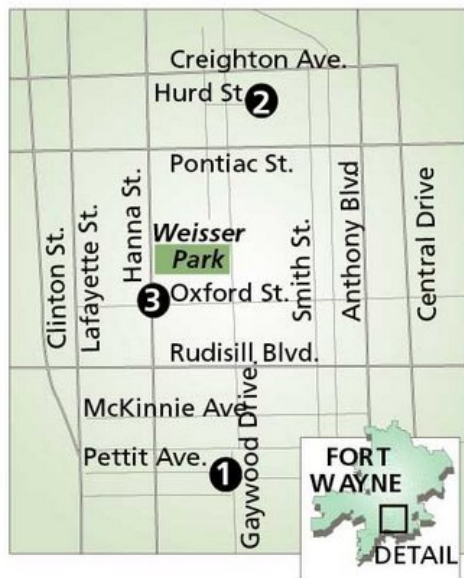


Kids left in cars at risk, police say

Jeff Wiehe | The Journal Gazette Published: March 12, 2011 3:00 a.m.

Stolen cars, kids

- 1. Tuesday:** 4415 Gaywood Drive, truck with baby
- 2. Wednesday:** 1119 Hurd St., car with four children
- 3. Thursday:** Oxford and Hanna streets, van with five children



Three days, three stolen vehicles. In each case a slew of similarities.

A vehicle is parked and running on the south side of town, left unattended as its driver dashes in somewhere – a house, a gas station – for a brief second. Maybe a purse gets left on the seat or somewhere else in view.

Also, at least one kid gets left alone in each car – and taken as someone swipes the vehicle.

That's what Fort Wayne police have dealt with for three straight days – stolen vehicles taken with children still inside, providing the kids with mini joyrides and their mothers with major heart attacks.

Despite the unlikelihood of such similar cases happening during a three-day stretch, police right now do not believe anyone is targeting cars with children inside. Instead, they're targeting something that offers up an open invitation to steal: A running car left unattended.

"When you think about what's going on, suspects see a running car with the concept of valuables inside," said Officer Raquel Foster, spokeswoman for the Fort Wayne Police Department. "That all just provides suspects with an opportunity."

Fort Wayne police investigate about 500 vehicle thefts a year. Most of those cases involve vehicles that are running and left unattended, according to police.

Police and other child experts are urging people to not leave their kids unattended in cars. Besides the possibility of their being snatched along with your car, there are other safety issues, officials say. Plus, leaving children alone in a car could lead to criminal charges.

The cases

The thefts began Tuesday.

Someone stole a pickup truck parked and running in the 4400 block of Gaywood Drive. That someone also took a month-old baby. The truck and the unharmed baby were found about an hour later with no sign of the suspect.

On Wednesday, someone took a Chevy Lumina parked and running outside a home in the 1100 block of Hurd Street. Four children – ages 5, 4 and a pair of 2-year-old twins – were inside. The car, which was low on gas, and the children – all unharmed – were found in an alley nearby.

And then on Thursday, a 38-year-old woman parked her minivan at the Marathon gas station at Hanna and Oxford streets, left it running and darted inside. In the process, she left her five children, ages 1 through 11 years old, in the unlocked car.

Shortly afterward, she saw her van pulling away and beginning to round the building, a man behind the wheel. The woman made it outside and stepped in front of the van, which then stopped, according to police.

The man inside jumped out and ran away, taking with him the woman's purse.

No arrests have been made, and descriptions in the first two instances were vague.

The pickup truck had tinted windows and nobody saw who took the vehicle. Police were unable to get a good description of the man who took the Chevy Lumina, though Foster said investigators believe he, like the suspect in the third theft, tried to take a purse inside the car.

The man who took the minivan at the gas station was described as 5-foot-3 to 5-foot-5, black, with a medium complexion and a thin muscular build. He was wearing a grey-hooded jacket and a mustard colored hat.

Temptation, danger

Rachel Tobin-Smith knows the temptation is great.

You've got three kids with you, maybe four. They're young, they're a handful and they're all buckled up in the backseat. Maybe one has taken off his or her shoes. Maybe another is asleep.

You need to buy a gallon of milk. You need something from the drugstore. You can be in and out real quick. The kids can stay behind. Why get them all unbuckled? What's the worst that can happen?

"It is so tempting, and so dangerous at the same time," said Tobin-Smith, the executive director of SCAN in Fort Wayne, whose mission is to prevent child abuse and neglect.

So much can happen in such a short amount of time when children are left alone, Tobin-Smith said.

If the car is running, one of the children can knock it into gear. If the car is turned off, the temperature in the car can change drastically – getting really hot on a summer day or very cold on a winter day.

If the car is locked, who's to say someone won't come by and convince the kids to unlock the doors, allowing the intruder inside? What happens if that one- or two-minute trip into the store turns into seven or eight minutes?

"Take them with you," Tobin-Smith said. "It's the very safest thing for your child. As hard as it is, just take them with you, or if you have an adult with you, have the adult stay with them or just take them home."

In some cases, leaving children unattended in a car can lead to criminal charges.

Allen County Prosecutor Karen Richards said her office regularly reviews cases where children were left alone in cars. Although in the past few years she's only charged one person with a crime – felony neglect of a dependent – the option is always there, she said.

"If I get something that rises to the level of prosecuting, I will," Richards said.

There is no set standard as to what constitutes a crime in that situation, though.

Richards said she has to review each case separately. She takes the age of the children into account, as well as the weather and how long they were left in the car. Were they intentionally left in the car for long periods of time? What happened that caused the children to be left alone?

Likewise, the Indiana Department of Child Services can review such cases.

"It would really depend on the circumstances," said Ann Houseworth, spokeswoman for the department, on what would cause child services to view such a case as child neglect. "Whenever we do an assessment of a situation, we look holistically at the circumstances of the situation."

Like Richards, Houseworth said each case is different and presents its own set of circumstances.

"It's always important that parents use their best judgment," Houseworth said.

And right now, police and child advocates are urging people make that judgment simple.

Turn your car off.

Don't leave your kids alone.

Safety tips

A spate of recent thefts involving vehicles with children inside has police and children's advocates urging parents to never leave children alone in automobiles. Some reasons why:

- If the vehicle is running, it can be stolen – along with the children
- An unattended child could accidentally shift the vehicle into gear
- Even if the vehicle is locked, someone could come by and convince a child to unlock the doors
- Intense weather can cause harm – cars heat up and become cold fast

Source: Fort Wayne police and SCAN

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