

Burglary Prevention

Burglars

Burglars range from the experienced professionals to inexperienced opportunistic teenagers.

The professional burglar is well prepared, experienced, and cautious. They have been in the business, maybe their whole adult life, and may have never been caught. They are efficient. They only go after small high value items that are easy to carry and easy to sell. They spend only a few minutes inside your house and disturb as little as possible. They want the burglary to go undetected.

They carefully scrutinize your home in advance. They are looking for an indication when the home will be unoccupied. They want to know how many people live there and what time do they go to work or school. They are also looking for access points. If they have to climb through a window or break through a door, they want to do it where they won't be seen.

There are amateur burglars that break into homes when they are desperate. Often they are drug users who need some quick cash for another purchase. They are experienced burglars but are not as careful and well prepared as the professional, and they take more chances. They have broken into homes before; sometimes they get caught, but are often successful.

The opportunistic burglar is usually a teenager or a pair of teenagers acting on an impulse. They are less experienced because they may not have done it before and are often caught. While they are looking for cash, guns, or drugs, they are also breaking in for the thrill of it. They are the burglars that will damage a house. Because they are usually high from alcohol or drugs, they add to their excitement by trashing the house and spend more time inside than the experienced burglar.

The damage they cause will usually cost more than the value of any property they steal.

What burglars want to avoid?

At the top of the list is a dog. No burglar wants to crawl through a window to find a growling, snarling German Shepherd glaring at them. It would be too difficult to explain the injuries if medical treatment were necessary.

They also want to avoid small dogs that will bark at any intruder. A dog tied up outside or inside a back yard fence is tolerable if the burglar can get inside the house without having to confront the dog.

Even if you do not have a dog, a “Beware of the Dog” sign prominently displayed is helpful. A large dog dish, dog toy, or dog leash left near the back door can make the burglar believe there is a possibility they may find a dog inside.

A burglar is not trying to break into *your* house; they are trying to break into a house with the least risk to them.

Burglars will not break into your house if they know or think someone is at home. They go to great lengths to insure the house is vacant before attempting to enter. If they are ever discovered inside the house, they will have some story that will explain their presents.

“Is this 123 Elm Street? I was called to check on a water leak. They said if no one was home I was supposed to go right in.”

Of course they have the wrong address.

“Oh I’m so sorry. I’m not familiar with this part of town. I’m sorry I bothered you, I’ll be on my way”.

If you see someone on your property that obviously doesn’t belong, they may be in the planning stages of a burglary. In this situation you should discretely take their picture through a window and then gently confront them.

“Excuse me, may I help you?”

“I’m from Metro Cable. There was a report of a service outage in this area”.

There is no point asking their name, they won’t give you the correct one. If you ask for identification, it will be phony. There is no need to challenge their story, threaten violence, or call the police. They have been discovered, and they are not coming back.

Statistics show that there is twice the number of residential break-ins during the day than at night. This is because it is more difficult to know the house is unoccupied at night. The burglar is more willing to risk being seen than being confronted inside the house by the home owner.

Alert neighbors can be a deterrent to a burglar. The burglar’s objective is to get inside the house without being seen or noticed. An unlocked door is ideal, but if they have to break the door or go through a window they are not going to do it in full view from the street or the next door neighbor.

If you are going to be away from home for an extended period, notify a neighbor you trust and ask that they keep an eye on your house. Tell them there is no reason for anyone to be in the home or on the property while you are gone.

You may not want to notify a neighbor you don’t know well. They may not break in, but they may pass along the information to someone who will.

If you see someone who doesn’t belong in your neighbor’s house or on their property, make sure the person knows they were seen.

If you have a door or window alarm, tell your neighbor about them. Make the neighbor aware that if they hear the alarm, someone has broken into the house.

How do they get inside?

A common tactic of an experienced burglar will be to park their car a block or two away before attempting a break-in. They don't want a neighbor to become suspicious of a strange car parked on the street or in the drive way. If they are discovered, they don't want someone to record their license number before they get away.

They will walk up to the front door and ring the bell posing as a door to door salesman. If someone answers, they will just try to sell some item they brought with them. But if no one answers, as they expected, they will check the door to see if it's locked. If locked, they will have to go around to the back of the house. If they have done their homework, they will find a window or door that is out of view from the street and neighbors.

If the doors and windows are locked, it's usually not too difficult to break through them and they probably brought a simple tool to help pry them open. Sliding glass doors are particularly vulnerable as their locks are not as sturdy. It's recommended that doors have deadbolt locks with a strike plate that is held by long screws that reach the wall studs.

If the burglar was extra prepared, they may be someone who was inside the house before. Maybe as a contractor, or a salesman, or deliveryman, or a stranger who asked to use the phone or bathroom? This would give them the opportunity to know what kinds of locks are used and which windows are unlocked. If they find all the windows locked, they may discretely unlock a ground floor window for future use.

The advice here is obvious, don't use unlicensed contractors, do not allow salesmen or deliverymen to be alone in any part of your house, and do not allow strangers to come into your house.

In a high end neighborhood, burglars working as a team may be as bold as to pull into the driveway with some service vehicle when they know the house is unoccupied. This is rare and they keep doing it until they eventually get caught.

What burglars are looking for and where do they find it?

The professional burglar is looking for something of significant value that is small and easy to sell. They are not going to risk their career on low value junk. Cash is the most desired loot because it doesn't need to be sold. Jewelry is good because of its small size and high value, drugs are easy to sell, and hand guns are a bonus because they bring a high price.

Years ago, electronics were the target of burglars. They would go after a VCR, TV, DVD, and stereo equipment. Today, there is no value in these targets. It is difficult to give away a television that is more than a couple years old. VCR and DVD players can be purchased for under \$100 so the price they fetch after they have been stolen isn't worth the burglar's travel expense. Because the burglar parked down the street, he is not likely to lug a large screen television or high end stereo system back to his car.

When the burglar first enters the house, he goes straight to the master bedroom.

He knows that jewelry is kept on or in the dresser and if there is a hand gun, it might be in the night stand. They check the closet for furs and they know that some people still hide cash and valuables under the mattress.

Next stop is the bathroom medicine cabinet. Almost any prescription drug can be sold on the black market. Medical records are confidential for a reason. If a burglar learns you have a prescription for a narcotic, you will be a target.

A home office will be of interest to the burglar. They will look in desk draws for cash, checks, credit cards, and spare car keys. They may not be a car thief, but they can sell the keys to someone who is.

Time permitting; the burglar may quickly check the freezer. They will be looking in the back for something that looks out of place. A few years ago, a congressman from Louisiana hid bribe money in his freezer. If a laptop is convenient or an expensive digital camera or Rolex is out in the open, they will get picked up.

The inexperienced amateurs are looking for things they want. If they have never burglarized before, they probably don't have a way to sell their loot. If they find cash, jewelry, drugs, or a hand gun they will take it. But they will also take video games, MP3 players, liquor, snacks, and anything else that interests them.

Places a burglar will not look includes under the kitchen sink. They don't want to spend time sorting through the disgusting chemicals kept there. They will avoid the upstairs rooms and the basement. If someone walks in while they are in the house, they want to make a quick exit through the opposite door. If they were upstairs or in the basement, they may become trapped. They won't waste time in the garage as they don't expect to find anything of value they can carry off.

How to protect your home?

By knowing the techniques and motivation of the burglar makes it easier to develop a strategy to protect your home.

A burglar wants to avoid a dog; so either get a dog, or make it appear you have a dog. A "beware of dog" sign is good. Dog items scattered outside the house may work, or a humane society sticker on your front door advising first responders that a dog is inside. An electronic watch dog is popular. It will bark like a large dog when someone approaches the door.

Door and window alarms will discourage a burglar. An experienced burglar is not too concerned with a monitored home security system because they know they will be out of the house before the police arrive. They may be more concerned with a loud door or window alarm that can be heard by the neighbor next door. Even if they enter the house in spite of the alarm, they will spend less time inside.

A burglar will not enter a house if he thinks someone is home. Leaving the radio or TV on loud enough to be heard through the front door may help. They may ring the doorbell to see if someone answers. If no one comes to the door, but they hear the radio or television, they may still have doubts.

Don't invite the burglar in by leaving a note on the door. "Went shopping, be home at 4". Don't tell your friends on Facebook about a vacation you are planning, and

don't leave a message on your voice mail informing the caller that you are away from home. Check your messages remotely so your voice mailbox doesn't fill up.

When you are on vacation, don't let mail or newspapers pile up. It's best to let the neighbor pick them up for you rather than informing the newspaper or post office that you will be gone.

Security cameras are good. You want the kind that will take a picture when motion is detected. Put the camera in a hidden location, otherwise the burglar will just steal it. Turn the flash off so he won't know a picture was taken. It won't keep him out of your house, but you will get a picture of him.

Surveillance camera may be even better, but you have to keep a recorder going to capture the activity. If you are going to use a fake camera, don't put it in an obvious location. An experienced burglar will look for it and if it is too easy to find, he may assume it's a fake.

Some people have suggested the use of decoys. Scatter cheap costume jewelry on your dresser. Label a prescription bottle Vicodin, Cialis, or Oxycodone and fill it with aspirin. The burglar will quickly scoop up jewelry; grab the bottle, and run thinking he has made a big score. He won't need to take the chance of staying inside longer.

A safe is a good thing to have. A big heavy safe that is bolted to the floor will tell the burglar that he is wasting his time looking for valuables; they are all in the safe. He isn't going to have the tools with him to unbolt it from the floor and he would need another person to help him carry it back to his car.

A diversion safe like a fake soda can is the next best thing. It won't discourage a burglar, but it will keep your valuables safe. Make sure they are kept in context. If you use a fake soda can, keep it in the refrigerator with other real cans of soda. If you use a fake book, keep it on a book shelf with other books. Fake shaving cream can belongs in the bathroom and keep a fake cleanser container under the sink.

Keep your valuables in remote nontraditional places in the house. Keep your furs in your child's upstairs bedroom closet. Keep money and jewelry downstairs in a shoe box behind the hot water heater where there are cobwebs. Keep your prescription medicine under the kitchen sink or in the garage.

If you are a victim of a burglary:

If you discover evidence of a break-in, call the police then call your insurance agent. You will be asked to take an inventory of your valuable items to see what was taken. The police will look over your house, collect any obvious pieces of evidence and determine the method of entry. Don't expect the CSI to show up to dust for prints and wrap your house in yellow tape. The police may make some recommendations on how the break-in could have been prevented, then they will make out a report and that's probably the last you will hear about it.

Your insurance company will pay for your loss after your deductible and may make more recommendations to avoid another break-in.

Pay attention to the recommendations and make changes to your house and life patterns. If the burglary was easy and successful, you will likely be hit again after enough time passes for you to replace the stolen items.