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## Smash, Grab and Flee

'Ram raids' are an alarming new trend in retail theft

by DAVID P. SCHULZ

Cars, vans, SUVs and pick-up trucks crash through storefronts all the time, but these are usually accidental “pedal error” incidents. In fact, there are 50 to 60 such incidents every day, according to Storefront Safety Council co-founder Rob Reiter.

“Starbucks gets hit once a week, 7-Eleven gets hit about one and a half times a day. In fact, for convenience stores altogether, it’s about 20 times a day,” says Reiter, who has been tracking vehicle-into-building crashes for more than a decade.

While the vast majority of these vehicle-into-store incidents are accidental, he says as many as 5 percent are intentional. Targets of these “ram raids” are usually stores with ATMs, pawn shops with gold watches and jewelry in hock and other retailers like jewelers and consumer electronics stores featuring small, easy-to-grab

high-value merchandise.

One of the highest profile ram raids in this country involved an Apple store in Temecula, Calif. Early in the morning of September 6, 2012, an SUV rammed through the security gates and a glass storefront at the Apple store in an unenclosed section of the Promenade mall, according to the Riverside County sheriff’s office. Passengers in the vehicle, faces covered, jumped out and began scooping up iPads and iPhones from a wall display and stuffing them into backpacks. Meanwhile, the driver was trying to back out of the store, but the security gate that had partially rolled up on the initial impact, rolled back down and hindered escape. After repeated attempts, the vehicle was able to exit — but not before losing a license plate.

The incident was recorded by three surveillance cameras, and it turned

out the driver had used his own car in the ram raid. It wasn’t long before authorities had a suspect in custody, 22-year-old Equonne R. Howard. He initially pleaded not guilty and was eventually found to be not competent to stand trial. His accomplices have not been apprehended or identified.

### PROPERTY DAMAGE

Ram-raiding Apple stores has become something of a trend. Two days before Christmas 2013, thieves crashed a stolen Opel Corsa into an Apple store in Berlin and got away with merchandise including iPhones, iPads and computers. A week later, copycats in the Netherlands rammed a vehicle into an Apple store open less than a month and got away on scooters with an unspecified number of gadgets.

The use of vehicles in smash-and-grab thefts is much more common overseas than in North America, notes Reiter. Last November, three men in England were sentenced to a combined 19 years in prison for conduct-

ing a series of ram raids over a three-month period in a five-county area. Their targets were typically convenience stores. Using stolen cars and license plates, they would smash into stores and steal cash, tobacco products, beauty aids and anything else they could grab. "The total estimated loss through their crimes was in excess of £50,000," says Detective Constable Steve Johnson, adding that the damage caused to retailers during the raid was also about £50,000.

The manager of a sporting goods store that was ram-raided multiple times says that after the second attack he installed steel bars in front of the shop, but thieves returned with a Range Rover to smash into the store. "The damage they do is worse than the stuff they steal," says Peter Coleman of Wilderness Way. "The latest one ruptured our central heating system and virtually tore the front off the shop, which cost us £10,000. The stuff they stole was only £2,000."

## **RAISING BARRIERS**

The crime is common enough that cities like Atlanta, Dallas and Houston have laws on the books requiring that on-premises ATMs be adequately shielded from ram raids by bollards or other barriers.

In what Reiter describes as a more typical ram raid, last year four men stole a pick-up truck and used it to smash into a convenience store in Corinth, Maine, where they stole cigarettes and a lottery ticket dispensing machine. The men made their escape in the truck, which they later abandoned and set on fire.

Enterprising thieves improvise variations on a theme that lie between standard smash-and-grabs and store-front ram raids. At a Best Buy in Brooklyn, N.Y., thieves apparently used a jackhammer to create a hole through a cinderblock wall in pre-dawn hours. Once inside the store, the gang swiped iPads, GPS devices and other electronics worth at least \$73,000, according to law enforcement officials.

In another scenario, would-be thieves threw a chain around an ATM protruding through a storefront and pulled it from the building, but lost the machine a few blocks away when the chain broke. In another case, a van driver attacked an ATM standing in front of a supermarket. He kept ramming it with his vehicle in an attempt to break it open but left empty-handed after bystanders alerted authorities.

Reiter suggests that retailers look into installation of barriers designed to protect storefronts, a solution he says would collectively cost retailers about \$6.6 million annually, based on data from the National Safety Council.

## **STORES**

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