



Historical Records Theft: Strategies for Prevention and Response

Myths and Facts about Post-Theft Communications

Myth: Discussing theft openly will paint the organization in a negative light.

Fact: All historical records repositories are at risk of theft, regardless of size, budget, or reputation. Theft is a constant challenge for any custodian of historical records, even those with advanced security programs and technology. Your ability to learn from the experience and share your lessons only supports the archival community and demonstrates your commitment to security.

Myth: Unless a theft is kept secret, donors and volunteers will lose confidence in the organization.

Fact: Most donors and volunteers will recognize that your organization is the *victim* of a crime, not the *perpetrator*. By sharing your experience and lessons, you are affirming your commitment to the protection of your collections and those of other organizations. It is better that your stakeholders learn about the situation early, openly, and officially instead of secondhand and long after the fact. Early notification of stakeholders shows respect and will earn their much needed trust and support during a difficult period.

Myth: Sharing information about a theft will lead to legal problems.

Fact: Your repository has every right to share factual information about the theft. This may even include a photograph or biographical information on the thief, provided that he has been found guilty of the crime or it is part of the public record. While your organization should never share opinions or assumptions, discussing the theft openly and accurately cannot incur legal liability. When your communications with the public and media stick to the known facts, you reduce the likelihood of misguided and possibly libelous opinions in the press.

Myth: Acknowledging a theft will result in budget cuts.

Fact: Victims of theft generally do not suffer budget cuts as a result. On the contrary, a theft can open a window of opportunity for better funding of your security program.

Myth: Open communication upon discovering a theft will “tip off” the thief, forcing him “underground” and reduce your chances of recovering stolen items.

Fact: Most thieves consider themselves to be “underground” already; your organization’s openness will not likely affect your chances of capturing the thief or recovering your items. Once the thief knows that the theft has been discovered, he may try to separate himself from the item as quickly and anonymously as possible. Most sellers and buyers will be suspicious when a thief attempts to unload stolen items haphazardly.