

# AIDS activists say 'Syringe Bandit' is crippling efforts to fight prejudice

By KEITH STONE  
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LOS ANGELES — Bicycle shop owner Bill Ledgerwood always worried about being held up at gunpoint, but he never dreamed he would be threatened at needlepoint.

Ledgerwood was the first victim last week of the man whom Los Angeles police dubbed the "Syringe Bandit" after he threatened people eight times with a needle he claims is loaded with his AIDS-infected blood.

"AIDS never really popped into my mind, being my age," said Ledgerwood, 67. "But when he raised his syringe and said, 'I'm going to give you AIDS,' I could see my retirement go out the window. I could see my family become destitute."

Within the next three days, the bandit struck seven more times. And police say copycats have pulled two heists, one in the Los Angeles area and one in Sacramento.

No one was injured in the attacks, but AIDS activists say the bandit has crippled their efforts to convince mainstream America that people with the AIDS virus should be helped and accepted — not feared.

"This is the kind of case that fans prejudice and discrimination and re-

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inforces the public view of people with AIDS as recalcitrant or dangerous," said Lawrence Gostin, executive director of the American Society of Law and Medicine and a Harvard University professor.

In that sense, people infected by the human immunodeficiency virus, which causes AIDS, also are victims of the Syringe Bandit, activists said.

"People with HIV are not criminals," said Mario Solis-Marich, director of public policy for AIDS Project Los Angeles. "This particular person is damaging and hurting all people with AIDS and all people with HIV."

Police say it was just a matter of time before criminals exploited the 10-year-old AIDS epidemic by trying to brandish it as a lethal weapon.

"I'm surprised it hasn't happened sooner," said Betsy Braziel, a spokesman for the Sacramento police. "It's a natural progression. It's just a new tool that can be used — and a lot simpler than a gun."

Doctors say the AIDS virus cannot be transmitted through skin-to-skin contact. The only way someone can be infected is if the virus enters the body through an opening in the skin or a splash in the eye or through sexual contact.

Doctors said the risk of contracting AIDS from the Syringe Bandit's needle is relatively minuscule, especially since no one knows whether it carries tainted blood.

"Out of every 1,000 needle sticks, there are four people infected," said Dr. Alexandra Levine, professor of medicine at the University of Southern California.

In addition, it would be difficult for the bandit to spray blood from the syringe because blood coagulates within minutes, Levine said.

Nevertheless, the bandit should be considered dangerous, authorities warned.

"The virus — the infection — must be viewed as a lethal one," said Dr. Martin Finn, medical director of the Los Angeles County AIDS programs. "Believe me, this is no game."