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Thieves Using 'Lock Bumping' To Gain Access



Terri Gruca

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(WCCO) People lock their doors, mailboxes and offices in an effort to keep thieves out, but ordinary locks may not prevent them. Reporting

Thieves are cashing in on a new break-in technique that can give them access to locked materials in seconds.

Lindsay Ornstein is always careful to keep her door locked.

"We're having a baby and we want to make sure that we keep our apartment safe," Ornstein said.

She even has two locks for extra protection, but leading experts said the regular locks most people have may offer a false sense of security.

"What you think is keeping you safe is mostly vulnerable," said security expert Marc Tobias.

Tobias said he has popped open thousands of ordinary pin tumbler locks with a technique called bumping. It is when a specially-cut key is inserted and knocked on.

"It causes all the pin tumblers in the lock to split and the lock opens," Tobias said. "And it doesn't matter whether it's a deadbolt lock on a business or a lock on your house. Chances are it can be rapidly bumped open."

Locksmiths have been using the technique for years to help homeowners but the International Association of Investigative Locksmiths worries because the specially-cut keys are being sold online with instructions on how to bump. They fear the keys could end up in the wrong hands.

"Someone that's looking for jewels, looking for collections, looking for high-priced items would probably have the capability of doing it," said Donald Shiles with the International Association of Investigative Locksmiths.

Tobias said he can tackle most standard locks.

"It can be five seconds, it can be under a minute, but at the end of the day, about 95 percent of them can be bumped open," Tobias explained.

Tobias then demonstrated how he can bump open the lock on his mailbox.

"It's pretty serious, especially when you consider that more than 5 million post office box locks can be bumped open in the same fashion, which is perfect for identity thieves," Tobias said.

He notified the postal service about the threat.

The postal service said, "(It) identified a number of potential vulnerabilities that might allow a person to gain unauthorized access. A number of security measures have been taken and postal employees have been asked to remain alert."

To protect themselves, consumers should look for a higher security lock. There are several available, including one from Medeco.

"High security locks add extra locking features within the cylinder that make the bumping much more difficult," said Clyde Roberson with Medeco.

The extra security, however, comes with a higher price. Each high security lock costs about \$100, but homeowners may be able to get a discount on their insurance if they install the locks.

"Is it worth the money to you? That's the decision an individual has to make," Shiles said.

Ornstein said it is something she is now seriously considering now that her family is growing.

"I think it just gives added peace of mind," she said.

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