

# Report says crime up at U.S. churches

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(RNS) Each week brings an average of two arsons, seven thefts, and 19 burglaries at U.S. churches, according to Christian Security Network's second annual year-end report of church crimes.

The report, which uses news articles, police blogs, and verified personal reports to compile its data, showed a slight increase in most church crimes in 2010 from 2009, for a total of 1,783 incidents.

That figure was up 546 from the year before and included 970 burglaries, 397 thefts, 102 arsons, and 89 counts of vandalism, the report stated. The report only covered churches and not other houses of worship, such as mosques or synagogues.

"Two years is not long enough to prove any trend," said Jeffrey Hawkins, the founder and executive director of the Cincinnati-based group. "We will know better after another year or two if this keeps trending up. Maybe this year was just a bad year. Maybe we got better at finding out what had happened."

Hawkins hopes the upswing in crimes committed against churches will encourage churches to take security more seriously and will help those who have been victimized to realize they are not alone.

"Every church that gets burned down thinks they are the only church. But we see an arson twice a week. That's the awareness part," Hawkins said.

Hawkins also stressed the value of the report's numbers when compared against more recognized reports like the annual Department of Justice's Hate Crime Statistics and Uniform Crime Report.

The 2009 Hate Crime Statistics recognized only 89 hate crimes against Christians; the Uniform Crime Report reports all incidents that occur on church property even if they are not against the church, Hawkins said.

The 2010 report put an emphasis on verifying crimes: Hawkins said there would be many more incidents in the report if the organization reported every crime they knew had occurred but could not verify.

What's more, not all crimes are reported to police or the media.

"Security is never 100 percent, but (having) no security is 100 percent vulnerability," Hawkins said. "It's all about awareness. Our mission is to bring awareness to the community. No church is immune from this kind of thing and they have to start now. There is no tomorrow."