

## **Don't become a burglary victim!**

**Your home is your castle...or is it?** Are you really safe once you get home and lock your door? In an open society your home should be the sanctuary for you and your family. Your home is the only environment where you have control over who can get close to you or your family. Protecting your home and family from criminal intrusion should be high on your list of priorities.

By far, the most common threat to our home is burglary. According to the FBI, a burglary occurs somewhere in the United States every 15.4 seconds. By definition, the crime of burglary is a non-confrontational crime. However, becoming a burglary victim can leave a family feeling vulnerable and violated. To avoid becoming a burglary victim, it is important to first gain an understanding of who commits them and why.

The majority of home and apartment burglaries occur during the daytime when most people are away at work or school. The summer months of July and August have the most burglaries with February having the fewest crimes. Burglaries are committed most often by young males under 25 years of age looking for items that are small, expensive, and can easily be converted to cash. Favorite items are cash, jewelry, guns, watches, laptop computers, VCRs, video players, CDs and other small electronic devices are high on the list. Quick cash is needed for living expenses and drugs. Statistics tell us that 70% of the burglars use some amount of force to enter a dwelling but their preference is to gain easy access through an open door or window. Ordinary household tools like screwdrivers, channel-lock pliers, small pry bars, and small hammers are most often used by burglars. Burglars continue to flourish because police can only clear about 13% of all reported burglaries and rarely catch the thief in the act.

Although home burglaries may seem random in occurrence, they actually involve a selection process. The burglar's selection process is simple. Choose an unoccupied home with the easiest access, the greatest amount of cover, and with the best escape routes. What follows is a list of suggestions to minimize your risk by making your home unattractive to potential burglars.

### **DOORS AND LOCKS**

The first step is to "harden the target" or make your home more difficult to enter. Remember the burglar will simply bypass your home if it requires too much effort or requires more skill and tools than they possess. Most burglars enter via the front, back, or garage doors. Experienced burglars know that the garage door is usually the weakest point of entry followed by the back door. The garage and back doors also provide the most cover. Burglars know to look inside your car for keys and other valuables so keep it locked, even when parked inside your garage. Use high quality Grade-1 or Grade-2 locks on exterior doors to resist twisting, prying, and lock-picking attempts. A quality deadbolt lock will have a beveled casing to inhibit the use of channel-lock pliers used to shear off lock cylinder pins. A quality door knob-in-lock set will have a 'dead latch' mechanism to prevent slipping the lock with a shim or credit card.

- Use a solid core or metal door for all entrance points
- Use a quality, heavy-duty, deadbolt lock with a one-inch throw bolt
- Use a quality, heavy-duty, knob-in-lock set with a dead-latch mechanism
- Use a heavy-duty, four-screw, strike plate with 3-inch screws to penetrate into a wooden door frame
- Use a wide-angle 160° peephole mounted no higher than 58 inches

The most common way used to force entry through a door with a wooden jamb kick it open. The weakest point is almost always the strike plate that holds the latch or lock bolt in place. The average door strike plate is secured with only door frame molding. These lightweight moldings are often tacked on to the door frame and can be torn away with a firm kick. Because of this construction flaw, it makes sense to upgrade to a four-screw, heavy-duty, high security strike plate. They are available in most quality

hardware stores and home improvement centers and are definitely worth the extra expense. Install this heavy-duty strike plate using 3-inch wood screws to cut deep into the door frame stud. Use these longer screws in the knob lock strike plate as well and use at least one long screw in each door hinge. This one step alone will deter or prevent most through-the-door forced entries. You and your family will sleep safer in the future.

## **SLIDING GLASS DOORS**

Sliding glass doors are vulnerable to being forced open from the outside because of inherently defective latch mechanisms. This can be easily prevented by inserting a wooden dowel or stick into the track thus preventing or limiting movement. Other blocking devices available are metal fold-down blocking devices called "charley bars" and various track-blockers that can be screwed down.

The blocking devices described above solve half the equation. Older sliding glass doors can be lifted off their track and defeat the latch mechanism. To prevent lifting, you need to keep the door rollers in good condition and properly adjusted. You can also install anti-lift devices such as a pin that extends through both the sliding and fixed portion of the door. There are also numerous locking and blocking devices available in any good quality hardware store that will prevent a sliding door from being lifted or forced horizontally. Place highly visible decals on the glass door near the latch mechanism that indicates that an alarm system, a dog, or block watch/operation identification is in place. Burglars dislike alarm systems and definitely big barking **dogs**.

- Use a secondary blocking device on all sliding glass doors
- Keep the latch mechanism in good condition and properly adjusted
- Keep sliding door rollers in good condition and properly adjusted
- Use anti-lift devices such as through-the-door pins or upper track screws
- Use highly visible alarm decals, beware of dog decals or block watch decal

## **WINDOWS**

Windows are left unlocked and open at a much higher rate than doors. An open window, visible from the street or alley, may be the sole reason for your home to be selected by a burglar. Ground floor windows are more susceptible to break-ins for obvious reasons. Upper floor windows become attractive if they can be accessed from a stairway, tree, fence, or by climbing on balconies. Windows have latches, not locks and therefore should have secondary blocking devices to prevent sliding them open from the outside. Inexpensive wooden dowels and sticks work well for horizontal sliding windows and through-the-frame pins work well for vertical sliding windows. For ventilation, block the window open no more than six inches and make sure you can't reach in from the outside and remove the blocking device or reach through and unlock the door. In sleeping rooms, these window blocking devices should be capable of being removed easily from the inside to comply with fire codes. Like sliding glass doors, anti-lift devices are necessary for ground level and accessible aluminum windows that slide horizontally. The least expensive and easiest method is to install screws half-way into the upper track of the movable glass panel to prevent it from being lifted out in the closed position. As a deterrent, place highly visible decals on the glass door near the latch mechanism that indicates that an alarm system, a dog, or block watch/operation identification system is in place.

- Secure all accessible windows with secondary blocking devices
- Block accessible windows open no more than 6 inches for ventilation
- Make sure someone cannot reach through an open window and unlock the door
- Make sure someone cannot reach inside the window and remove the blocking device
- Use anti-lift devices to prevent window from being lifted out
- Use crime prevention or alarm decals on ground accessible windows

## **BE A GOOD NEIGHBOR**

Good neighbors should look out for each other. Get to know your neighbors on each side of your home and the three directly across the street. Invite them into your home, communicate often, and establish trust. Good neighbors will watch out for your home or apartment when you are away, if you ask them. They can report suspicious activity to the police or to you while you are away. Between them, good neighbors can see to it that normal services continue in your absence by allowing vendors to mow your lawn or remove snow. Good neighbors can pick up your mail, newspapers, handbills, and can inspect the outside or inside of your home periodically to see that all is well. Good neighbors will occasionally park in your driveway to give the appearance of occupancy while you are on vacation. Allowing a neighbor to have a key solves the problem of hiding a key outside the door. Experienced burglars know to look for hidden keys in planter boxes, under doormats, and above the ledge. Requiring a service vendor to see your neighbor to retrieve and return your house key will send the message that someone is watching. This neighborhood watch technique sets up what is called 'territoriality' which means that your neighbors will take ownership and responsibility for what occurs in your mini-neighborhood. This concept works in both single family homes communities and on apartment properties. This practice helps deter burglaries and other crimes in a big way. Of course for this to work, you must reciprocate and offer the same services.

- Get to know all your adjacent neighbors
- Invite them into your home and establish trust
- Agree to watch out for each other's home
- Do small tasks for each other to improve territoriality
- While on vacation, pick up newspapers, and flyers
- Offer to park your car in their driveway
- Return the favor and communicate often

## **LIGHTING**

Interior lighting is necessary to show signs of life and activity inside a residence. A dark home at night sends the message to burglars that you are away on a trip. Light timers are inexpensive and can be found everywhere. They should be used on a daily basis, not just when you are away. In this way you set up a routine that your neighbors can observe and will allow them to become suspicious when your normally lighted home becomes dark. Typically, you want to use light-timers near the front and back windows with the curtains drawn. The pattern of them clicking on and off simulates actual occupancy. It is also comforting not to have to enter a dark residence. The same light timers can be used to turn on radios or television sets to further enhance the illusion of occupancy.

Exterior lighting is also very important. It becomes critical if you must park in a common area parking lot or underground garage and need to walk to your front door. The purpose of good lighting is to allow you to see if a threat or suspicious person is lurking in your path. If you can see a potential threat in advance then you at least have the choice and chance to avoid it. Exterior lighting needs to be bright enough for you to see 100 feet and it helps if you can identify colors. Good lighting is definitely a deterrent to criminals because they don't want to be seen or identified.

Another important area to be well-lighted is the perimeter of your home or apartment especially at the entryway. Exterior lighting on the front of a property should always be on a timer to establish a routine and appearance of occupancy at all times. Common area lighting on apartment properties should also be on a timer or photo-cell to turn on at dusk and turn off at dawn. Garage or porch lights left on all day on a single family home is a dead giveaway that you are out of town. Exterior lighting at the rear of a home or apartment are usually on a switch because of the proximity to the sleeping rooms. The resident can choose to leave these lights on or off. Security lights with infra-red motion sensors are relatively inexpensive and can easily replace an exterior porch light or side door light on single family homes. The heat-motion sensor can be adjusted to detect body heat and can be programmed to reset after one minute. These security lights are highly recommended for single family homes.

- Use interior light timers to establish a pattern of occupancy

- Exterior lighting should allow 100 foot visibility
- Use good lighting along the pathway and at your door
- Use light timers or photo-cells to turn on/off lights automatically
- Use infra-red motion sensor lights on the rear of single family homes

## **ALARM SYSTEMS**

Alarm systems definitely have a place in a home security plan and are effective, if used properly. The reason why alarms systems deter burglaries is because they increase the potential and fear of being caught and arrested by the police. The deterrent value comes from the alarm company lawn sign and from the alarm decals on the windows. Home and apartment burglars will usually bypass a property with visible alarm signs and will go to another property without such a sign. Some people, with alarm systems, feel that these signs and decals are unsightly and will not display them. The risk here is that an uninformed burglar might break a window or door and grab a few quick items before the police can respond. Also, don't write your alarm passcode on or near the alarm keypad.

Alarm systems need to be properly installed and maintained. Alarms systems can monitor for fire as well as burglary for the same price. All systems should have an audible horn or bell to be effective in case someone does break in. However, these audible alarms should be programmed to reset automatically after one or two minutes. The criminal got the message and will be long gone but your neighbors will have to listen to the alarm bell, sometimes for hours, until it is shut off. If you use a central station to monitor your alarm, make sure your response call list is up to date. Home alarms, like car alarms, are generally ignored except for a brief glance. However, if you have established and nurtured your neighborhood watch buddy system, you will experience a genuine concern by your neighbor. It is not unusual to have a neighbor wait for the police, allow them inside for an inspection, and secure the residence. A good neighbor can also call the glass company or locksmith to repair any damage, if pre-authorized by you.

The biggest difficulty getting to this level of concern is taking the first step. You can take it by calling your local crime prevention unit at the police department. Most police departments in large cities have neighborhood watch coordinators to help you set this up. You should invite your adjacent neighbors over to your home for coffee and begin the information exchange. You'll be amazed how the process runs on automatic from there.

- Alarm systems are effective deterrents with visible signage
- Alarm systems to be properly installed, programmed, and maintained
- Alarm systems need to have an audible horn or bell to be effective
- Make sure your alarm response call list is up to date
- Instruct your neighbor how to respond to an alarm bell

## **HOME SAFES**

Since the prices of good home safes are falling, having a safe in your home is a wise investment. Home safes are designed to keep the smash and grab burglar, nosey kids dishonest babysitter or housekeeper from gaining access to important documents and personal property. Home safes need to be anchored into the floor or permanent shelving.

- Use the safe everyday so it becomes routine
- Protect the safe code and change it occasionally
- Install it away from the master bedroom or closet

## **OPERATION IDENTIFICATION**

This is a program supported by most police agencies. They recommend that you engrave your drivers license on televisions, stereos, computers, and small electronic appliances. They suggest this so they can identify and locate you if your stolen items are recovered. I suggest that you go way beyond this step.

I recommend that you photograph your valuables and make a list of the make, model, and serial numbers. You should keep this list in a safety deposit box or with a relative for safe keeping. Keep receipts of the larger items in case you need to prove the value of the items for insurance purposes. Beyond that, I recommend that you photocopy important documents and the contents of your wallet. You will be thankful that you took these steps in case your home is ever destroyed by fire or flood, is ransacked, or if your wallet is lost or stolen.

- Identify your valuables by engraving your drivers license number
- Photograph and record the serial numbers of all valuables
- Photocopy the contents of your wallet and other documents
- Store the copies in a safe deposit box or with a relative

I hope you found these ideas to be helpful!