



# **THEFT & BREAK-INS**

David Allan & Robert Madsen

## Thefts And Break-ins

---

Break-ins and thefts are a reality in the self storage industry. Every owner and operator needs to understand, manage and minimize exposure and liability for the company and minimize impact and damage for the customer. According to a leading provider of self storage insurance, theft is now the second most common source of claims after water damage. While not possible to identify the specific cause of all crimes, popular media has created a fantasy where self storage facilities contain hidden 'treasures' that make contents of self storage units seem much more valuable than they typically are. In reality, contents of self storage units are only truly valuable to the owners of these goods. They contain family collectables, keepsakes, "Heartifacts" and items that carry emotional meaning to those who choose to store them. They may also contain commercial inventory meant to be sold in a retail store or commercial inventory for trades, such as electricians and plumbers, that do not have significant financial value. Rarely, if ever, do units contain the treasure and bullion that some popular television shows have us believe is common place. However, this combination of high perceived value and low perceived security, make it not hard to understand why these crimes occur. Storage facilities do not generate much traffic, so once the manager of the site goes home, facilities can appear to be vulnerable despite high tech security. This white paper is intended to share ways to enhance security and provide considerations of what to do once a break-in has occurred.



## Typical Types of Perpetrators

---

First, let's identify the three typical types of perpetrators of self storage break-ins:

- 01** Smash and grab petty thieves
- 02** Organized groups targeting specific items
- 03** Tenants staging thefts of their own units

Smash and grabbers gain access to a facility and cut locks until they find something of value. Organized groups often know what they are looking for and where they are going to find it. These break-ins often have an 'inside job' component. The self-sabotaging group looks to capitalize on an insurance payout.

In the past, it has been difficult to bring charges against criminals as this type of break-in has been considered petty and victimless. Without punishment, these criminals often repeat their methods while frustrating owners, staff and customers. Thankfully, this has begun to change with charges and jail time being brought against offenders.

### [News Story: Niagara Man Gets Jail for Self Storage Robbery](#)

*(click to read or scan the QR code below)*



# How Does It Happen?

---

While every crime has its own particular nuance, there are certain consistent characteristics.

## Gaining Access

In facilities with outside access (drive-up units), criminals will often cut through a fence to access units. The limiting factor to this strategy is that it limits what the thieves can steal to what they can carry. After a few trips back and forth through the fence, they usually quit which limits the damage and exposure to the storage facility. An alternative way of gaining access is to tailgate another car through a gate or have somebody hold a door open for them in indoor access facilities. Once inside a facility they will prop or jam a door open or tape over the door latch so they can come back and access the door after hours. Another clever way to access units is to rent under a fake or bogus name to gain facility. They access the facility with their own security code and then break in to other units. Often they move and collect items in their own unit to be removed later. Access can also be gained by guessing an access code. As unbelievable as it sounds, many facilities have static 'contractor codes' that are basic easy to remember codes such as 1111 or 1234. These codes are easily guessed. These basic codes should not be used by any facility or any customer.

Other ways criminals can gain access are:

- Code sharing with friends or family
- Successful bidders of storage auctions are given temporary codes
- Movers hired by a customer are provided codes
- Commercial customers who share codes to multiple employees

Prohibiting access to a facility is most often not a realistic option. As a storage facility, we need to be able to let our customers and their agents access their goods. However, strong security practices can and should be in place to discourage criminals and limit the damage they can cause. Understanding what happens once a thief is in a facility and how they commit their crime is important to understanding how to stop it from happening.

## Scoping the Job & The Crime Itself

Once inside the facility (either gate or building), would-be criminals will often walk around to get a feel for the facility and try to peek inside open customer units who have their door open to target a few specific units. Most often, perpetrators will target units that can be cut with large bolt cutters. Cutting locks in this manner is fast and quiet, so it doesn't attract much attention. Disk locks need a grinder to get off, which is a time consuming and noisy process that often attracts attention discouraging the crime. A common tactic for criminals who don't know what they're looking for is the "bulk cut" method. In this attack, criminals take their time to cut every lock they can in a full hallway and open every door quickly and quickly look for valuable items. They will often throw boxes and stored items in to the hallway making quite a mess and intermingling goods from many different units. This happens more often when facilities have individual unit alarms. By bulk cutting, they sort quickly and try to be out of the facility before police are



## How Does It Happen?

---

on site. This method is very disruptive and leaves a mess for both managers and customers to deal with.

Items commonly targeted are the things that can be easily carried and resold online and at local flea markets. Examples are items like tools and tool boxes, electronics, laptops, cameras and sports collectables.

Most items included on insurance claims after a break-in are the result of damage done while tossing a unit, not actually stolen, further evidence that the thieves get frustrated expecting to find valuable items but only finding regular everyday household goods. The loss experienced through the damage of items is usually more emotionally damaging than the cash value of the goods, suggesting that the belief that this type of crime is 'victimless' is not actually correct.

Thieves who rent a unit legitimately may disassemble the interior walls or climb over walls to access adjacent units. With modern construction of storage units this is not as common. This type of break-in can take a long time before the realization that a theft has occurred since there is no outward evidence such as a cut lock. Fortunately, this type of theft is limited in the scope of how many customers it can affect, but it is important to remember to watch for these types of thefts as well.

Finally, a new unfortunate trend we are seeing is criminals prying the entire latch mechanism off of roll up doors. This results in extensive damage to the door itself, making it very difficult to repair and secure the unit after the crime has been committed. Unfortunately there's no quick fix to this and either new doors will need to be ordered or a fabricator will need to build a new latching mechanism to fix the damaged latch.



# What Do You Do Once It Happens?

---

Once a break-in has been identified, several things must happen quickly.

1. Notify the police.
    - Call 911 if the crime is in progress (remember to NEVER confront a thief if the crime is in process).
    - Call the local non-emergency if discovered after the crime has occurred.
  2. Ensure that the crime is no longer in process or the perpetrator is no longer on site. Personal safety should always be your first priority.
  3. Secure affected lockers with a manager lock.
  4. Follow internal policy (if available) to notify facility owners, managers and other key internal personnel.
  5. Contact customers who have been affected.
  6. Take some time to write down as many details as possible. It's easy to forget these details later on.
  7. Take photos. But photos and details must not be shared outside the company without proper consent and permission.
  8. Review camera footage and gate logs to see if any key details were captured. This will allow you to better understand the facts and make fewer assumptions about what you think happened vs. what actually happened. This is a big task, but worth it. Many recorders overwrite data after a period of time, so it is important to save the data so that it can be saved and replayed.
  9. Advise your insurance provider that there has been a break-in.
  10. Complete a formal incident report. This report should be well thought out and include detailed information about the event. This is important so that later on the event is properly recorded and follow up questions can be properly addressed.
    - This report (and photos) will be required by your insurance company and the police. The more clear the better.
  11. Arrange for customers to come in and check on their units. If items have been stolen or damaged, give the insurance contact name and number to the affected customers.
  12. If appropriate (or possible), offer affected customers a free unit to sort their belongings to see what's been damaged or stolen.
  13. If items have been left in the hallway, take photos and collect items in a vacant unit so they can be returned to customers once positively identified.
  14. Keep all files and photos in a safe place as these may be needed again in investigations or court cases.
  15. Maintain your professionalism and treat the situation seriously.
-

## What Do You Do Once It Happens?

---

Once the above steps have been taken, the immediate reaction portion of the situation will be over, but there is more to be done. As a facility owner, you will need to repair any damage as soon as possible and correct any security weaknesses that have been identified. Understanding how the crime happened and taking steps to correct your own security weak points is part of your responsibility to your customers and needs to be taken seriously.

Remember that once a customer begins an insurance claim, the claim is between them and the insurance company. If a customer is underinsured (or uninsured) this may lead to an uncomfortable or difficult conversation, but as a facility, you owe no additional compensation provided no-fault provisions, and/or value limitations are included in your rental agreement. Also remember that it is the responsibility of the insurance company to manage fraudulent claims. As an owner or manager of a storage facility your responsibility is to cooperate with the insurance companies as they investigate the suspected fraud, not to investigate it yourself.



## What Happens If It's A Vehicle?

---

Typically, it is easier to break into a parked vehicle than a storage unit, but in the case of vehicles, most of the value of the loss comes from the damage done to the vehicle as opposed to the monetary value taken. Unfortunately, we are seeing a rise in things like stole catalytic converters, so make sure your parking areas are well covered with cameras to deter this sort of crime.

1. Self storage insurance, typically, does not insure parked vehicles, so the customer will have to be directed to their auto insurance policy holder.
2. Requiring all parked cars have valid insurance can alleviate tensions after a break-in.
3. The vehicles will need to be protected from the elements to prevent further damage as soon as possible.
  - Car covers can be purchased or plastic bags taped over windows.
4. Inspect all other vehicles and equipment to make sure the incident is isolated in nature.
5. All other steps are the same (police, photos, incident report).
6. Remember that vehicles stored inside drive-up self storage units are typically not covered by self storage insurance.





# How Do We Prevent This From Happening In The First Place?

---

The unfortunate truth is that if somebody is totally committed to committing a crime, there is very little that can be done to stop them. But you can discourage it from happening and you can discourage it from happening at *your* facility. There is an old proverb that says “you don’t have to outrun a bear, you just have to outrun the slowest person in your group”. Your goal here is to make sure you are not an easy target.

Putting the proper procedures in place will discourage would-be criminals from targeting your facility. Obviously, we would want to be able to prevent these crimes from taking place, but if that’s not possible, how can we make it as difficult as possible for a would-be criminal to commit the crime and maximize law enforcement’s chances to catch the criminal after the fact. Here are some best practices that should be in place at a minimum:

1. Get full and accurate information from all of your tenants.
  - Remember that would-be criminals may try to rent a unit under a phoney name. Obtaining proof of identity is important.
2. Install and properly maintain an access control systems.
  - A gate is not going to stop anybody if it is kept open all the time.
  - A fully fenced site is a standard deterrent that will slow down or deter a criminal from making an easy smash and grab.
3. Have high quality security cameras with plenty of signage notifying people that the site is under surveillance.
  - Security cameras are a good deterrent to crime as well as a useful tool after the crime has occurred. Make sure you have signage that cameras are in use to at least make people think twice about committing a crime on camera.
  - Make sure cameras are upgraded and clear. High quality cameras are very cost effective these days so if you still have those black and white cameras with grainy videos, it’s time for an upgrade!
4. Encourage staff to watch for suspicious behaviour.
  - As described above, most criminals ‘scope’ a job before doing it. Watch for things that don’t look right and feel free to ask people acting suspiciously if they need help. This type of check in lets these people know that the site manager is engaged and the site is not an easy target.
  - Managers watching for people loitering is one of the best forms of discouragement, as would-be criminals look for employee absenteeism and apathy.
  - Scanning access logs and cameras in the morning for who accessed the facility overnight is a good best practice to notice suspicious behaviour.
  - Anything out of place on the daily walk through should be followed up fully and not left to assumption.
  - Remember that it is never acceptable to act on assumptions based on how somebody looks, how they dress, or their ethnicity. This is discriminatory and is not acceptable and not supported by the CSSA.



# How Do We Prevent This From Happening In The First Place?

5. Ensure adequate lighting is installed and is functioning properly.
6. Disk and cylinder locks are a far better deterrent than regular pad locks.
7. Individual unit alarms are an excellent tool to limit the extent of loss during a break-in.
  - Without unit alarms, thieves can take their time and sort through units.
  - Some newer facilities also have heat and / or infrared sensors to further discourage theft.
  - Make sure managers do not ignore alarms if they are triggered overnight.
8. Make sure you do not use common contractor codes or easy to guess codes (1234 / 1111, etc...).
9. Having good and regular communication with other facility operators in the area can help everybody be more vigilant when crime events are occurring.
10. Ensure your site is well maintained. Small things like keeping the grass cut can go a long way in discouraging crime.
11. Encourage customers to store small, valuable items such as jewelry or watches in safety deposit boxes. These items are most often specifically excluded from self storage insurance contracts.
12. In areas where crime proves to be difficult to deter, consider hiring a security company to do random patrols. Accompanying signage is also a good deterrent.
13. Not all sites need to be accessible 24/7. It's not unreasonable to limit access to daytime hours and only provide extended access to those who can provide reasonable justification for needing off hour access.
14. Consider language in your rental agreement that limits the value of goods stored within storage units.

## DISK LOCKS



## PAD LOCKS



## How Do We Prevent This From Happening In The First Place?

---

The single best deterrent to crime on your site is your staff. Staff who are engaged and care are far better than any other security measure you can implement. Being aware of who and when customers are accessing your site, suspicious characters, and checking in with customers is invaluable. Also, getting staff in the habit of doing proper site checks could prevent a crime before it happens.

As a reminder, a proper site check includes the following items:

1. Randomly checking locks ensuring they are actually locked.
2. Looking for unlatched or unlocked units.
3. Ensuring that cameras are actually recording, have not been obstructed in any way, and are pointing at what they are supposed to be recording (check the playback occasionally as well).
4. Pick up garbage and keep the site tidy and clean.
5. Keep an eye out for anything suspicious or out of place such as ladders along the fence line or cut or damaged fence sections.
6. Strange damage in or around the site.
7. Cut pieces of lock or metal shavings on the floor.



## Remember

---

Dealing with a break-in is a stressful event for everybody. As an owner, remember to check in with your manager and employees to see how they are doing and see if there is anything you can do to support them. Employees have the difficult job of calling customers to let them know this has happened and this process can be overwhelming. Make sure to be empathetic to your staff while they are being empathetic to the customers affected. Dealing with break-ins takes time so remember to be patient and remind yourself that this was a crime; it wasn't your fault, it wasn't your manager's fault and it wasn't the customer's fault. It was a criminal act.

Also remember to not volunteer any unnecessary information to those affected or the press. As in most situations of a crime, the more you say the more difficult the investigation can be for law enforcement and insurance companies. Saying the wrong things can make things much worse and leave you more vulnerable to civil actions and unfavourable press. It is always best to leave the details to the police and insurance companies.

But most of all, remember that these things happen and to maintain your professionalism and empathy. Keep moving forward and do what you can to make it less likely to happen to you again in the future.

**“ This isn't a reflection on you as a person or your company, you are a victim of this crime as well. ”**



# GET IN TOUCH

## David Allan

VP Business Development  
and Aquisition

Apple Self Storage  
[dallan@applestorage.com](mailto:dallan@applestorage.com)



## Robert Madsen

President

U-Lock Mini Storage Group  
[robert@selfstorage.ca](mailto:robert@selfstorage.ca)



## CSSA

The Canadian Self Storage Association (CSSA) invites self storage owners and vendors to join. Members will benefit from leadership, information, products, networking, services and government representation. Seemingly simple changes in legislation can have devastating impacts to our self-storage industry. Only through the collective lobbying efforts of an association which represents our industry (i.e. strength in numbers), will we be able to combat these issues as they arise.

Scan the QR Code to learn more or visit  
[www.cssa.ca](http://www.cssa.ca)



# APPENDIX



# CHECKLIST: What To Do Once A Break-in Happens

---

\*Print this page for quick reference.

- Notify the police.
    - Call 911 if the crime is in progress (remember to NEVER confront a thief if the crime is in process).
    - Call the local non-emergency if discovered after the crime has occurred.
  - Ensure that the crime is no longer in process or the perpetrator is no longer on site. Personal safety should always be your first priority.
  - Secure affected lockers with a manager lock.
  - Follow internal policy (if available) to notify facility owners, managers and other key internal personnel.
  - Contact customers who have been affected.
  - Take some time to write down as many details as possible. It's easy to forget these details later on.
  - Take photos. But photos and details must not be shared outside the company without proper consent and permission.
  - Review camera footage and gate logs to see if any key details were captured. This will allow you to better understand the facts and make fewer assumptions about what you think happened vs. what actually happened. This is a big task, but worth it. Many recorders overwrite data after a period of time, so it is important to save the data so that it can be saved and replayed.
  - Advise your insurance provider that there has been a break-in.
  - Complete a formal incident report. This report should be well thought out and include detailed information about the event. This is important so that later on the event is properly recorded and follow up questions can be properly addressed.
    - This report (and photos) will be required by your insurance company and the police. The more clear the better.
  - Arrange for customers to come in and check on their units. If items have been stolen or damaged, give the insurance contact name and number to the affected customers.
  - If appropriate (or possible), offer affected customers a free unit to sort their belongings to see what's been damaged or stolen.
  - If items have been left in the hallway, take photos and collect items in a vacant unit so they can be returned to customers once positively identified.
  - Keep all files and photos in a safe place as these may be needed again in investigations or court cases.
  - Maintain your professionalism and treat the situation seriously.
-

