Cause for alarm

Daytime burglaries reported at a rate four times higher than during similar period last year

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By ALECIA WARREN/Staff writer

What Ronald Shillington marvels over, he said, is that he couldn't have been gone for more than an hour and a half.

And yet when he returned home from an outing on Tuesday afternoon, he saw that his blinds had been pulled up.

And his belongings rifled through. And several valuables taken.

"I think they call it a grab and dash," the retired Coeur d'Alene man said on Friday. "They grabbed two laptops, and took all my wife's jewelry."

Shillington isn't just irked by the brief window of time a stranger needed to break into his house on Newbrook Drive, he said, likely through an unlocked back door or a flimsy sliding window.

He's also baffled **it happened in broad daylight**.

"The standard reaction - when people tell you it absolutely makes you feel creepy and violated, it's true, no matter what they took," Shillington said, adding that he and his wife are now destined to forever double-check their locks. "Looking around my house, seeing what they had done and turned over and opened, it's very personal. So now we're very paranoid."

What he wishes he had known before, he added, is how big a problem this has been in the area.

"We didn't know about it," he said. "There wasn't any big alarm at 20 or 30 (burglaries)."

And it's well beyond that.

There have been 91 residential burglaries in Kootenai County since the first of September through mid-October, according to the Sheriff's Department.

That's vaulted from 21 residential burglaries reported over the same period last year, said Maj. Ben Wolfinger.

"We're not seeing any big screen TVs. We're talking stuff that's easy to carry," he said. "It's usually jewelry, cash that people leave around."

Most have occurred during the day when residents often aren't home, he said. Suspects are believed to be roving neighborhoods knocking on doors, he said, kicking them in if no one answers, and offering dog-walking services or firewood for sale if someone does.

"That way, they avoid confrontation," he said, adding that the theory is based off reports.

The burglaries have been random, he said, many of them north of the Spokane River, between Hayden and the state line.

"It seems to be moving north," Wolfinger said. "We've seen it in the valley, the prairie, in Dalton and Hayden."

It's uncertain what has caused the dramatic escalation, he said.

"Every once in a while we'll see a spike in burglaries, whether in daytime or nighttime, business or residential," he said. "Usually it's associated with small groups or individuals."

The Pine Grove area between Ramsey Road and Highway 95 has also been targeted lately, said Sgt. Christie Wood with the Coeur d'Alene Police.

There have been five burglaries in the residences between Dalton and Hanley avenues since Sept. 1, Wood said.

"We would just remind people to make sure they're active in their block watch, that neighbors are helping neighbors," she said. "If they don't have one, contact me to start one."

Her other advice boils down to allowing some healthy paranoia.

Lock up tight, she said. Deadbolts aren't for decoration.

"Make sure they're securing residences as best they can," she said.

The Sheriff's Department has also reassigned deputies from other shifts to work saturation patrols, Wolfinger said.

"We've got deputies really working at the time when people are being victimized," he said.

Although no suspects have been identified or arrested, he added, detectives are working through the weekend following up on leads.

To organize a neighborhood watch, contact Wood at the Coeur d'Alene Police Department: 769-2319.

Anyone with helpful information can also call the Sheriff's Department at: 446-1300.

Culprits behind such burglary sprees usually don't hide for long, Wolfinger said.

"Eventually they get caught, if they keep that same pattern," he said.

[Emphasis Added by JVR]