

Sharp rise in NY bank robberies

CNN January 3, 2004

NEW YORK (AP) -- The city's 400th bank robbery of 2003 required no safecracking. No hostage-taking. Not even a drawn gun.

The robber simply walked into an HSBC branch in Manhattan on Tuesday, produced a threatening note demanding money and left with an undisclosed amount of cash.

The unremarkable formula has been the hallmark of a remarkable rise in city bank robberies in 2003: 408 were reported by New Year's Eve, up 64 percent from 249 in 2002.

The numbers, which include five heists in just over an hour this past week, defied a dip in the city's overall robbery rate and outpaced increases nationwide, exasperating police and bank officials.

"I honestly can't tell you why it's happening. ... It's just a rash," said Ed Hausdorf, director of security for North Fork Bank, hit by more than three dozen robberies in 2003.

The vast majority of stickups-by-note involved robbers working solo. Some were drug addicts desperate for easy cash, who used no more than a baseball cap and sunglasses as disguise.

Their ranks even included women and children. In August, a 12-year-old boy handed a teller a note that read "I have a gun. Give me \$30,000," and then made off with cash. Police arrested the boy's mother and the teller, alleging it was an inside job.

The banking industry long ago abandoned armed guards to avoid the risk of gunplay that could threaten customers. Tellers tend to hand over a few thousand dollars rather than risk calling a bandit's bluff.

Under pressure from police, some banks have bolstered security, installing bulletproof glass "bandit barriers" and surveillance cameras.

"I think the banking industry has to do more," Police Commissioner Raymond Kelly said this past week.

Kelly backs a pending City Council bill to require bandit barriers. Police also advocate wider use of exploding cash packs that coat robbers with a bright dye.

But the New York Bankers Association opposes mandatory bandit barriers, saying they don't deter robbers. It instead favors "vigilant surveillance," silent alarms and tougher sentences.

As the robberies have increased, so have arrests -- 137 through December 28, compared to 64 over the same period last year.

But in May -- on the very afternoon Kelly passed out awards to four banks lauding their security records -- three Manhattan branches belonging to other banks were robbed in less than an hour.

Even the suburbs have not been spared in the outbreak of bank heists.

In Westchester County, a riding coach was accused of hitting six banks in just two days with notes that made unverified claims she was a victim of the September 11 terrorist attacks.

"You listen good," one of her notes allegedly read. "I went through the September 11 attack and I'm very angry today. Don't make a sound or everyone is going to die."



Video surveillance camera shows a person passing a note to a teller demanding money at a bank in Midtown Manhattan on December 16.