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Journal News

FRIDAY, APRIL 12, 2013

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LOCAL HEALTH CLUBS COMBAT LOCKER THEFTS

Criminals target fitness centers

HEALTH CLUB CRIME

The Journal News reviewed police call records for 92 addresses where health clubs are in Putnam, Rockland and Westchester counties in 2012. The stand-alone fitness centers at the top of select categories:

WESTCHESTER

20

calls for alleged larcenies from Bally Total Fitness, Yonkers

7

calls for alleged assaults from Yonkers YMCA

11

calls for alleged disputes from Tarrytown YMCA

ROCKLAND

10

calls for alleged larcenies from New York Sports Clubs, Garnerville

PHOTO ILLUSTRATION
MARK VERGARI/THE JOURNAL NEWS

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It's not just weights getting lifted at the Bally Total Fitness in Yonkers, which features a warning on the front door about locker-room thefts.

"Please secure all valuables in the lockers with a key lock," warns a flier emblazoned with the Yonkers Police Department's logo. "A combination lock is not as effective in preventing

'break-ins' as key locks."

The Bally Total Fitness at 589 Tuckahoe Road had 20 larcenies reported to police in 2012, the most for any stand-alone health club in the Lower Hudson Valley, according to a review of police call records.

And Bally isn't the only health club in criminals' sights. On Tuesday, a 38-year-old West Harrison woman told po-

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CLUBS: Police urge caution to prevent thefts at local gyms

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lice that her credit cards, keys, a necklace and an iPod were stolen from a locker secured with a combination lock at the White Plains New York Sports Clubs, 4 City Place, between 12:15 and 1:40 p.m.

Police records for 92 fitness clubs in Putnam, Rockland and Westchester counties recorded 2,534 police-service and 911 calls in 2012. Many of the calls from properties hosting fitness centers are for noncriminal incidents like false burglar or fire alarms and medical emergencies, but some are for alleged disputes, assaults and other criminal activity.

Not all the Yonkers Bally calls turned out to be actual thefts, but enough of them were verified to prompt action.

"Bally has coin-operated lockboxes located at the front desk for members who wish to secure valuables while utilizing the facility," said Earl J. Acquaviva, vice president and general counsel of Bally Total Fitness Corp. in Towson, Md., adding that the club installed security cameras in the facility and parking lot.

Between Jan. 1, 2012 and April 5 of this year, the Yonkers police confirmed eight thefts from cars in Bally's parking lot and 10 thefts from lockers. The crimes led Yonkers police to post plainclothes officers inside and outside the club, Lt. Patrick McCormack said.

The 911 call logs don't document crimes. They are simply allegations by the public or gym staffers.

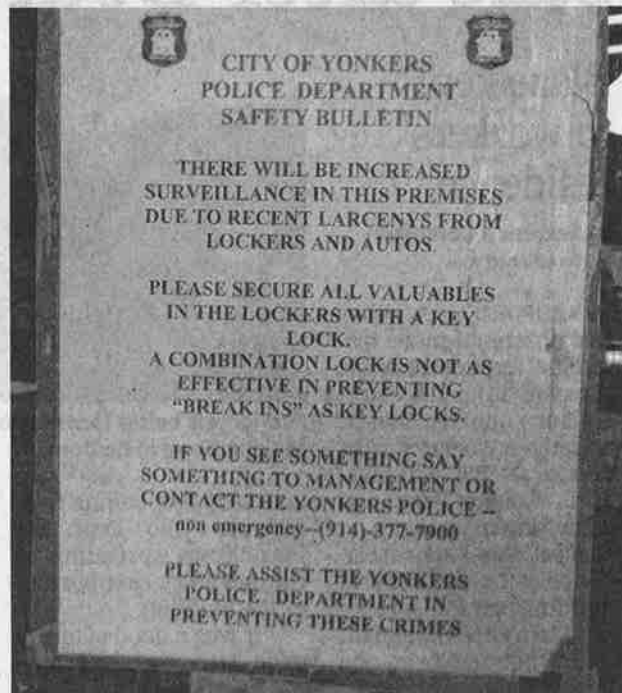
The Journal News identified 97 fitness clubs in the Lower Hudson Valley, and the newspaper obtained 911 call records from police using the state's Freedom of Information Law. Records for health clubs in communities served by state and county police could not be obtained in a timely manner.

In the case of health clubs that share an address with other businesses in shopping centers or strip malls, call records often don't indicate if an alleged incident is related to the gym or not. For instance, 33 Lecount Place in New Rochelle, the part of New Roc City where



Charles DeFrancesco, owner of the Pure Fit Club in White Plains, works with Denise Groothuis of West Harrison. Pure Fit is one of the safest gyms in Westchester County and had no reports of larcenies or disruptive incidents in 2012.

SETH HARRISON/THE JOURNAL NEWS



A warning sign for members hangs at the front entrance to the Bally Total Fitness on Tuckahoe Road in Yonkers.

ERNIE GARCIA/THE JOURNAL NEWS

Planet Fitness shares an address with other businesses, had the most calls for larcenies: 21. A strip mall at 33 Route 304 in Nanuet where Planet Fitness shares an address with stores had Rockland County's highest number of larceny calls: 12.

Stand-alone locations with the most disruptive incidents included the Tarrytown YMCA, which had 11 calls about alleged

disputes, and the Yonkers YMCA, which had calls for seven alleged assaults. In Rockland County, the New York Sports Clubs in Garnerville logged the most alleged larceny calls: 10.

Jon Gribben, the Garnerville New York Sports Clubs' general manager, couldn't discuss his club's 2012 numbers because he didn't work there at the time. Gribben said his

ON THE WEB

View a database of health club locations and police-service requests at lohud.com.

club's security precautions include quarter lockers in front of his office where patrons can store valuables.

Rich Biribia, 75, of Stony Point joined the Garnerville New York Sports Clubs at 20 W. Ramapo Road in December and hasn't had any problems.

"I've never seen anything to indicate that it wasn't safe," said Biribia, noting that signs warn patrons to secure their valuables.

Margaret Anderson, 47, of Cortlandt had her purse stolen from her locked car in January during a morning workout in the Peekskill Planet Fitness at 1839 Main St. Peekskill police received three larceny reports last year from that address, the site of a strip mall.

Anderson's abandoned purse was recovered on March 15 near a Club Fit at 600 Bank Road in Jefferson Valley, said Yorktown police, who noted that there have been numerous car break-ins in that

mall's parking lot. The theft caused Anderson, who doesn't like to use gym lockers or carry a lock, to stop hiding her purse in her car.

"I have a cover on my iPad and it has slots for a diver's license and credit cards, and even if I have errands, I'll swing back home and get my purse. I will not bring it with me," Anderson said.

Shawyn Patterson-Howard, chief executive officer of the Yonkers YMCA, said some of the alleged assaults aren't happening in her building, which has its public fitness rooms on the ground and basement levels, with housing on upper floors.

"People come into the Y if there are fights in the square," she said of Getty Square, which is two blocks away. "and we'll call the police."

Gerry Riera, chief executive officer of the Tarrytown YMCA, said the alleged disputes recorded at 62 Main St. are not for the fitness center.

"We have a low-income residence as part of our facility. The incidents you are referring to are with respect to our residence, not our members," Riera wrote in an email.

Eric Schoen is a member at the Dobbs Ferry

New York Sports Clubs and he used to be a member at the Yonkers Bally two to three years ago. Schoen said he left Bally because he wanted a more upscale health club with a swimming pool, not because of thefts.

"A lot of people buy crappy locks, that's a problem, and a lot of people are in such a rush in the gym that they don't lock the lock properly. I've seen that," said Schoen, 53, adding that his gym has "decent" security. "They have people cleaning and doing work in the locker room. Someone would have a hard time breaking in."

Still, there's a sign at the Dobbs Ferry New York Sports Clubs warning of larcenies from fitness centers and instructing patrons how to reduce opportunities for criminals.

The International Health, Racquet & Sportclub Association offers 10 recommendations for safeguarding the public's belongings in locker rooms. That includes warning patrons when thefts occur, posting cameras at entrances to locker rooms and conducting random sweeps of locker rooms and parking lots.

Several gyms had medical emergencies in 2012. On Aug. 7, police responded to Planet Fitness in Airmont after a patron dislocated his shoulder while doing a military press.

With a focus on supervised athletic conditioning and physical education, Pure Fit Club at 1133 Westchester Ave. in White Plains doesn't feature big rows of exercise machines like many health clubs.

It also had no medical emergencies, crime or rowdy behavior in 2012.

"The people we're bringing in are coming for personal training," owner Charles DeFrancesco said. He said the gym's \$80 monthly walk-in rate for patrons outside the sprawling office building dissuades disruptive behavior. The Journal News is a tenant at 1133 Westchester Ave.

"I want to keep the meatheads out," DeFrancesco said.

Staff writer Richard Lieberson contributed to this report.