



No. 49

Burglary Prevention

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To be a burglary victim is an experience shared by many Australians, particularly those living in urban areas. While Australia's burglary rate is unacceptably high, there are concrete steps which individual householders, business people, and communities can take, alone and in partnership with State and local governments, to reduce the risk of burglary. This Trends and Issues paper analyses the problem of burglary and outlines some practical countermeasures.

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Director

Burglary is one of the more common crimes in Australia. Under the common law, burglary was defined as breaking and entering a dwelling at night with the intention of committing a felony. For present purposes, we broaden this definition to include the unlawful entry of premises generally. Thus, our discussion extends to commercial and other institutional premises, as well as homes; and to attempted or unforced entries of such structures by persons without legitimate access. It includes entries where no theft may have occurred. Contrary to popular misconception, burglary is not the same as robbery, which is defined as stealing from the person by force or threat.

Over 380000 incidents or attempts were reported to Australian police agencies in 1994 (ABS 1995). In addition to these, crime survey data suggest that perhaps half as many cases go unreported. The Australian Bureau of Statistics (1994) estimated that in a recent 12-month period, 6.8 per cent of Australian households had been the victim of an actual or attempted break-in. Most urban Australians, if they have not already been the victim of a burglary, would know someone who has. The odds are that most residents of Australia's urban areas will become the victim of burglary at least once in their lives. Evidence suggests that commercial premises may be even more likely than households to be victimised; recent research by the Australian Institute of Criminology estimated that as many as 25 per cent of commercial premises are victimised each year.

The consequences of burglary are often serious. It can be costly; in 1992 the Australian Institute of Criminology estimated that residential and commercial break-ins cost nearly \$900 million per year. Burglary is, by definition, intrusive. It engenders stress and fear in many prospective victims. To its direct victims, the experience usually brings about extreme anger and annoyance, and in some cases, may occasion lasting psychological injury. It is particularly disturbing to women living alone (Maguire 1980).

**AUSTRALIAN INSTITUTE
OF CRIMINOLOGY**

trends

&

issues

in crime and criminal justice

October 1995

ISSN 0817-8542

ISBN 0 642 23437 X



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The pages which follow will discuss the factors which contribute to the risk that an individual or a premises will become the victim of such an offence. We will then turn to various measures which Australians can take in order to reduce the risk of burglary victimisation. Whilst it may not be possible to eliminate burglary from Australia, there are concrete steps which can be taken to achieve significant reductions in the incidence of burglary.

Incidence

As Figures 1 and 2 suggest, Australia's rate of reported burglary is about average by international standards, but has increased in recent decades. The precise magnitude of this increase in burglary is unknowable, given the size of the "dark figure" of unreported offences. On the other hand, there is evidence that the rate of burglary may have declined slightly over the past three or four years in some Australian jurisdictions (Jochelson 1995).

Explaining Burglary

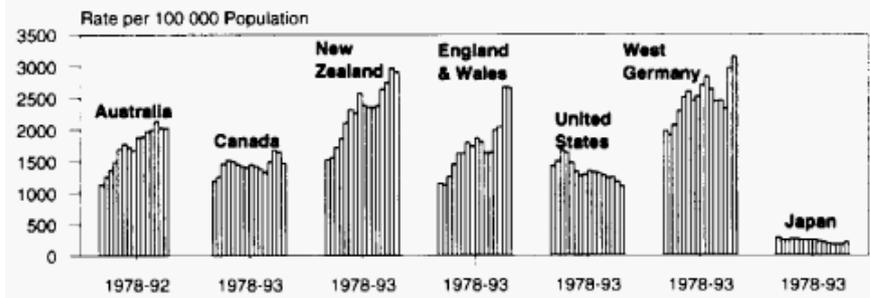
There are many factors which combine to enhance the risk of becoming the victim, or the perpetrator, of burglary. Some of these are amenable to policy intervention, others to individual or community prevention.

Burglaries do not occur by chance. The risk that a household or a premises will become the victim of burglary will depend upon the opportunities which a premises presents, and the proximity and motives of a prospective offender.

Motive

Our knowledge about the background and motives of burglars is limited, because only about 10-15 per cent of reported cases are solved, and those burglars who are identified may not be typical. Fragmentary evidence,

Figure 1. Reported Burglary Rate per 100 000 Population, 1978 to 1993



Source: Offences reported/becoming known to police, as in Mukherjee & Dagger

primarily from North America and the United Kingdom, suggest the following.

Prospective burglars will vary in their motives. A significant proportion are casual opportunists, who may be tempted by an open window to an obviously unoccupied house, but who otherwise might not go to great lengths to identify or enter a target premises (Bennett & Wright 1984). There are those driven by the need for quick proceeds with which to acquire drugs, who may be expected to be more persistent. Finally, there are those who might be described as "professional" burglars, who tend to be more systematic and analytical in their selection of target and modus operandi.

Situational factors

Australia is particularly vulnerable to burglary. One of the more significant factors driving the increase in burglary is that of opportunity. In many respects, burglary is a reflection of our affluent times. Felson (1994) observes that today there is an unprecedented abundance of valuable, portable, and easily resold consumer goods such as video equipment and cameras. Australians may not keep a great deal of cash at home, but most now possess a VCR, or other desirable and portable goods. It is precisely these types of goods that are recorded as being the most frequently stolen (Jochelson 1995; West 1995).

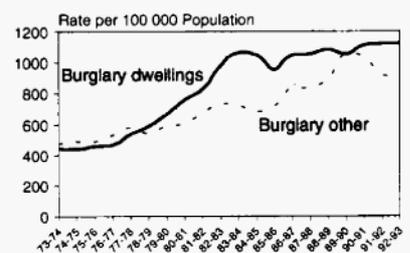
The most important situational factors which contribute to a potential burglar's decision to commit an offence are the "surveillability" of the premises (the likelihood of a burglar being seen by neighbours or passers-

by) and whether the premises in question appears occupied. Recent concerns about the incidence of "home invasions" in Australia belie the fact that most prospective burglars seek to minimise the risk that they will be detected in the course of an offence, and seek to avoid confronting a victim.

The nature of the Australian workforce means that many homes have no-one present during working hours. This high proportion of unattended homes provides abundant opportunities for prospective burglars. It also means there are fewer residents about who might keep an eye out for suspicious activity.

In addition, Australians' preference for detached dwellings provides greater access to premises through doors and windows. Because of our equable climate, doors and windows are left open for comfort during most of the year. These factors are compounded by Australia's level of urbanisation, which entails high concentrations of potential offenders and potential victims, in close proximity to each other.

Figure 2. Reported Burglary Rate per 100 000 Population, Australia, 1973-74 to 1992-93



Source: Offences reported/becoming known to police, as in Mukherjee & Dagger 1990 (updates)

Nevertheless, Australian dwellings are by no means equally vulnerable to burglary. Some, because of location or configuration, are at greater risk. Here again, the most important factors are accessibility and surveillability. For example, premises located near shopping areas, those situated on street corners, or near road intersections are more accessible to prospective burglars. Not only are access and a speedy departure facilitated, but the comings and goings of strangers are less likely to attract attention. Other types of premises at greater risk because of easy access and low surveillability are multi-unit dwellings without access security, structures adjacent to parks or open spaces, and premises not clearly visible from the street because of foliage or other obstruction.

Socioeconomic factors

Most burglars tend to be male, between the ages of 15 and 24, and from relatively disadvantaged backgrounds. But to explain burglary simply as the offender's response to poverty and unemployment, or as the consequence of a permissive society, is to oversimplify. The relationship between economic adversity and property crime is complex. As Weatherburn (1995) has suggested, it is not general economic contraction and a rising unemployment rate which explain increases in property crime, but rather a general environment of economic prosperity combined with inequalities in the distribution of wealth. Geographically, relatively affluent communities which are situated near or are readily accessible from areas of relative disadvantage, will be more vulnerable to burglary.

There are thus inevitable tradeoffs in burglary prevention. Proximity to shops and schools can entail greater risk of victimisation as well as convenience. This leads us to a discussion of how the risks of burglary can be more effectively managed by individuals, by neighbourhoods and other non-governmental associations, and by

government agencies, acting both independently and cooperatively.

Preventing Burglary

Even though there may be little a householder can do to keep a truly determined burglar out, there exist a number of prevention strategies which can have a positive impact.

Because much burglary is unplanned and speculative in nature, with burglars influenced by obvious opportunity as an inspiration for the offence, the most important defence against burglars are those steps which reduce opportunity. Many of these steps are simple and relatively inexpensive, relying on commonsense.

Individual measures

Householders can take a number of measures to reduce the risk of burglary. These range from the simple strategy which may offer protection against the casual opportunist, to sophisticated security systems intended to defeat the committed professional.

Surveillability. The first principle of burglary prevention is to make one's premises readily visible to neighbours and passers-by. All else equal, a premises whose sole means of access is freely visible from the street will be less vulnerable. Despite the preferences of many Australians for a modicum of privacy and solitude, these can often only be realised at the expense of surveillability.

Burglaries often occur during daylight hours when the attraction of apparently unoccupied dwellings may outweigh the risks attending surveillability. The establishment of neighbourhood watch programs, with neighbours noting any suspicious activities at nearby houses, thus makes sense. Indeed, suspicious activity occurring after dark may also come to the attention of vigilant neighbours. Householders should also secure any tools or garden equipment which might be used by a prospective

burglar to force doors or windows (West 1995).

Appearance of Occupancy.

One of the most effective steps in burglary prevention involves giving an unoccupied premises the appearance of being occupied. In the case of residential dwellings, this would entail discontinuing postal service and newspaper deliveries when household members are away on holiday. Simple timing devices can be installed in all premises to turn lights on and off in a manner which gives the illusion that someone is present. During daylight hours, a radio can be left playing in order to convey the impression that someone is there.

Restricted Access. The 1993 Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) Crime Victims Survey, estimated that 100 000 households victimised in the previous 12 months had no security devices in use (ABS 1994). The first line of defence against burglary is simply to lock one's doors and windows when one's premises are unoccupied. Special care should be taken to secure access points to the side and rear of one's premises. This is often sufficient to discourage the uncommitted opportunist. The installation of physical devices such as deadlocks and window bars make access more difficult.

Supplementary security measures. After dark, surveillance, as well as the illusion of occupiers' presence, can be enhanced by inexpensive sensing devices which automatically activate outside lights when they detect heat or movement.

On a less sophisticated basis, the family dog may be just as effective; indeed, so too may a "beware of dog" sign, regardless of whether or not a canine is actually present.

Additional burglary prevention measures might include the marking of personal property, to render its resale less anonymous and therefore more difficult.

Alarm systems of varying degrees of sophistication may also be installed. The most effective systems would appear to be those which are

visible, known to generate loud noise when activated, and which send an automatic signal to a security service. When such devices are in use, notice to this effect displayed at points of access may discourage a prospective burglar. Even the display of a notice, without actual alarm systems in place, may dissuade the casual opportunist.

Focusing on the high risk victim

Research suggests that recent victims of burglary are at relatively high risk of subsequent burglary victimisation (Polvi et al. 1991). Australian survey data indicate that approximately one in four victim-households are burglarised again within a year. Such exceptional vulnerability may reflect ease of access generally, the burglar's familiarity with the premises, the victim's lifestyle, or some combination of these factors. In any event, this suggests that an upgrading of security in the immediate aftermath of a burglary can reduce the likelihood of repeat victimisation, and lower the overall incidence of burglary. Significant achievements in burglary reduction have been achieved in the UK by assisting victims in the immediate aftermath of burglary to install new locks and other simple security devices. A program referred to as "cocoon neighbourhood watch" enlists the immediate neighbours of a burglary victim to exercise special vigilance on the victim's behalf (Forrester et al. 1988). Not only can such programs, properly designed and implemented, succeed in reducing a victim's vulnerability to repeat victimisation, it can help victims recover a sense of competence and control which may have been damaged when their personal space was violated by a stranger.

Police responses

The incidence of burglary in Australia today exceeds the capacity of Australian police services to respond to each case with a thorough investigation. As such, the likelihood that burglary cases will be solved, the

offender brought to justice, and the stolen property recovered, is not great.

Furthermore, it is not likely that a massive spending on police surveillance, or on police response to burglary would yield commensurate payoffs in terms of burglary reduction. To be sure, the incapacitation of those repeat burglary offenders who are apprehended may serve marginally to reduce the incidence of burglary. But it would appear that the most productive investments in combating burglary are those which focus on prevention.

Despite the fact that much burglary lies beyond the capacity of the police to control, certain police strategies can be beneficial. Police often screen cases, and assign priority to burglaries that promise to be "clearable". In the United States, "sting" operations are mounted and often succeed in catching burglars as they try to sell stolen property to police undercover fencing operations. "Career criminal" programs allocate police resources toward the identification, surveillance, and arrest of repeat burglars.

Other professions

It is also appropriate to encourage broader thinking about contributions which Australians in a variety of professions can make to crime prevention. Architects should be challenged to reconcile current Australian preferences for certain types of building design and landscaping, with crime prevention considerations. Builders and architects could also be encouraged to submit plans for new and remodelled buildings to a qualified burglary prevention officer on the staff of a local council, for example. Innovations which enhance aesthetic value as well as crime prevention can be fostered by the use of financial incentives by private sector as well as public sector agencies. Alternatively, such contributions could be recognised by awards or prizes.

Community enhancement/empowerment

Some of the more creative crime prevention concepts in Australia today involve local community initiatives and grassroots participatory programs for crime prevention (Brown & Polk 1995). It should be recognised at the outset that community empowerment is not always instantly achievable. Indeed, it is those communities characterised by high residential mobility and low social cohesion which are among the most difficult to mobilise. The unique problems of Aboriginal communities also render the task of empowerment extremely difficult.

Nevertheless, there are many creative ways in which communities can work against crime. These rely not on a "top-down" strategy, where prescriptions and solutions are bestowed upon the citizenry by senior public officials, but rather a "bottom up approach". This entails local residents working together to define their shared problems, determine appropriate solutions, and to develop goals, priorities and plans of action. Programs such as Residents in Safer Environments, sponsored by NRMA in collaboration with the community of Fairfield, NSW, are illustrative (Rush & Partners 1994).

Citizens can organise locally, to explore ways of solving problems of disorder in public places, or more specifically, the security of residential or business premises. This could entail, for example, community consultation on issues of crime and fear, and organising for safety audits and other action on a wider or narrower scale. Such activity could extend well beyond prevention but also to victim assistance, and restorative justice as typified by victim-offender reconciliation and community service options.

The Commonwealth Government, in its 1995 Justice Statement, emphasised the importance of neighbourhood activity to "empower community based and community-driven" solutions. Local

conditions vary, and so will local solutions.

In a sense, this would expand upon the concept of community-based policing to community-based criminal justice. It hardly need be stated that community empowerment does not extend to citizens taking the law into their own hands. Rather, such activities would harness the very considerable energies residing in the community, and integrate them on a cooperative basis with local and State governments. It would facilitate and enhance the contribution of the police and other government agencies, while strengthening the competence of citizens.

Although they may be attractive in theory, it should nevertheless be recognised that community development programs do not spring up automatically. They are likely to be particularly difficult to mobilise in areas where there is a high degree of residential turnover, and little social contact among neighbours — precisely those factors which tend to be associated with high risk of burglary.

It is also important for residents to be informed about burglary patterns in the community, and about methods commonly used by local burglars. Information on a neighbourhood's "burglary profile" can help in designing a prevention strategy. The challenge is to mobilise the community and to instil in citizens a sense of competence, rather than fear.

Integrated programs

As noted above, no single solution exists to the problem of burglary in Australia. On the other hand, a variety of measures are capable of achieving significant marginal impacts, and a carefully designed package of measures can have substantial positive effects. Programs which integrate situational and social strategies would appear to have the greatest promise. Successful crime prevention programs, most notably the one in Seattle, Washington, have succeeded in reducing burglary by such means as

making unoccupied houses appear occupied, neighbourhood watch strategies, security precautions, property marking, social development, and improved criminal justice sanctions. The Seattle program achieved a 50 per cent reduction in burglary (Waller 1986). The Kirkholt Burglary Prevention Project in the United Kingdom achieved a 75 per cent reduction in the burglary rate through an integrated program which included a "cocoon" neighbourhood watch program, where neighbours of recent burglary victims were enlisted to provide special support for and vigilance on behalf of victimised households. The program was specially designed to contain repeat victimisation.

It has also been suggested that selected neighbourhood residents at home during the day be recruited as "street watchers", to keep an eye on the homes of their neighbours who are out during working hours (West 1995). The Dutch Government has subsidised the recruitment of "social caretakers" to exercise functional surveillance in certain high-risk neighbourhoods (Hesseling 1995).

Counterproductive Burglary Prevention

It should be noted that some burglary prevention initiatives may have unintended consequences. Bars and deadlocks may impede exit from a premises in the event of fire or other emergency. Not only may some neighbourhood watch programs fail to have an impact on burglary, they may actually increase fear and insecurity among participants. "Sting" operations may serve to increase theft in the short term by increasing demand for stolen goods. Some participants in the current debate over keeping firearms at home to deter burglars have observed that such weapons may become the subject of accidental or intentional misuse, with fatal consequences to members of the very household which they were

intended to protect. Given these downside risks, burglary prevention policies should not be implemented in a haphazard manner. They should be carefully planned and pilot tested, then subject to rigorous evaluation and controlled replication before being introduced on a widespread scale.

Conclusion

Burglary seems likely to remain a persistent problem in Australia. One may nevertheless take encouragement that a variety of practical measures exist to reduce the incidence of burglary and to mitigate its impact. It is also important to monitor trends in burglary, with particular reference to the following:

The geographic distribution of burglary, and the methods of access used by burglars

Such information should be made publicly available, in a non-threatening way, to assist householders and proprietors of commercial premises in selecting the most effective prevention methods.

Changes in the demographic composition of burglary offenders

To the extent that perpetrators can be identified, changes in participation by those who are economically disadvantaged, juveniles, or from minority backgrounds may assist in the implementation of social and developmental programs.

Patterns in the distribution of stolen goods

Greater knowledge about markets for stolen property may inform policies to render the disposition of stolen property more difficult, improve the identification of burglars and receivers of stolen goods, and facilitate the recovery of stolen property (Jochelson 1995; West 1995).

Criminologists can contribute to burglary reduction through more refined analysis of the problem, and

the development of countermeasures based on that analysis. A risk management approach, which identifies vulnerable premises, individuals, and geographic areas, and develops appropriate interventions accordingly, is likely to be the most productive strategy. Criminologists can also contribute to the rigorous evaluation and subsequent refinement of those burglary prevention programs which are introduced.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Stuart MacIntyre and Ross Homel of Griffith University, Ken Polk of Melbourne University, and Christine Coumarelos of the New South Wales Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research assisted greatly with comments and advice.

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