

Flipping the Equation on Self-Storage Security Costs



A Familiar Crime Spree

In May of 2020, a couple was arrested and charged by the Michigan State Police with “conducting a criminal enterprise and conspiracy to conduct a criminal enterprise.” The criminals’ targets: 11 self-storage facilities located across three counties in Michigan.

The alleged burglars used a straightforward line of attack against self-storage facilities: They would locate isolated sites, cut locks off units, clean the units out, and then replace the locks with new ones. In many cases, both the self-storage operators and clients didn’t realize anything was amiss until a unit was opened.

Authorities recovered “several thousand dollars of suspected stolen property,” ranging from firearms and ammunition to jewelry and electronics-- enough to fill “two trucks and a trailer.” What was not as easy to quantify, however, was the damage to the reputation of the affected facilities and the erosion of trust between the self-storage companies and their clients.

The crime spree in Michigan is not a new phenomenon in the self-storage industry, but it highlights the competing demands of security, ease-of-access, and cost that many self-storage operators grapple with daily.

This document will examine self-storage central security and access systems, their upfront and residual costs, and cost-effective alternatives that new technologies have made possible in recent years.

NEWS

Battle Creek couple arrested for storage unit break-ins in 3 counties

Trace Christenson Battle Creek Enquirer

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WAYLAND – A Battle Creek couple has been arrested, accused of breaking into storage units in Calhoun, Allegan and Barry counties.

Terri Lorene Vantuinen, 36, and Eric James Morgan, 38, are in the Barry County jail facing charges of conducting a criminal enterprise and conspiracy to conduct a criminal enterprise, Michigan State Police said Tuesday.

Troopers said the pair was charged in connection with burglaries at 11 storage businesses, including one in Bedford Township just west of Battle Creek. Investigators said other thefts are likely but not yet discovered.

Police said the pair along with a third suspect, not yet in custody, are alleged to have entered the storage unit properties over several months, cut locks from individual units and taken items and then placed new locks on the units.

The Cost of Unauthorized Entries

Public data and statistics covering self-storage facilities and crime are far and few between. The lack of information is due to several reasons, including both client and operators underreporting thefts and vandalism, as well as how municipalities record their crime statistics and if that data is publicly available. Nonetheless, third-party investigations can help fill in the blanks.

In 2017, an investigative team from ABC 7 News reviewed hundreds of burglary reports from suburbs around Chicago. The team identified 286 break-ins at self-storage facilities for that year, with just over three-fourths of the intrusions occurring at the same chain of self-storage facilities.

Another investigation by CBS 5 in San Francisco found 295 self-storage break-ins in 2011. 264 of those break-ins were at the same large chain of self-storage facilities that lead break-ins in ABC 7's reporting—a staggering eight times the average amount of break-ins at other facilities.

The fact that two independent reports, six years apart, in two geographically different areas, found a higher rate of

break-ins at the same chain of self-storage facilities is not a coincidence. In both reports, the facilities that suffered break-ins shared some or all of these qualities:

- Lack of or non-functioning security cameras
- Wire ceilings accessible with ladders
- Client-provided locks
- Lack of on-site security personnel
- Lack of individual unit alarms
- Lack of central access systems

To summarize: Clients' units were easy to access by outsiders, were not easy to secure via traditional locks, and were not actively monitored by security personnel. For enterprising burglars, such a scenario presented the perfect opportunity to repeatedly target these facilities, resulting in a rash of negative news coverage, lost client property, and damaged reputations.

Solutions to these security problems exist, but their implementations can cost substantial time and money.

Conventional Security Solutions

There's no shortage of traditional security solutions available to self-storage facility operators. A cursory Google search returns hundreds of results for keypads, lighting, cameras, gates, and fences. Security measures that operators rarely omit are the most basic: fences to secure the perimeter of a site, cameras on facility entrances and exits, and lights throughout the site to deny cover of darkness to thieves.

Beyond basic security measures, there are more advanced deterrents that can be costly to retrofit in existing self-storage facilities. Alarms, keypads, and digital access are effective but can be expensive to install. According to a self-storage security expert writing for Inside Self-Storage, these systems can cost up to \$250 per unit or around \$50,000 for a 200-unit facility. This cost can be closer to \$75,000 or \$80,000 depending on the difficulty of retrofitting the equipment in old construction.

Central access systems are also available and offer features such as using a client's phone to unlock their unit through a mobile app. However, these systems are typically installed during the construction of new facilities and can easily cost hundreds of thousands of dollars to retrofit older sites. Centralized security installations also typically require

expensive ongoing support contracts, which can further eat into a facility's profits.

Most operators must balance their self-storage security with a reasonable budget. Advanced, cloud-based central security systems are not economical for the majority of existing self-storage facilities. However, a revolution in the IoT, or internet of things, space has created new, affordable solutions for self-storage security.

Security Measure	Cost
Control Access System	\$7,700 - \$30,000 per system
Video Cameras	\$300 - \$400 per camera
Security Gate	\$8,500 - \$35,000
Individual Unit Alarm/Lock	\$50 - \$250 per door
Maintenance/Support Contract	\$1,200 – \$5,5000 per year

A Revolution in Self-Storage Security

Over the past few years, IoT technology has advanced at a rapid rate, driving down the price of hardware while increasing the quality of consumer IoT products. Skyhawk, a versatile IoT platform developed by Pica Product Development, represents a fundamental leap forward in self-storage security solutions.

Conventional central security access systems require tens of thousands of dollars for installation and maintenance, but Skyhawk products are deployed with little cost and without contactors. Skyhawk devices also function regardless of a site's electricity or internet connections, thanks to efficient, long-lasting batteries and dedicated LTE connections.

Skyhawk products connect through the nation's largest LTE network, Verizon, ensuring consistent coverage throughout the continental United States. Skyhawk also supports its products with OTA (over-the-air) updates, meaning that the platform evolves over time.

Additionally, Skyhawk devices are supported by the Skyhawk CE application, allowing users to receive direct notifications to their compatible mobile devices when activity in a unit is detected. For self-storage operators,

Skyhawk empowers their clients to take the security of their units into their own hands.

The Skyhawk platform is an ideal solution for self-storage operators that want to improve the security of their facilities without the expensive investment of central access security systems.



Conclusion and Next Steps

Self-storage providers must contend with securing their customers' belongings, maximizing profits, and offering value to their clients. While conventional security systems are available, their cost of installation and ongoing support are often too expensive for many facilities to retrofit into existing sites. Nonetheless, break-ins and thefts can adversely affect a facility through lost property and negative press.

Skyhawk offers a cost-effective solution for self-storage customers to monitor units that requires **no infrastructure investment** from owners and minimal effort to deploy—all while **costing less than half** of similar per-unit security measures.

Skyhawk devices offer entry detection and notification features without the need for expensive, proprietary hardware installations or extensive retrofitting. Deployment takes minutes, and Skyhawk devices can easily be added or replaced when needed, making them perfect for monitoring empty units as well as occupied ones.

Contact the experts at Skyhawk to learn how your facility can benefit from our revolutionary IoT platform.



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