

# Preventing Burglary

Tim Prenzler and Michael Townsley

School of Justice Administration, Griffith University, Brisbane

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Australian Institute of Criminology.

## Abstract

Preventing burglary is possible, but in Australia the prospects for major reductions are extremely poor. Current social trends are almost all criminogenic for burglary. Opportunities in the built environment are facilitated by increasing prosperity, the continuing proliferation of consumer goods, increasing population densities and residential mobility, and the consumption of services outside the home. Motives to take advantage of opportunities are fuelled by economic and cultural inequality and alienation, and the continuing demand for illegal drugs.

Substantial reductions in burglary can only be achieved by highly eclectic means. This paper reports on successful case studies of burglary reduction. These are wide ranging and include measures such as property identification schemes, liberal methadone programs, sound security management strategies in commercial premises, and insurance company sponsored home security programs. The paper also considers 'upstream' strategies with less direct empirical support, but with richer potential. These include early childhood interventions and social equity developmental programs. However, burglary will continue to plague Australians until politicians and policy makers adopt a radical and diverse package of strategies, many of which will not be specifically targeted at preventing burglary.

## Extent and Cost of Burglary

Most western countries experienced significant increases in crime, including burglary, in the 1960s and '70s in association with rapid economic growth, the availability of easily stolen consumer products and the movement of social life away from the family home (Cohen and Felson 1979). In the United States - the international point of comparison for crime - burglary has been one of the most common 'street crimes' which increased rapidly during the 1960s up to the mid-1980s and has since stabilised (Shover 1991). In Australia, it is clear that the rate of increase in burglary has declined but there is contradictory data on current trends. One recent review of police reports and victim surveys identified a small level of increase in the 1990s (Grabosky 1995). Figures from NRMA, a major insurer on the East Coast, showed stable rates in the 1990s, although the cost of burglary increased. Burglary claims in NSW alone cost the NRMA \$37.3m in 1995/96 - a 12% increase from the previous financial year (not counting inflation) and a 71% increase over five years (NRMA 1996:4).

The first international crime victim survey, conducted in 1989, gave Australia the highest rate of home burglary (4.4% of respondents compared to the next highest rate of 3.8% in the US) (van Dijk, Mayhew and Killias 1990:23). The Australian component of the 1992 international crime victim survey found that 4.2% of households had been burgled - a figure claimed by the authors to be a probable overestimate (Walker and Dagger 1993:17). A 1993 Australian Bureau of Statistics

(ABS) victim survey found that 6.8% of households experienced at least one burglary or attempted burglary (1994:1). Walker and Dagger reported that about an equal number of attempted burglaries occurred in comparison to successful burglaries. Around a quarter of victims were burgled more than once in a year (Walker and Dagger 1993:16). Burglary figures are much larger when theft from a garage and theft from a car are counted as 'burglary' (3.8% and 6.4% respectively). The ABS reported that in 1995 across Australia 184,653 private dwellings were recorded as the victims of an unlawful entry related to property theft. Reported cases of unlawful entry with intent for 1993, '94 and '95 were, respectively, 382,245, 379,505 and 384,897 (ABS 1995a:6).

Figures vary between states. Western Australia has had the highest rate with 3,524 cases of unlawful entry with intent per 100,000 persons in 1995. The Northern Territory had the next highest rate (3,039); with Victoria the lowest (1,575) and the ACT the second lowest (1,602) (ABS 1995a:6). Queensland had a fairly average rate. An ABS survey estimated on 1995 levels that Queensland households could expect to be burgled once every 16 years (ABS 1995b). Nonetheless, comparing states is largely irrelevant because of their internal diversity. Regional comparisons show sharp differences in burglary patterns. For example, the NRMA reported that the Central West region of NSW experienced a 5% drop in claims in 1995/96 while, in Sydney, the local government area of Strathfield experienced an 86% increase (NRMA 1996). A recent study of burglary rates and public perceptions showed that, on the whole, public fear of burglary was well out of proportion to risk (Weatherburn, Matka and Lind 1996).

In residential burglaries the most commonly stolen items are jewellery and cash, followed by videoplayers, hi-fis, tools, CDs and tapes, watches and TVs (Bridgeman and Taylor-Browne 1996:1). Burglary is also a major source of illegal firearms (Corkery 1994). One UK study found that only 7% of stolen property was recovered and half the victims were uninsured (Coupe and Griffiths 1996:vi). On average, residential burglaries in Australia resulted in the loss of about \$2,000 worth of property and damage of about \$150 (Walker and Dagger 1993:16)

Even where the monetary value of stolen goods is low, burglary often produces severe psychological effects for up to 12 months. Victims feel their personal space and sentimental valuables have been violated. Insomnia, depression and insecurity are typical symptoms (Nicolson 1994). Women report longer term anxiety (Coupe and Griffiths 1996:4). Burglary keeps home insurance costs high and, along with other 'street crimes', accelerates neighbourhood decay, retreat into private fortresses and recourse to private security services (Taylor 1995). Although traumatic, burglary needs to be considered in the context of all crime. For Australia, the financial cost has been estimated at approximately 8% of the conservatively estimated direct cost of crime compared, for example, to the estimated cost of fraud at 60% (Walker 1994a:20-21).

The *First National Survey of Crimes Against Businesses* in Australia (Walker 1994b) found that burglary of commercial premises was the most common crime, accounting for about 27% of businesses victimised. Commercial burglary cost about the same as residential burglary: approximately \$435m in 1992, which was about 8% of the total cost of crime to business. Small businesses were most vulnerable and only 63% of victims were fully insured (see also Grabsoky 1995).

## **Demographics of Targets**

Residential burglary can occur across all socio-economic levels (Gillham 1991). Affluent homes often attract skilled professional burglars and residents living in poorer areas are vulnerable to the more typical offender who lives in close proximity (de Frances and Titus 1993). Although victimisation of burglary is experienced across the social spectrum, victimisation is correlated with certain demographics (Farrell 1994). More vulnerable households tend to be in lower socio-economic areas with generally high crime rates (Block 1993), and victimisation is higher in communities that lack social cohesiveness (Lynch and Cantor 1992).

The number of people in a household is a crucial element of risk (Walker and Dagger 1993). Households headed by married couples have less chance of being victimised than other types of families (Phillips 1995). Single parent families are a high risk group (Lindsay and McGillis 1986), as are young urbanised professionals who reside in poorer areas (Trickett, Osborn and Ellingworth 1995). These people tend to be single renters and frequently leave their houses empty for long periods (Sampson and Wooldredge 1987). Different housing types experience different victimisation risks. The 1989 international crime victim survey reported that detached houses are the most victimised in Australia, in contrast to the greater vulnerability of apartments in many other countries (van Dijk et al. 1991, Trickett et al. 1995). However, Walker and Dagger's (1993:46) survey found that flats and apartments in Australia experienced almost twice as many incidents as detached houses.

Time of day is also an important variable. Cromwell, Olsen and Avary (1991) suggest that 75% of burglary offences are the result of opportunistic exploitation of temporary vulnerability. For example, the morning hours of a weekday are a common time for houses to be left empty; the occupants being either at work, taking children to school or shopping. During other periods of the day the property may be safe (see also Sparks 1981).

## **Demographics of Burglars**

Burglars are much the same in all countries. About 80% are young males, aged 15-25, with a record of school failure, family conflict, poor parental involvement in schooling, and substance abuse. As many as 80% of offenders may be unemployed (Britt 1994; CJC 1996; Smith, Devine and Sheley 1992). Most are repeat offenders, unskilled and leisure oriented, with weak bonds to conventional society and little or no empathy for victims (Wright and Decker 1994, Salmelainen 1995). Disadvantaged ethnic minorities figure disproportionately in the profile. Although most burglars do not enjoy what they do, they often feel under intense pressure to obtain money quickly for drugs, alcohol and conspicuous consumption tied to peer group status (Wright and Decker 1994; Salmelainen 1995). Despite the implication from this profile of economic and cultural 'need' as a causal factor (Weatherburn 1992), it has been argued that 'a significant proportion' of burglars are casual opportunists, easily deterred by difficulty of access and the chance of being identified (Grabosky 1995:2; see also Findlay, Bright and Gill 1990:6). Few perpetrators are self-initiating but are introduced to burglary by peers (Biron and Ladouceur 1991, Wright and Decker 1994). In some areas, upwards of 20% of offenders may be responsible for 75% of offences (Salmelainen 1995:24).

Burglars prefer to do their work outside their immediate neighbourhood, and are relatively mobile in the search for targets by foot, motor vehicle or public transport. Nonetheless burglars tend to live in the same band of suburbs where most burglaries are committed: areas with large populations of young people and high levels of 'family disorganisation' (Patterson 1991). The large majority prefer empty premises and avoid contact with victims (Grabosky 1995:2). Most grow out of it, but a small core will move on from simple burglary to aggravated burglary, armed robbery and other major crimes.

Age, gender and class are the most significant variables in the profile of burglars (when location and unemployment are seen as effects of class). Females begin burglary at a later age, and tend to act as accessories (Decker, Wright and Redfern 1993). Lower class females (including those in the so-called 'underclass' or 'surplus class') are much more likely to be involved in burglary than young women generally (Simpson and Ellis 1994).

### **Theorising Causality**

The above diagnosis invites a theoretical explanation which is necessarily integrated. Most of the major criminological theories can be seen to provide partial explanations: strain, social bonding, social disorganisation, social learning, feminist and opportunity theories. The causal factors are so intermeshed and resistant to precise quantification that any percentage attribution of responsibility can only be extremely tentative, and would vary significantly between locations (Weatherburn 1992). It is both trite and profound to say that opportunity has little importance unless motives are present; and powerful motives can be de-activated by lack of opportunity. As one study of offender decision making concluded:

Though offenders made conscious choices throughout their crimes - as suggested by the rational choice model of decision making - their offence was not an independent, freely chosen event so much as part of a general flow of action emanating from and shaped by their involvement with street culture (Wright and Decker 1994).

Feminist theoretical approaches are particularly applicable where they attempt to explain the extreme disproportions in offending behaviour between males and females. Burglary would seem to be closely related to male socialisation into more risk-taking, less empathetic, traits; and related to conflict between masculine status and the failure of young men in education and the labour force.

What can be said with certainty is that theories of psychological and biological abnormality have little relevance as broad explanations. Similarly, a simplistic classical theory of the fully responsible 'rational economic man' is also of extremely limited utility in understanding or preventing burglary. Nonetheless, it is this latter view which has driven government control efforts.

### **What Doesn't Work**

The traditional criminal justice system approach to burglary prevention has involved two elements: police emergency response intervention; and investigation, prosecution and punishment. These are based on principles of general deterrence (scaring off potential offenders) and specific deterrence (scaring of potential re-offenders), but also extend to the incapacitative effect of incarceration. This is a failed model.

Numerous reviews identify a high rate of reportage of burglary. Van Dijk, Mayhew and Killias cited a figure of 81% for their international study (1991:25), although Walker and Dagger (1993:17) cited a figure of 89% while Grabsoky (1995) reported 50% and Felson (1994:8) reported a much lower rate of 39% based on a US National Crime Survey. Whatever the case with reportage, burglary has an extremely low conviction rate. Typically less than 10% of offences result in a conviction. Some surveys report conviction rates of less than 2% (Felson 1994:9).

Contrary to incapacitation theory, liberal probation and parole policies do not appear to increase burglary rates (Geerken and Hayes 1993; Neithercutt, Carmichael and Mullen 1990). Even if numerous burglaries are committed by offenders on bail (Avon and Somerset Constabulary 1991, Morgan 1992), eliminating bail is not necessarily a solution. One study found that burglars who spent time in jail quickly made up for lost time, so that their rates of burglary over time equalled those of their un-incarcerated colleagues (Hurrell 1993). Some studies indicate that imprisonment is in fact positively correlated with burglary (Gray 1994), which of course makes sense from a social learning perspective.

Other studies suggest a slight decrease in burglary as a result of increased enforcement (e.g., Clarke 1994). Improvements in police responses may produce minor reductions but the effect is very dependent on jurisdictional demographics and is difficult to sustain (Chamlin 1991). Technological improvements, in fingerprinting for example, may increase convictions (Kentucky Criminal Justice Statistical Analysis Centre 1990), but this will not necessarily flow on to substantial reductions in offences and the costs may outweigh the benefits. A study of the impact of the UK Police and Criminal Evidence Act (PACE) on burglary showed that changes to police powers and procedures - such as detaining suspects for questioning - produced greater 'professionalism' in handling cases but no consistent improvement in conviction rates across jurisdictions and no demonstrable reduction in offences (Brown 1991). The Queensland Police Service (QPS) has estimated that the annual cost of responding to reported residential burglaries is approximately \$6.5m (CJC 1996:2). The QPS recently caused controversy on the Gold Coast when it elected not to respond to reports of burglaries with less than \$1,000 worth of losses.

Burglars *are* afraid of being caught (Decker, Wright and Logie 1993), but they perceive their chances of being caught as extremely low. Burglars who are caught do not expect to be caught and do not expect to be caught again. On the whole, this is an objective perspective on the burglars' part, given the extremely low conviction rate. One study found that only 1% of burglaries involve the perpetrator being caught in the act (Felson 1994:11). This is predictable in the context of police patrol capacity. An analysis in Los Angeles County estimated that full deployment of patrol officers would provide each premises with half a minute of protection in every 24 hour period. Doubling the number of police would provide one minute of protection (Felson 1994:11).

Given the limits on the criminal justice system, a French study concluded that 'the insurance market and the security industry manage the problem of theft and burglary: the market takes over where the state fails' (Zauberman and Robert 1990:1). Prospective targets of burglary can take steps to improve their security in ways that reduce their likelihood of victimisation or provide some redress through insurance. But one strategy that does not work is physical resistance including resort to firearms. Despite some recent cases in Australia where burglars have been

shot and the attempted burglaries have been prevented, this is a risky course (Indermaur 1995b).

Contrary to what many right-wing politicians believe - including the right-wing of the Australian Labor Party - the public do not have a strongly punitive view of burglars. Opinion surveys vary in their findings, but even where a punitive view is taken, it is accompanied by support for rehabilitation, especially where the offender is socially disadvantaged (McCorkle 1993). Most victims appear to prefer compensation, rehabilitation, remorse and reconciliation over punishment (Umbreit 1990). Community service orders are a favoured option over imprisonment or fines (van Dijk et al. 1991; Walker and Dagger 1993:101). There is a good argument that adult society has no right to punish offenders whose criminal acts are clearly symptomatic of maladjustment as a result of the failure of adults to meet young people's needs. Conventional society, it could be argued, must first provide flexible schooling, full employment, housing and protection from abuse before it starts apportioning moral blame and punishment.

### **What Seems to Work**

The above analysis suggests that the best way to prevent burglary is to stay at home! - or at least to live in a large household where there is likely to be someone home most of the time. However, such arrangements do not suit many people.

Burglary prevention can be separated into two main models: situational interventions and social interventions. The former focuses on reducing opportunities in the immediate context of the crime event, while the latter focuses on changing dispositional factors. Numerous overlaps are of course possible between the two approaches.

#### *situational prevention*

Protective measures such as target hardening are the most popular means adopted by property owners to deter burglars. Dogs seem to be a good deterrent, but they require a lot of attention. Surprisingly perhaps, victim surveys suggest there is little evidence of a definite significant preventative effect from special locks, grills, high fences or burglar alarms (e.g., Walker and Dagger 1993:30). Walker (1994b:83) and van Dijk et al. (1991:88) found that premises with alarms were more likely to be burgled. However, this could be because more vulnerable homes and businesses may be more likely to install alarms. Van Dijk et al. noted that alarm owners appear to have higher rates of attempted burglary. The insurance industry gives cautious support for the use of alarms and other security devices, although it recognises that there is a major problem with the 'human factor'. The NRMA reported that in 49% of cases where homes with alarms had been burgled, the alarm was not on at the time (NRMA 1996:8).

One of the most famous anti-burglary initiatives, the Kirkholt Project in the UK, used free security hardware upgrades on a housing estate to prevent repeat victimisation. (Removal of coin operated fuel meters also contributed to less offences.) (Forrester, Chatterton and Pease 1988) Similarly, the Shield of Confidence security program, developed in Hamilton-Wentworth Ontario in the 1980s, involved police certification of a basic standard of home security involving quality of locks, doors and windows, security on garages and exterior lighting. Certified homes received an insurance discount. In two reviews of incidents, there were only three cases of certified homes

being burgled and these resulted from failure to activate locks. The same area was subject to an annual burglary rate of one in 16 homes (in Sarkissian 1992). It is notable that in 1996 the NRMA withdrew its sponsorship of Neighbourhood Watch and put funds instead into a discount scheme for clients with alarms (as well as some funding of social prevention initiatives including an after school recreational program and an after school tuition program) (NRMA 1996:28-29).

Appropriate security management in commercial premises can reduce vulnerability where a comprehensive security plan is adopted, regular risk analyses are conducted, and personnel security is integrated with physical security. However, in many commercial and public sector agencies, security management is marginalised and subject to counter-productive under-funding (Fischer and Green 1992).

Burglars frequently do not obtain sufficient cash for their needs and are obliged to sell stolen property. Targeting receivers is one way of trying to reduce this market. Reducing demand can be pursued through police stings in setting up dummy second hand dealers, or through tighter controls on dealers such as requiring proof of identity from suppliers and recording item numbers. These approaches 'make sense', but are still largely in an experimental phase. They require computerisation and determined regulatory intervention into the second hand goods sector (Jochelson 1995, NRMA 1996).

Property marking is a strategy closely related to targeting receivers. An intensive property marking scheme amongst relatively isolated villages in the UK in South Wales showed significant success (Laycock 1992). The scheme involved a 72% participation rate and depended on widespread publicity which got the message home to both 'law abiding' residents and resident burglars. The first year of operation saw a 40% drop in offences. In a two year period participants experienced a 60% drop in offences, with no evidence of displacement.

Neighbourhood Watch has received a great deal of support in Australia but it has produced mixed results. It can be beneficial but tends to be more successful in higher income areas in which there are adequate numbers of residents at home for sufficient lengths of time to make surveillance work. In the UK, a more refined version of Neighbourhood Watch - Cocoon Watch - has shown promise. Cocoon Watch developed as part of the Kirkholt Project and was based on the probability of repeat victimisation. Within 24 hours of the incident, a Crime Prevention Officer counselled the resident and conducted a security audit on the premises. In the Kirkholt Project, upgrading was paid for as a part of the project. Additionally, with Cocoon Watch, victims' immediate neighbours were asked to make an extra effort to be aware of strangers in the area. Participating neighbours were also given free security upgrades. This process was repeated for every victimised person during the running of the project. By targeting only repeat victimisation, a burglary reduction of 75% was claimed with no observable displacement (Forrester et al. 1988).

Some other 'situational' measures show promise for burglary prevention. The lower rate of burglary amongst home owners suggests that greater home ownership could facilitate less crime. Home owners are more likely than tenants to stay at home; and home ownership is associated with greater neighbourhood stability, sense of community and defensibility, and participation in Neighbourhood Watch (Hope 1995; Maltz, Gordon and Friedman 1990; Sampson 1985; Sampson and Wooldredge 1987). In group housing such as unit complexes, there is also some potential for 'concierges' and caretakers to contribute to the prevention of crime and

disorder, including burglary prevention (Hesseling 1992, Safe Neighbourhoods Unit 1993, van Dijk et al. 1991).

### *social prevention*

Recent reviews of burglary in Australia have tended to focus on situational prevention at the expense of social measures (e.g., CJC 1996, Grabosky 1995). A major problem with social prevention programs is lack of rigorous evaluation. One review of 120 programs in the US found that only 4% had utilised any form of pre- and post-test data (in Witt and Crompton 1996:28). A difficulty for evaluation is that programs are usually aimed at generalised effects. Impacts specific to burglary are difficult to precisely distinguish.

Despite the methodological problems, recent international reviews of a diverse range of 'social' or 'community-based' prevention programs have challenged the 'nothing works' thesis popularised in the 1970s. Careful attention to participant selection, program design, personnel, and evaluation can produce reductions in offending and re-offending - in large part by meeting physical and emotional needs (providing a stake in conformity), and occupying time (e.g., Farrington 1996, Findlay et al. 1990, Hollin 1990; Grabosky and James 1995; Witt and Crompton 1996).

The majority of these programs are aimed at adolescents in the 'at-risk' category. For example, Findlay et al. (1990) described 12 programs in the UK categorised as 'neighbourhood-based youth initiatives', 'issue-based youth initiatives' and 'police and school initiatives'. Some projects claimed reduced burglary levels in local areas of between 36% and 44%. Also in the UK, a Young Offender Community Support Scheme involved placing young offenders - most of whom had been convicted for burglary - into custodial care-giver families. A non-re-offending rate of approximately 80% was claimed over eight months compared to the same rate of re-offending for the control group (Field 1992).

For younger burglars, marijuana, alcohol and stimulants are sources of the demand for cash and the reduction of inhibitions. Money for heroin is a significant motive for older burglars. An experiment in Merseyside beginning in the late-1980s involved the provision of methadone on a large scale, using a multi-agency approach, with highly qualified committed staff, and with strong police support (provided at the 'expense' of foregone arrests). Interviews with participants indicated a 50% reduction in the number engaged in acquisitive crimes, contributing to a substantial reduction in burglaries at a time of rapidly increasing crime in nearby areas (Parker and Kirby 1996, see also Hall 1996).

Social prevention programs suffer from under-funding, instability in funding, lack of staff training, and lack of long term follow-up including employment placement and provision of accommodation (Barker, Pease and Webb 1992, Field 1992). They tend to be highly dependent on the skills and personalities of program operators, and face considerable difficulties in sustaining reform after 'graduation' (Hollin 1990). Many have been criticised for poor ethical standards related to addressing the full range of participants' problems; as well as inadequate consultation with participants, and lack of equal opportunities (Findlay et al. 1990). However, the limited successes of such programs should not be seen as inherent limitations, but as indicators of their potential and the need for much greater government support.



Crime prevention programs aimed at young people can fail to show substantial reductions in offending for a wide variety of reasons. One salient factor is the relative lateness of the intervention at the time of onset of symptoms. Early childhood interventions attempt to go back to the starting point of social development. Tremblay and Craig (1995) reviewed programs focused on strengthening families with young children, and improving preschool and elementary school participation. These programs, such as the famous High/Scope Perry Preschool Project, involved a variety of strategies including nutritional advice and parenting training, social skills training, conflict resolution, and extra-curricula teaching support. Tremblay and Craig concluded their review of developmental interventions on a positive note:

A large number of perinatal and preschool studies have shown that interventions with high-risk families can change the parenting behaviour many theories identify as the first part of a chain of events that leads to antisocial behaviour... money invested in early (e.g., preschool) prevention efforts with at-risk families will give greater payoffs than money invested in later (e.g., adolescence) prevention efforts with the same at-risk families (1995:218, 224).

From a feminist perspective, developmental interventions would focus on 'feminising' boys into the same pro-social traits acquired by women. In *Boys Will Be Boys: Breaking the Link Between Masculinity and Violence*, Myriam Miedzian (1991) described programs that included girls but concentrated on reducing anti-social behaviour by boys. One program involved long-term training of children in infant care, thereby developing nurturing capabilities and empathy. The report did not include rigorous evaluation of outcomes but the program is (indirectly) rich in potential for reducing burglary!

## Conclusion

The causes of burglary and solutions to the problem are complex. Improved guardianship using a range of measures to deter offenders can be of some benefit. This will be the necessary immediate resort of those who are vulnerable, and critiques of privatised crime prevention must be wary of underestimating the impacts of victimisation. The value of opportunity reduction in reducing offending - thereby reducing the consequential costs and stigmatising effects of punishment - must also be appreciated. At the same time, there can be little doubt that most 'offenders' are also 'victims' of the failure of families and the failure of society to meet the needs of young people. The focus here must be on the problem of seriously alienated young men and the intense role conflicts they experience in the transition from childhood to adulthood. An enormous investment is urgently needed to integrate this group into society. The situation has been summarised perfectly by David Indermauer in his book *Violent Property Crime*:

Crime is only one symptom - along with substance abuse and suicide - of the crisis of young males in today's society. In addition to reducing opportunities for crime, crime prevention must recognise that the propensity to offend is a function of the psychological and social pressures experienced by the core offending group: young men (1995a).

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