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Mobbed. Robbed. Blasted with bear spray: Toronto small business owners describe alarming commercial break-ins

The bear spray residue was so bad after thieves made off with \$1 million worth of John Ansari's inventory, “the ambulance driver had to pull over and get out to breathe.”

By **Mahdis Habibinia** Staff Reporter

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John Ansari, owner of Johnny Watches, has experienced first-hand the spike in commercial break-ins. Nick Lachance/Toronto Star

In recent years, John Ansari has been mobbed during daylight, held at gunpoint and struck with a hammer.

In 2021, he was assaulted with bear spray before thieves took off with \$1 million worth of inventory from his Forest Hill watch store.

“The ambulance driver had to pull over and get out to breathe,” the owner of Johnny Watches told the Star.

“That’s how much they got me.”

Ansari’s experiences are part of a wave of commercial break-and-enters that police say are becoming more brazen in recent years, forcing city councillors, store owners and Business Improvement Areas (BIA) to sound the alarm for the small businesses bearing the brunt of the impact.

“I have never, in all my 30 years on council, got this many reports about break-ins,” deputy mayor and councillor Mike Colle (Ward 8, Eglinton-Lawrence) told the Star.

“I’ve never seen this scale and brazen nature.”

Colle, along with a few other councillors, hosted a crime-prevention summit late last week as a first step to bring stakeholders together and develop a response to escalating break-ins.

According to Toronto police data, 2023 saw a nearly 20 per cent increase in commercial break-ins to more than 3,000.

And this year has already seen 582 commercial break-and-enters as of March 4, up from just over 400 by that date last year.

Those numbers are the highest since before 2020; the uptick comes at a time when businesses are still trying to stay afloat after suffering during the COVID-19 pandemic.

It’s not precisely known if thieves are targeting small businesses especially hard — the police data doesn’t distinguish small businesses from malls, chains or other commercial properties — however, owners and city officials are reporting that methods have certainly changed in recent years.

For one thing, it’s not just inventory they’re after — thieves are increasingly targeting point-of-sale terminals, highlighting an unsettling vulnerability.



John Ansari, owner of Johnny Watches, has experienced first-hand the spike in commercial break-ins.

Nick Lachance/Toronto Star

Nathan Ladovsky, owner of United Bakers Dairy Restaurant in Lawrence Manor, said the store was broken into twice early last year, with security footage showing thieves arriving in a U-Haul truck before making off with some of their point-of-sale machines.

When Ladovsky checked his bank statements, he discovered the thieves had processed multiple refunds to the same card, amounting to \$3,900 in losses on top of \$4,000 in property damage and the cost to replace the terminals.

“Our bank became their ATM,” he said.

Some businesses don’t claim the costs through insurance because premiums will skyrocket, said Meg Marshall, community manager for the BIAs of Queen West, Ossington and Bloorcourt.

“Certain industries are almost uninsurable these days, one of them being jewelry,” she said.

Colle said he and Mayor Olivia Chow plan to gather the major providers of point-of-sale terminals — such as TD, Chase and Visa — to “call them on the carpet” for their lack of safeguards against theft. The vulnerability is “basically a joke,” he added.

Scott Tabachnick, spokesperson for credit and debit-processing firm Moneris, who attended the summit at City Hall, said there have been some improvements to safeguard the machines.

“For our devices, you cannot proceed with your initialization until you have changed the password,” Tabachnick said, noting this only applies to Moneris’ newer machines and that some businesses may still be using older debit and credit-processing devices.

Still, many thieves are professionals, said Insp. Paul Rinkoff from Toronto police’s Community Partnerships and Engagement Unit. These are “frequent fliers” who do their work quickly, he added.

“But point-of-sale thefts and break-ins are preventable and education goes a long way,” he said.

At the summit, police said store owners can take steps such as clearing windows for easy crime detection, locking up valuables away from plain view, equipping doors with deadbolt and strike plate locks, and installing deterrents such as motion cameras and bright lights.

Still, some business owners expressed frustration that the onus continues to be on them to protect their businesses, even if they've educated themselves and are already taking additional security measures.

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Kristina Dixon, a manager at Paradise Comics in Bedford Park, said there hadn't been any issues with thieves in the three decades her husband's store has been in business. That was until 2021 when a smash-and-grab cost them \$9,000. And then another break-in in 2022 cost \$35,000, including property damage.

The criminals have "got nothing to lose, which jeopardizes the whole community," she added.

The store has installed additional cameras and shatterproof glass, but just two weeks ago a security camera captured a person with a crowbar attempting to break into doors behind the store (they happened to be the way into a local resident's unit.)

One frustration is clear, she said: "The city is not offering any funding to help small businesses protect themselves."

As for Ansari, police eventually arrested his assailant, but he never recovered the \$1 million in stolen inventory.

He now asks customers to identify themselves, has removed jewelry from showcases, hired a security guard, and installed multiple cameras and a gate. Just last month, however, he said he and his security were mobbed by three people in masks during the day.

The break-in was unsuccessful, but “this is not the way I want to do business.”



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