Not safe at home: Boca carjacking happened as victim arrived at her apartment

By Adam Sacasa, Sun Sentinel

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BOCA RATON

— She thought she was safe at home. But the robber who wanted her car had other ideas.

When a Boca Raton woman parked at her apartment complex at about 11 p.m., a man approached her and began to ask directions. When she paused to answer, he whipped out a pistol, demanded the keys to her 2008 Nissan Altima and drove off in it, followed by an accomplice in another car.

Inside the car were an iPhone, iPad, laptop, and purse with cash and credit cards.

Experts say the March 28 carjacking was a crime of opportunity and the woman, not identified by Boca police, was targeted because it was late and she was alone.

Seeing a stranger in her neighborhood, not parking and getting out of the car may have been a better option, said Rachel Boba Santos, associate professor for the school of Criminology and Criminal Justice at Florida Atlantic University.

Coming home at night, if she sees someone outside near her home, Santos says she would drive around until the person is gone.

"One of the things about crimes of opportunity is they don't happen when a lot of people are around," Santos said.

The violent robbery shocked residents of the neighborhood just east of the Boca airport.

Matt Bauer and his girlfriend, Samantha Larry, live down the street from the apartment where the most recent carjacking took place.

"I've never witnessed someone doing something like that," said Bauer. "I'm surprised someone went as far as pulling a gun."

Almost the same thing happened in Hollywood at about 2 a.m. Dec. 14. According to police, two men approached an unidentified woman right after she pulled into the driveway of her home.
They pointed guns at her, stole her purse and drove off in her gray Mercedes E350.

Carjackings are usually violent and quick, experts say, and they are often totally random. Most happen at night. And police say being aware of your surroundings is often the best way to avoid becoming a victim.

Sometimes, even professionals can be robbed. That happened Feb. 8 in Miramar, when a Broward County Sheriff’s Office deputy in his personal car was carjacked after a red Volvo sedan with red-and-blue flashing lights pulled him over on Florida's Turnpike.

Carjackers steal for several reasons, Santos says, including joy riding, using cars to commit other crimes and stripping cars down for parts.

But the last reason, Santos says, isn't common because most carjackings are done by street criminals, not professional auto thieves.

There are also plenty of ruses and distractions carjackers use.

In the March 28 Boca carjacking, the man asked for directions before pointing a gun at the victim. In other cases, thieves have posed as cops, or intentionally bumped the victim's car to get them to stop.

If that happens, authorities advise motorists not to stop unless they're in a well-lit area with other people around. While that might not stop a determined robber, it could foil those looking to commit a crime of opportunity.

In some instances, carjackings have happened in traffic or at stoplights. Florida Attorney General Pam Bondi recommends always leaving some space in front of your car, so you're not trapped in case you need to get away.

Bondi said motorists can take steps to avoid becoming a violent crime victim, "even if it means running a red light or stop sign."