

[Pharmacy delivery vans targeted by thieves seeking painkillers](#)

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They're the new Brink's trucks.

Delivery vans that transport prescription painkillers from warehouses to pharmacies and hospitals are the targets of an escalating number of thefts across the country, STAT has learned. Amid a nationwide [epidemic of opioid addiction](#), the delivery vans have become an appealing and vulnerable target for thieves, addicts, and drug dealers.

Hitting the right pharmaceutical courier can yield a payoff similar to robbing an armored car. But the pharmaceutical van drivers usually receive little security training, work alone, and rarely carry weapons.



Surveillance video from a pharmaceutical delivery van robbery on Jan. 27 in Boynton Beach, Fla.

Known in the shipping industry as last-mile thefts, the courier robberies are causing alarm

because in addition to putting addictive prescription drugs in the hands of criminals, these incidents often involve the use of weapons and take place in busy public areas, such as pharmacy parking lots.

Read more: [Opioid crisis drives record number of US opioid deaths](#)

"We still have a segment of criminals that very much want to get their hands on those pills because they have high street value," said Captain Gregg Rector of the Hoover, Ala., police department, which is investigating a May van robbery. "People are willing to go to extreme means to get those pills."

In the Alabama case, thieves hit an unmarked white van carrying a cargo valued in the six figures. Just before dawn on May 15, the driver left a complex of warehouses in Birmingham

and pulled onto the interstate. A short while later, he noticed flashing blue and red lights in his rearview mirror and pulled over.

He grabbed his license and rolled down the window, figuring he must have been speeding. He was wrong.

A stocky man in his early 20s, wearing a shirt with "DEA" printed on it, walked up and stuck a gun in driver John Latham's face. The man reached in to the van and hit the button to unlock all the doors. Another armed man, wearing a ski mask, jumped in from the passenger side.

"Don't do anything stupid," the robber wearing the DEA shirt told Latham. "We want the drugs."

The narcotics and other drugs had a retail value of \$108,000, but on the street, some of the pills would sell for more than 100 times the retail price. The loot included 1,800 [oxycodone](#) and 300 [OxyContin](#) pain pills, which, depending on the dosage, could fetch as much as \$66,000 for drug dealers. A single tablet of [methadone](#), also part of the haul, sells for as little as 17 cents at a pharmacy but goes for \$20 on the street, according to police.

In the last two years, there have been nearly 100 last-mile pharmaceutical thefts nationwide, according to [FreightWatch International](#), an Austin, Texas, firm that provides logistics security services to companies. That's nearly four times the rate of similar incidents in 2012, although the company said some of that increase could be the result of better reporting. Pharmaceuticals made up 98 percent of all last-mile cargo thefts over the last two years, according to FreightWatch.

An industry group, which has recently focused on improving pharmacy delivery van security, reported 87 cases of robbery, theft, and what it calls suspicious activity related to last-mile deliveries in the first 11 months of this year. That is up from 72 such incidents in 2014, according to the Pharmaceutical Cargo Security Coalition.

By comparison, the FBI reports that the number of armored car heists in the United States last year was 24.

Thefts often involve violence

Fatal overdoses of prescription opioids such as oxycodone have [more than tripled](#) since 2000 and accounted for about 33 deaths a day last year, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. This crisis has prompted significant security upgrades in other links of the delivery chain stretching from pharmaceutical plants to pharmacies and hospitals.

Pharmacies have added safes with delayed locks to store painkillers, installed high-definition surveillance cameras and safety glass, and hired in-store guards in high-risk locations.

The stunning [\\$80 million theft](#) of drugs from an Eli Lilly Company warehouse in 2010 prompted widespread improvements to security at similar facilities across the country. Thieves cut a hole

in the Lilly warehouse roof in Enfield, Conn., and rappelled down ropes into the facility. After disabling the alarm system, they backed a tractor-trailer into a loading dock and made off with 49 pallets of pharmaceuticals.

Read more: [Democrats pledge to tackle opioid addiction](#)

Tractor-trailers carrying large loads from manufacturing plants and between warehouses are now typically outfitted with multiple GPS devices designed to thwart thieves. The technology can alert dispatchers if a truck veers off its route. Security personnel can also remotely turn off the vehicles' engines if they suspect a problem. Tracking devices are even installed on the boxes of drugs inside these trucks. Cargo thefts have declined significantly.



Pharmaceutical delivery van drivers, like John Latham of Alabama, usually receive little security training, work alone, and rarely carry weapons. (Photo: Wes Frazer for STAT)

"As that was slowing down, we started to see an increase in last-mile courier thefts in the last several years," said Gregg Goneconto, a former criminal investigator for the US Food and Drug Administration who now runs [Baymar Consulting LLC](#), a company specializing in pharmaceutical supply chain security. "These thefts are almost exclusively controlled substances. And where we rarely saw violent attacks in cargo thefts, these are unusual in that they involve the threat of force or the use of force."

That was the case on Jan. 27 in Boynton Beach, Fla., when a driver for Courier Advisory Group arrived at the Seacrest Pharmacy with a delivery. A surveillance tape shows the driver preparing to unload boxes from the side door of his van when a white Monte Carlo sedan quickly pulls up. Two men jump from the car and one of them pepper-sprays the driver in the face. He collapses

on the concrete sidewalk. One of the thieves quickly grabs two plastic bins nearest to the open van door and sprints back to the car. The entire incident lasted 12 seconds.

The thieves made off with a relatively worthless batch of non-controlled substances valued at just over \$2,000. In their haste, they missed other bins loaded with narcotics.

Security lapses are common

The vans and small trucks bringing pharmaceuticals to their final destination are most often driven by independent contractors. They work for scores of courier services hired by wholesalers to get drugs and other medical supplies to their final destinations. The result is a patchwork delivery system with varying security standards.

"We were hiring and contracting with carrier entities without really delving into what is necessary to protect our interests," said Charles Forsaith, the director of supply chain security at [Purdue Pharma](#), the maker of OxyContin. "We have learned you have to pay attention to things like background checks of drivers, reputations of companies, what they have for insurance, and you have to, as simple as it sounds, put in writing exactly what you want. The locking of the vehicle is a perfect example."

A driver failed to do just that on Jan. 26 when making a delivery in Mangonia Park, Fla. He left the rear door of his box truck unlocked as he went inside the Speedy Scripts Pharmacy with a delivery, a stop he made almost every weekday at the same time. A security camera recorded a man jumping out of an SUV, opening the rear door of the truck, and grabbing four to six plastic totes of pharmaceuticals while the courier was inside. It wasn't until three stops later that the delivery driver realized he had been robbed of \$50,000 worth of controlled substances, including oxycodone.

Read more: [CDC delays release of opioid prescribing guidelines](#)

The driver of a courier van in the Detroit area made it even easier for thieves. He left his keys inside the unlocked vehicle as he went inside a Rite Aid pharmacy to make a delivery about a year ago. The van was later recovered, but the contents, including narcotics, were missing.

Purdue's Forsaith is also chairman of the Pharmaceutical Cargo Security Coalition, an industry group formed in 2006 to combat supply chain thefts. Initially the group focused on large-scale targets like warehouses and tractor-trailer shipments, he said. About three years ago, the coalition formed an internal group of wholesalers to focus on last-mile thefts and common ways to combat those crimes.

Three wholesalers, with combined revenues of over \$300 billion, dominate the US pharmaceutical market. All three declined to answer specific questions about how often couriers delivering their products are robbed, any security measures undertaken in recent years, and their reliance on independent contract drivers to deliver their goods.

A spokesman for [Cardinal Health](#) said the company maintains "robust safety measures to ensure the safe distribution of products." A spokeswoman for [McKesson Corporation](#) said it would not answer questions for "security reasons." [AmerisourceBergen](#), which owned the drugs stolen in the Mangonia Park, Fla., case, did not provide responses to questions.

Unarmed and driving solo

In the Alabama robbery, the courier was delivering products for McKesson. The wholesaler uses a Franklin, Tenn., company called [Express Courier International Inc.](#) to deliver pharmaceuticals and other medical supplies in Alabama and neighboring states. Express, which doesn't have any drivers or vehicles of its own, contracts with local couriers to make the deliveries.

Charles Moyer, the chief executive of Express, said his company brings in local and federal law enforcement agents to talk to drivers about safety issues and conducts extensive background checks of couriers to guard against inside jobs.

He said additional security measures could be taken, such as adding a second person to delivery teams. But some of those solutions are expensive, and he said wholesalers would have to share some of the cost. The use of two-person teams is rare, and the last-mile delivery business is known for low margins that make the widespread use of that tactic unlikely.

Latham, the 67-year-old Alabama courier who was hijacked at gunpoint, said the dozen vans that deliver pharmaceuticals for the small courier company he drives for have been robbed five times in the past three years.

Drivers are not allowed to carry guns, and Latham said he wished he had one the day he was robbed. He searched for another job after the robbery without success. "The job market down here is not that lucrative for older employees," he said. "A couple of the other drivers who were robbed are also still doing it."

Latham said he hasn't received any security training since he started transporting pharmaceuticals about four years ago, after he was laid off from his job as a salesman for a local steel supplier. On occasion, drivers will receive a sheet with safety tips or a notice informing them of a courier robbery, he said.

On the day he was robbed, Latham was headed out on a route that should have taken him to about a dozen mostly small pharmacies in Georgia and Alabama. The daily pay for that route is around \$125, he said. Latham receives no benefits, although the courier service provides him with the van and gas.

The criminals started trailing Latham as soon as he left the warehouse, according to police. After hijacking the van on the highway in Hoover, the thieves drove back to Birmingham with Latham. The longer the men drove around, the more concerned he became.

Perched on a metal box in between the two front seats, Latham was able to feel a lug wrench on the floor. As they passed a cemetery, he told the men they needed to let him out. A Vietnam

War veteran, Latham said he was prepared to grab the wrench and fight his way out. Instead, the men let him go. He ran to a nearby McDonald's and called police. The van was later set on fire, after the drugs were removed. The crime remains unsolved.

"You really can't stop this," Latham said. "People who are addicted to these painkillers, they will pay for it."

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