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Squatters And Vandals Wreaking Home Havoc

Police arrested a trio of young men in late August on charges of trespassing and possession of marijuana after they were found in an empty home on Dominic and Pedersen. It was the first time they'd been caught but likely not the first time they'd busted into the empty residence.

Arturo Diaz, 24, was charged with trespassing, contributing to the delinquency of a minor, and possession of less than an ounce of marijuana. His two juvenile companions, ages 15 and 16, were similarly charged.

Never lived in, but ruined by vandals and squatters, the once-beautiful new home had become a popular spot for people looking for a place to do drugs, have sex, or commit random acts of vandalism.

The windows are broken and now boarded up to prevent further trespassing but the damage is done.

Although sad, the story is not unique. It's happening all over the Central Valley where the blight of foreclosures and stalled out development tracts dot the towns and cities, leaving them wide open for criminal activity.

"It's an ongoing problem," Oakdale Police Department Administrative Sgt. Kerri Redd stated. "And it's a real big problem in Oakdale."

In the past year there were 164 calls to the police department reporting disturbances, although not every call originated from a caller reporting vandals or squatters, there were quite a few who were.

"They'll look for homes with grass that's overly long and basically unkempt," Redd said of the criminally-minded. "The best thing you can do is help keep the homes in your neighborhood looking maintained."

Redd suggested, "Pick up the free newspapers from the driveway and if you see things hanging from the door, remove it so it doesn't look as if the home is empty."

While evidence of squatters living in the empty homes has been found in a few of the residences, most are simply vandals.

"It's horrid and it's spread out through the city. It's not just the transients doing this. They are opportunists breaking in through the back fence and windows. They're doing damage, stealing things. These aren't people just trying to get in out of the cold. These are people looking for a place to hang out and do bad things."

Most of the calls to the police department came from concerned neighbors and that's exactly what the police need, Redd said.

"The citizens are our eyes and ears out there. Definitely call if you see something suspicious. A neighbor is more likely to know if a vehicle belongs in a neighborhood than we are," Redd said.

Catching vandals and trespassers is difficult because when the police cars roll up on the residence, the people run away on foot, often melting into the night. But they can be caught as evidenced by the arrest in August so don't stop trying to make a difference, Redd said.

"Report all suspicious activity," she said. "We don't mind checking things out. That's our job."

To contact the police department, call 847-2231 or if you feel the situation is dangerous call 911.

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