

This Week

March 6, 2003

News ▶

Sports

Diversions

Calendar

Classifieds

Weather

Home

Printer Friendly

For more News stories, click here . . .

Go

Wilmette Police give warnings on combination lock fallibility

BY KEN GOZE
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Combination locks offer convenience and enough security to sometimes lock out their owners.

But police are concerned some thieves have been dialing their way to other people's wallets using techniques anyone can learn on the Internet.

In as many as a dozen cases over the past year and a half, thefts at the Wilmette Park District Community Recreation Center raised suspicions that thieves were able to tamper with the locks members bring for their own use.

"There were a rash of thefts where victims did not discover the thefts until they got home," said Roger Ockrim, community relations officer. "When people came back, their lock was intact."

It's not clear how the locks were opened in each case, but a pattern of thefts over the last year suggest that one or more thieves has learned how to open the combination locks.

In one recent case, a man lost his wallet and almost \$1,000 in cash but did not discover the loss until later in the day.

Beyond immediate losses, victims face the possibility of identity theft, in which thieves can use personal information to open dozens of new accounts and wreak havoc on credit ratings.

Combination locks have been a standard for decades because of their convenience, but there are methods to break the three-digit codes, and many of those methods are easily found on the Internet.

Nathan Jeremy Hillson, creator of a Web page detailing one method, asid with practice a lock can be cracked in about five minutes.

That's still long enough to attract suspicion in a high-traffic locker room, although it could work with a lookout in some situations.

Some parts of the cracking method only work on certain brands and older models.

Leaving valuables at home is the best way to avoid problems, police said.

"I actually use an old Master lock, the kind the trick works on, in the locker room of my gym," Hillson said.

Now a graduate student in biophysics at Harvard, Hillson said he became interested in cracking locks in high school, when he learned about the mathematical relationship of combinations.

He said he applied the skill mostly to pranks among friends and for recovering lost combinations on his own locks.

“There is nothing morally wrong or illegal with my page, and I at most should be considered a slight nuisance. I have seen several other Master lock cracking pages out there, many with improvements and updates to the technique,” Hillson said.

It’s possible that some of the recent thefts used less sophisticated methods such as watching victims dial their numbers or taking advantage of the fact that some users leave the dial set near the last number for convenience.

Whatever the case, the fitness center has taken steps to help members avoid theft, said Terry Porter, parks and recreation director. As in other public places, unlocked and unattended items are still the most tempting targets for theft.

“We’ve got signs up encouraging people to use key-type locks. We also put in a bank of small lockers and we put them just across from the registration desk. To the extent possible, we advise people don’t bring a lot of valuables,” Porter said.

Liza McElroy, executive director of the Winnetka Park District, said she would examine the issue with operators of the district’s golf facility. The district’s tennis center also has lockers, but most people come dressed to play.

 [back to top](#)

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