

# Hard times, hardened targets

*While the latest quarterly crime figures show falls in many offences compared with the same quarter of last year, for security planners the figures should still sound a warning bell.*



***With recession biting past experience tells us the risk of crime is likely to increase, as lives get harder and stealing becomes a more attractive option.***

So despite the official figures showing the number of incidents for most types of crime – including serious and violent crime – was down in the last quarter of 2008, for the full 12 month period they are less encouraging.

For example, the number of robbery, extortion and hijacking offences fell by 6.7% in the last quarter but was still up by 6.2% for the year overall. The number of offences of 'robbery of an establishment or institution' rose by 53 incidents over the year, as did carjacking and hijacking offences, by the same number.

And despite a 6.7% fall in the last quarter, the full year's figures for burglary and related offences showed that the number of offences was in fact 1058 higher, with 72 more aggravated burglaries.

For both individuals and organisations the watchword should be increased caution.

For now, at least, it should be assumed that the final quarter's dip in burglary

numbers was just a blip and that the underlying trend is still upwards.

Certainly as far as burglary is concerned there is anecdotal evidence that suggests the real trend is upwards.

If you want an unofficial barometer of crime, talk to a locksmith.

One of Ireland's best known, Colin Crothers of Crothers Security, says he has seen first hand how much burglary has increased since October.

It hasn't been just a light increase, he says, but a 'surge'.

His emergency response staff are often on hand, securing crime-hit premises, before the police get there – and although he wouldn't claim it himself, he's probably among the first to spot evidence for what's really happening.

His company has been in business for 35 years providing a 24-hour emergency call-out service.

It has long been a steady business, with just a few random phone calls from those needing help among the greater volume of calls from regular customers, and from people enquiring about electronic systems.

But Suddenly, in October 2008, the emergency call rate picked up. The phones started ringing out-of-hours as a growing number of business and householders, discovered they had become victims of break-ins.

That spike in activity began almost four months ago, and the call rate has remained higher than usual since then (up to February).

"At times we've run short of timber for boarding up."

The nature of the crime itself is nothing new, it's just the volume of it that has surprised Colin.

There have always been two types of crime, he points out: amateur, opportunist attacks, and pre-planned, properly executed professional hits.

In the case of the opportunists, they'll take anything they can get their hands on – small, portable items such as ipods, jewellery, mobile phones, laptops and, of course, cash.

The professionals are more likely to target commercial premises and what they'll take depends on what they want to sell. Sometimes they want a

business's stock, other times they want equipment, computers etc.

"IT crime is a major security issue. You don't just have the value of the items stolen, but the security risk of all the data taken, plus the down-time while the business has to get back on its feet."

In the commercial sector criminals may be changing their tactics and going for softer targets, believe some security professionals.

Harry Traynor, manager of Marshes Shopping Centre in Dundalk, agrees that the risk of crime is probably now higher than it was a year ago, and that criminals are spreading their nets wider when it comes to picking targets.

Having worked in security and the retail sector since 1981 he says that while the official crime figures may come from a 'wholesome source' it's wise to use your own common sense and treat such statistics with healthy scepticism.

His advice to businesses is to follow his own organisation's example and tighten up on security.

# 14 Security in a Recession

"My personal view is that when we hit difficult times people (criminals) have to lower their sights. Where their aim would once have been to get substantial sums of money by hitting ATMs, now its localised, easier, softer targets. Assaults and threats to staff will probably rise and security managers need to plan for that."

He says security at the Marshes was reviewed before Christmas with, for example, procedures for cash collections from the car parks changed. Other security procedures were updated too, and tenants given advice to help them keep one step ahead of would-be criminals.

**"If you disrupt the intelligence of the criminal he is not able to plan an operation properly. That's the purpose of a security review: to change the way you do things and have a disruptive effect."**

It's a message that the business community generally is quite receptive to, he says. Certainly the retail managers he talks to, although not security specialists, are taking the threat of crime more seriously.

"Because of the recession the question of profitability is high up the agenda. Retailers are paying more attention to both electronic security and guarding because they are more aware that they are profit-critical."

With pressure on all companies to cut costs and reduce wage bills, Harry urges caution.

"Cutting staff leaves you vulnerable so if you do have to reduce the number of people you employ, make sure you also review security as part of that process. And make sure that your remaining staff are more aware of crime risks."

Once crimes such as store-theft catch hold, it can be hard to halt a downward spiral – for example, customers who see someone running out without paying will feel less secure themselves, and those who are less honest may be encouraged to follow suit in the future ('if that person's not paying, why should I?')

By taking measures to increase awareness and tightening up control of what goes on in their environment, businesses can make themselves less attractive targets.

But for companies and their employees there is potentially an even more sinister side to the current changing crime risks. Following two high profile 'tiger kidnappings' in Belfast in December - involving store managers from Next and M&S - some believe the danger that this type of crime may spread should also be taken seriously.

Taking family members hostage and forcing key-holders to give access to premises may be seen by criminals as a relatively low risk way to net large amounts of cash, never mind the fact it is very unpleasant for the victims (often including children).

At the ISIA, Sharon Doran says that for some hardened criminals this type of crime 'may sound like easy money'. She warns that threat is real and says it's not just banks and cash-carriers who need to be aware of it.

"What the Belfast incidents tells us is that criminals are not necessarily just going after large amounts of money any more."

In addition to the pressures brought on by the current economic downturn gangs may also be feeling cash-strapped following recent police successes in tackling the illegal drugs trade. So ironically police progress in one major crime area may have the unwelcome effect of increasing the risks in others.

"Every time a drugs gang loses income they'll want to regain it another way," points out Sharon.

Back at the Marshes Harry Traynor says its something he's taking seriously for the first time.

"The risk never crossed my mind until I saw what happened with the Next employee. But now we've told our managers they need to be aware of what's going on around them and do things like vary their routes to work."

Shopping centres have an advantage, he says, because security personnel provide an extra layer of protection for retail staff. New procedures have been put in place as the Marshes to take advantage of this fact.

For example security staff know the people who are authorised to open stores and they are on the look-out for suspicious activity; they will not allow even authorised people to open the stores at unexpected times; and they will not allow strangers, or family members, to accompany staff opening the stores. Other measures can be put in place too.

Harry says that the risk should not be overplayed – 'you don't want to build this up too much' – but says all employees should be more aware of the environment around them.

Even where staff don't have the benefit of a third-party security team to watch over them, duress codes in premises alarm systems can be used to silently summon help. And employees should take simple, common-sense precautions themselves.

**"Do simple things like not keeping your keys in your bag – if you get robbed then the criminals are less likely to get your keys and break into the premises as well."**

Another simple measure, he says, is for those who use sat-navs which automatically store their home address. This helpful feature can leave you more at risk of burglary if your car gets stolen; so turn your sat-nav off when you are within a mile or two of your home, and it won't record exactly where you live.

"There are plenty of simple things you can do. It's all about building up a tier of measures to make yourself less vulnerable."

It is a message that people are undoubtedly listening to, despite the apparent encouragement provided by official crime figures. And the risk of increasing crime is being taken seriously in the wider community, not just among security professionals, says Colin Crothers.

In his experience more people are taking pre-emptive measures to protect their property with more individuals buying safes and security systems – and the customers are not just the well-off types you might expect.

"We recently had an elderly lady come in and buy a large fire safe for her deeds and valuables. I'm not sure where she'd been keeping them up to this point, but people are feeling more insecure and want to keep their possessions safe around them."

Following the failures in the banking sector the public are also more sceptical about once-trusted professions – and perhaps are less inclined to leave their documents with a solicitor who might disappear off to the Seychelles.

**Taking a longer view, one reason why the current downturn may seem so dramatic is the sheer contrast with the boom which came before it.**

Hard times in the past were undoubtedly much worse, but then peoples' expectations were lower too says Colin Crothers.

"This recession is a lot more dramatic relative to where we were. There is a whole generation now that has never experienced hard times. And people now also feel they have a lot more to lose."

Never before has a generation grown up expecting to be comfortable and affluent, and not expecting to be out of a job and for many younger people the uncertainties of a downturn seem doubly frightening.

The last recession was where Colin, and the more seasoned security professionals like him, cut their teeth.

What they remember about the last time leads them to be, if not exactly optimistic, then at least level-headed.

"We'll get through this recession," he says. "It may take two or three years but in the end people will just knuckle down and get on with it. They'll maybe realise they have to do a bit more, and get a bit less for it – and they'll get a little bit wiser."

Working in the security industry, he laughs, is a bit like being a funeral director – "we will always be needed, no matter how bad things get. I wouldn't go so far as to say we're recession proof, but there is only so far that people can cut back when it comes to protecting what they have." ☺

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