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Rise in car thefts, break-ins tied to down economy

BY GINA DAMRON
FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER

When Jerry Kubiak heard that a Dodge Ram had been stolen from the driveway of a home on his street in Troy a few weeks ago, he took notice -- and precautions.

"I keep my garage door shut all the time now," the 80-year-old said.

Vehicle thefts and burglaries from autos are a growing concern in communities across metro Detroit and -- in Oakland County communities like Troy -- are becoming more prevalent. In some cases, the economy is to blame, police officials said. In many others, police said, people are stealing cars and property for money to buy drugs.

"Money is very tight right now," said Troy Lt. Chuck Pappas. "People are out of work."

Troy has seen increases in break-ins and stolen cars. Likewise, Madison Heights has seen an increasing number of larcenies from vehicles. And, in Royal Oak, while the total numbers of thefts for the year are down, there was a 38% increase just in September compared with September 2007.

Some cities have seen decreases in auto thefts, including Detroit, which saw a 14% drop to 19,617 in 2007 from 22,917 in 2006, according to the most recent FBI statistics.

The number of thefts in Warren has remained steady, with the city seeing 656 through the end of August, compared with 652 in the same period last year.

So far this year, Troy has had 138 vehicles stolen, compared with 129 during the same period last year, police said. The city has seen a jump in thefts from autos, as well, tallying 326 so far this year compared with 275 in the same time frame last year.

The city also has seen a rash of thefts in recent months, with two cars stolen and attempted thefts of three others within a two-day period in October.

Pappas said vehicles have been stolen from health club parking lots, shopping centers and neighborhoods. Chrysler and Dodge vehicles are popular targets.

And though Troy police are boosting patrols in high-crime areas and working with neighboring cities, Pappas said car owners should protect themselves.

"People just leave their cars running, keys in the ignition, doors unlocked," he said. "Everybody's got this attitude, 'Never happen to me.' I tell people, 'Help us to help you.' "

Oakland County Sheriff Michael Bouchard said that, through Oct. 1, there had been 155 auto thefts in the communities the department polices. During the same time period last year, there had only been 117.

In Madison Heights, 10 to 12 cars are broken into each week. That's about 33% more per week than police were seeing about six months ago, Lt. Corey Haines said.

Kubiak of Troy doesn't plan on being a victim. He said his neighborhood is safe, but he's starting to keep the outside of his house lit at night.

"I would imagine everybody's concerned," he said. "It brings it to your attention."
