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# New Jersey crimes hit home

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Joan Brennan saw flashing red lights and a police car in her driveway on April 20, 2009, and wondered if a neighbor's house was on fire. Fear gripped her that night when she realized police were at her Northfield home.

Brennan, 50, a food sales broker, had gone out to dinner after working all day in Atlantic City. Her boyfriend David Goldstein had left the restaurant ahead of her, only to discover burglars had kicked in an outside wooden door to their basement.

Brennan fled into the back yard and police were combing her house for clues. Someone apparently carrying drug money took two jars holding \$250 in coins. Brennan had planned to buy her grandson a savings bond for his first birthday.

"I was terrified. I was scared," Brennan said. "David told me, 'we were broken into' and I just had to sit down."

"I grew up in this area. And I have never been afraid here," she said. "But this was a nightmare for me to handle."

## Property crimes on rise

When New Jersey crime statistics are published, as 2009 numbers were Wednesday, attention

involving theft of property.

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decreased in this state of New Jersey, but not statewide in the number and rate of property crimes.

The impact of these crimes is often overlooked. There are no support groups or compensation programs for property crime victims. Stolen property is rarely ever recovered.

But police analysts and victims say property crimes take an emotional and financial toll on the criminals' targets and on the communities in which they happen.

The latest statistics show violent crime decreased statewide by 11 percent last year's 40,132 burglaries were up 8 percent from the year before. Larcenies in New Jersey increased 4 percent to 138,644.

Property crimes hit certain towns in this region especially hard.

Vineland in Cumberland County had the state's sixth highest number of burglaries. Millville and Bridgeton were in the top 25. Burglars struck nearly four out of every 100 homes in

Atlantic City, Galloway, Egg Harbor and Hamilton townships, Ventnor, Ocean City, Wildwood and Middle Township.

Residents of Bridgeton with 240 burglaries last year had the highest rate in the state, with five burglaries committed for every 100 housing units in that city.

Larcenies - which include shoplifting, pickpocketing, purse snatching and stealing from cars - were prevalent in those same towns. Atlantic City had the fifth highest number of larcenies in the state, and Vineland was 10th.

### Lost sense of security

Statistics show that once something is stolen, the chance of police recovering it is low. Stolen cars are recovered more than half the time. But that's not the case with cash, clothing, electronics and other items taken out of homes, cars and businesses. Only 6 percent of the \$255.5 million in

personal property stolen in New Jersey last year was recovered, according to Department of Crime Data.

"Usually, when you see someone with a hole in their shirt, you know they've been a victim,"

"Even when you catch a burglar and he admits to a string of burglaries, he's already gotten rid of (the goods)," he said. "They don't save it for a rainy day. They're getting rid of it as soon as possible."

even when items are recovered, they may sit in a police room unclaimed until they are claimed.

Three-quarters of burglaries are committed in homes rather than businesses, the crime report shows. And more than twice as many homes are broken into during the daylight hours.

Marie Hasson, head of psychiatry for AtlanticCare and its Atlantic County branch, says:

feel violated when someone breaks into their home, or even suspects a break-in.

cases

sense of security. You thought you were in a safe neighborhood, but suddenly, it's not as safe.

Northfield resident Brennan said that after her break-in, she felt like she was "under a microscope."

couldn't see had intimidated and threatened her.

Hasson said: "You need to feel safe. You need to feel secure. And the biggest thing is to get that feeling back."

### Communities suffer, too

Not only victims bear scars from property crime. A rash of burglaries can frighten an entire community. That fear and publicity resulting from news coverage can lead to a decline in property values

on a town, said Sharon Schulman, director of the William J. Hoesly Center for Public Policy

Richard Stockton College

If an area is known for crime, people start to move out and new residents are less likely to move in.

roofed people move into formerly middle class neighborhoods, and the schools start to suffer.

That makes it harder to attract more business and economic development, said Schulman.

that violation as well."

She said communities must promote their good qualities to counter crime publicity. And authorities must fight crime effectively.

This region's declining property crime bucked the state trend last year. Atlantic County experienced a dramatic reduction in burglaries, dropped by more than half, and larcenies declined by 30 percent.

Only 1.3 burglaries were committed for every 100 homes there last year.

Sgt. Maria McMinn said Atlantic City police improved communication between its

investigative, patrol and intelligence units. When a crime occurred in a neighborhood, the

Bridgeton Police Chief Mark Ott said despite the high burglary numbers, his department has increased street patrols to deter burglaries.

The greatest asset in fighting crime in Bridgeton, especially in the case of home burglaries, is information provided by the public, Ott said.

When thieves burglarize businesses, they usually go to the store to get their money.

When it comes to home burglaries, Ott said, the police rely on the accounts of neighbors and other witnesses.

Atlantic County Prosecutor's Office officials could not be reached for comment.

### Steps to stem crime

Other authorities said the public can help combat crime.

Ott said the public should avoid street deals on merchandise that may have been stolen.

Bollen said homeowners should lock their doors and windows when they are away from home.

He said the police will continue to work with the community to reduce crime.

them.

"The common thing burglars look for are unlocked doors and windows," he said.

"When you hear of a rash of vehicle burglaries, it's a matter of the perpetrators walking down street and looking for open vehicles," he said.

Brennan and Goldstein had a new security system put in a few days after their home was

burglarized. But Brennan converted her anger to action. She attended the next city council meeting to start organizing a neighborhood patrol effort.

She attended a training session conducted by the county Sheriff's Office.

She said she started working with her neighbors. Brennan now has 120 people arrested in

organizing. A man showing Northfield divided into patrol areas on her kitchen table Friday.

She said people should be aware of suspicious activity in their neighborhoods. She wants to help other people avoid the experience she endured.

"We're asking people to look out for their neighbors," Brennan said.

Staff writer Edward Van Embden contributed to this story.

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