

This time of year, many people are excited about the prospect of buying and exchanging gifts with friends and family. Unfortunately, the holiday season also brings out thieves looking for opportunities to make other people's property their own gifts. I'm relatively certain no one has "become a victim of theft" on their Christmas wish list, so let's go over a few simple ways to ward off thieves.

When you are out shopping, especially if you have a long shopping list or many stores to visit, your vehicle is going to accumulate quite the collection of presents. Vehicles represent an attractive target to thieves during the holiday shopping season. Visibility is the key to preventing theft from your vehicle. Parking in areas that are well-lit or well-traveled makes your vehicle a less desirable target. Reducing the visibility of the merchandise in your vehicle is also important in preventing theft. If your vehicle has a trunk, place merchandise in the trunk to keep it out of sight. If your vehicle doesn't have a trunk, use the cargo cover, blankets, coats, or anything else that will keep people outside your vehicle from seeing the merchandise inside your vehicle. In addition to these visibility-related strategies, keeping your vehicle locked is critical. In virtually all cases reported to our office where property is taken from a vehicle, the victim's vehicle was unlocked. Forcing entry into a locked vehicle in a well-lit and well-traveled portion of a parking lot represents a very risky proposition for even the most determined thief.

Porch pirates are a recent addition to the holiday season, arriving on the coat tails of the boom in on-line shopping. Visibility is also the key to warding off these thieves. The most secure method of receiving your on-line purchases is to have the package delivered to someone who can take delivery in person. When making shipping arrangements, consider alternative shipping arrangements if no one will be home to receive the package. Shipping the package to a trusted neighbor or relative who will be home is a great option. If permitted, having the package delivered to your workplace is another good alternative. If the package must be delivered to an empty home, consider making use of delivery instructions to keep the package out of view of vehicles and people on the street. Parcel lock boxes are a great compliment to the delivery instruction strategy. Having a locking storage container, tote, or some other storage fixture will keep your packages out of sight. Porch pirates prowl all neighborhoods. Regardless of how safe you think your neighborhood is, it is worth the small effort required to keep packages out of view from prowling thieves.

Finally, I'd like to touch on the latest trend in theft this year, the group shoplifting incidents that have been seen in major metropolitan areas, including the Twin Cities. Thankfully, we've not seen this activity in the St. Cloud metro area. In the event you should find yourself in a store when a group of thieves enters, it is important to make your safety a priority. So far, these thieves have shown their goal is to get in and get out as quickly as possible with as much merchandise as possible. As infuriating as this behavior is, the safest response to this new crime trend is to get out of the way of these criminals, call 911, and be a good witness. When it can be done safely, getting photos or video of these criminals or their vehicles will be very helpful for law enforcement.

All of us at the Benton County Sheriff's Office wish you a Merry Christmas, Happy Holidays, and a happy and safe new year! For more crime prevention information and safety information visit the Benton County Sheriff's Office website at: <https://www.co.benton.mn.us/211/Crime-Prevention>. You can also like and follow us on Facebook and Twitter at @BentonMNSheriff for regular updates and crime prevention messages.