

Palmer man admits robbing families known to be attending funerals

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NORTHAMPTON - A Hampshire Superior Court judge postponed sentencing today for a man who admitted robbing several families while they were attending the funerals of their loved ones.

Thomas J. Walker, 20, of 131 North St., Palmer, pleaded guilty to four counts of breaking and entering in the daytime to commit a felony, four counts of larceny of over \$250 and two counts of larceny of a firearm. During his plea, Walker acknowledged that he studied the newspaper obituaries, noted the times of certain funerals, and broke into the homes of the families of the deceased, knowing that they would be at the services. Three of the thefts occurred in Belchertown and one in South Hadley. All of the break-ins took place last July.

Walker stole jewelry, money, computers and other items from the homes, as well as two handguns. Police matched a fingerprint at one of the crime scenes to Walker and also observed him on a surveillance video using one of the bank cards he stole. Police stopped Walker while he was driving and found some of the stolen property from South Hadley in his car, according to prosecutors. Many of the other items were recovered at his home.

Defense lawyer John W. Drake and prosecutor Frank E. Flannery had recommended a sentence of 3-5 years in prison in exchange for Walker's guilty plea, but Judge Bertha D. Josephson indicated that she would mete out an addition 10 years probation, calling Walker's actions despicable.

When a judge exceeds the recommended sentence, defendants are allowed to withdraw their guilty plea and seek a trial. Josephson gave Walker a day to reconsider. In court today, Walker said he would accept her sentence.

Josephson scheduled the sentencing for July 28 so that the probation department can prepare a pre-sentencing report. Drake told the judge that Walker developed a drug habit after his father, a former Massachusetts Highway Department worker, was injured and became addicted to Oxycontin. Use of the pain-killer spread through the family and Walker eventually became addicted to heroin, Drake said.