

Take steps to thwart would-be thieves

By Monica Crowe

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While enjoying the merriment of the holidays, it's important that people take extra precautions to protect themselves from becoming victims of crime.

"During the holiday season, we always have an increase of burglaries of houses, businesses and cars," said Lt. Curtis Hawkins, public information officer for the Ruston Police Department. "With the economy going the way it is, some people are really desperate for money and income. That could be a contributing factor to some of these things."

Since many people travel during the holidays, prowlers can take advantage of the opportunity to break in. Aside from home burglaries, in particular university students' residences are prime targets of break-in theft.

"It's very common during university breaks that we have several apartments or duplexes that are broken into when students are gone," he said. "Bad guys know that they are always gone for the holidays."

To thwart burglars, Hawkins said residents who are going out of town should find a house sitter to move the cars in the driveway, pick up mail and newspapers, leave lights on inside the house and turn on the alarm system.

"If you know and trust your neighbors, let them know you're going to be out of town so they will be looking for things out of the ordinary," he said. "Tell them where you're going, and leave a contact number."

If having a neighbor's vigilance or getting a house sitter is not an option, Hawkins recommends calling the police or sheriff's department and requesting to be put on the extra patrol list.

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Crime flares during holidays in parking lots and businesses

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Aside from home burglary, thievery from retailers' outlets and parking lots is prevalent during the holidays.

"We have numerous thefts and internal shoplifting that are reported during this time of year," Hawkins said. "Shoplifters tend to take advantage of the crowded stores and busy employees."

When shopping from store to store, do not leave merchandise in plain view.

"Make sure that you lock your vehicle and keep valu-

ables out of sight or in the trunk," Hawkins said.

Also, shoppers should not carry large amounts of cash with them or flash a bundle of bills when paying for goods, Hawkins said, and women should not leave their purses unattended.

With so many people on the road at this time of year, extra precaution behind the wheel is warranted. Hawkins said he discourages drivers from text messaging and being distracted by talking on cell phones, but keeping a charged

cell phone handy while traveling can be helpful in reporting to the police department any irregular activity on the roads.

"For a lot of people drinking is commonplace during the holiday season, and we encounter numerous intoxicated drivers after parties," Hawkins said. "We're encouraging people to get a designated driver, catch a cab or call a friend so you're not in a position to injure or even kill someone on the street or highway."