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Prevention of Residential Burglary

A Review of the Literature

Portland State University, Summer 2010

Criminology and Criminal Justice Senior Capstone Class:

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Definition of Residential Burglary and Prevalence in the U.S.

Our examination of the residential burglary literature resulted in 28 articles which contained definitions of residential burglary and data regarding prevalence and characteristics in the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, Western Europe, and Australia. Below is a description of our findings, focusing on the definition and prevalence in the United States.

The Uniform Crime Reporting Program defines burglary as “the unlawful entry of a structure to commit a felony or theft” (U.S. Department of Justice, 2009). Residential burglary could also be defined more broadly as the unlawful entry of any residential premises. According to the U.S. Department of Justice, in 2008, 70% of reported burglary offenses nationwide were burglaries of residential properties.

Many factors determine the degree of the crime being committed, including whether or not the dwelling was occupied, whether the offender was armed, the time of day of the burglary, and whether the victim or victims were assaulted or threatened (Shover, 1991). Residential burglary is often experienced as a deep intrusion into victims’ lives. “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” (Grabosky, 1995, p.1).

Residential burglary is one of the most prevalent crimes in the United States as well as in other countries (Grabosky, 1995; Shover, 1991; Weisel, 2004). Burglary accounts for 18% of all serious crime in the United States, and is the second most common serious crime, just behind larceny-theft. In addition, it is believed that as many as half of all burglaries go unreported, which might account for the low clearance average clearance rate of 14 % in the U.S. A significant factor related to the low clearance rate is that about 65 percent of residential burglaries investigated do not produce enough evidence or information about the crime, therefore making it one of the most difficult crimes to solve (Weisel, 2004, p. 1).

The official rate of residential burglary, as measured by the FBI’s Uniform Crime Report (UCR) has changed dramatically over the last 50 years. Burglary rates increased in the United States between 1960 and 1975, dropped slightly after that time, and were fairly stable during the 1980s. Between 1990 and 1999, reported rates dropped 32% (Weisel, 2004, p.1). In 1960, the rate of reported burglaries was 508 per 100,000 population, and by 1984 it had risen to 1264 per 100,000 population (Shover, 1991, p.73). The most recent statistics have the national burglary rate at 731 per 100,000 population (U.S. Department of Justice, 2009).

Victims

Our study reviewed 34 articles where authors included information pertaining to victim characteristics. The information obtained was broken down into five categories: risk factors for

burglaries to occur, household safety measures, demographic characteristics, neighborhood characteristics and repeat victimization.

Several studies contained information on victims' residences and the factors that make homes more susceptible to burglary. Several studies found that occupancy of the home was a major contributing factor and homes are generally more likely to be unoccupied during the day (Coupe & Blake, 2006; Weisel, 2004; Winchester & Jackson, 1982). Accessibility to the home is another factor. Homes which lack fencing or have easy access to doors and windows on the ground floor are more vulnerable than those with restricted access (Bernasco & Luykx, 2003; Bernasco & Nieuwebeerta, 2005; Wright, Logie, & Decker, 1995). Another risk factor is the surveillability of the home (i.e., how easy it is for neighbors to see what is going on in the house or on the property). Homes which are secluded, located on less busy roads, have neighbors at a far distance, or are surrounded by high fences; trees and shrubs have lower surveillability and are more vulnerable. Fences or vegetation may serve to restrict access for an intruder, but if possible, they should not restrict visibility from the outside (Brantingham & Brantingham 1993; Brown & Bentley, 1993; Coupe & Blake, 2006).

Several authors discussed safety measures effective in the prevention of residential burglary. Purchasing home security devices such as alarms and taking basic safety steps such as locking windows and doors will reduce the likelihood of becoming a victim (Hakin, Rengert, & Shachmurove, 2001; Winchester & Jackson, 1982). Dogs may also deter burglars, although we did not read any studies specifically investigating the effects of presence of dogs in reducing burglaries. A burglar alarm is the most common way to deter a potential burglar (Hakin, et al, 2001, p.135). Farrell and Pease (2006) found, however, that even after some victims are advised to purchase an alarm, they still choose not to invest in this strategy (p.174). According to Sorenson (2003, p.19), homes without any security measures are 2.7 times more likely to be burglarized than homes with security measures in place.

Research indicates that certain demographic groups are at a significantly higher risk than the general population. The British Crime Survey (BCS) found that when the head of the household was under age 25, the risk of burglary was 2.7 times higher. The same study showed that single parents were twice as likely to be burglary victims, as were residents of areas with high levels of physical disorder (Sorenson, 2003, p.19).

Burglary victims are often concentrated in specific neighborhoods. Those located in an inner city and ones with a high concentration of young people, single parents, and poverty are likely to have higher rates of burglary (Sorenson, 2003, p.37). Shover (1991) claimed that burglary is concentrated more in neighborhoods inhabited by young people, minorities and renters. He also stated the percentage of black people in a neighborhood is positively related to burglary rates (p.82). A study conducted in Milwaukee, WI indicated burglars who live in lower-income neighborhoods were more likely to burglarize within their immediate vicinities than they are to seek targets in other areas (Pettiway, 1992). Sorenson warned, however, that focusing on specific neighborhoods could result in ignoring high-risk targets in safer communities. He also pointed out that demographic traits of victims could explain the prevalence of burglaries more accurately than neighborhood factors. In other words, focusing on certain demographic groups such as low-income, single-parent households in urban communities would be a better way to approach

prevention, rather than focusing on entire neighborhoods and all the demographic groups within a district (pp.38-39).

Research also indicates that once a residence has been victimized, it is more likely to be victimized again in the future. Data from the British Crime Survey indicated that “less than 1% of burglary victims suffer over 20% of all reported burglary victimizations” (Sorenson, 2003, p.vi). A study in Saskatoon, Canada revealed that properties which had been burglarized in the past month had a 12 times greater chance of being burglarized again within that month (Polvi, Humphries, Looman, & Pease, 1991, p.412). The chance of a repeat victimization declines dramatically after a two-month period (Townesley, Homel, & Chaseling, 2000, p.50). Repeat victimization was an important theme in many of the research articles (Clark, Perkins, & Smith, 2001; Farrell, 2005; Farrell & Pease, 2006; Pease, 1991) and will be addressed more completely in the prevention section of the report.

Overall, the articles showed there are certain types of homes, in certain areas which are victimized more often. Changing the characteristics of the home itself and adding security measures will aid in the prevention of incidents.

Offenders

Our study reviewed 33 articles pertaining to offender characteristics and factors associated with the behavior of individuals who commit burglaries of residential properties. The articles provided information about standard demographic variables, offender motivations, the social aspects of offending, and substance abuse patterns. The following information is a synopsis of what we learned.

Burglars tend to be young males. Approximately 90% of those arrested for burglary are male and over 70% of the arrestees are under age 30 (Shover, 1991, p.87; Sorensen, 2003, p.11; Weisel, 2004, p.16). Mullins and Wright (2003) found that burglary tends to be a male dominated activity and that women are often not included, or play only a limited role, in the social networks that are heavily involved in burglarizing residences.

All offenders do not burglarize for the same reasons, or fall into one “type.” For some, burglary may be a crime of opportunity and these offenders are influenced by the number of opportunities with which they come into contact. These opportunists are more likely to be dissuaded by alarms, locks, and other deterrent measures, and may make decisions about targets on the spur of the moment (Shover, 1991, p.90). Other burglars may be more “professional.” They are the types who are apt to be willing to defeat alarm systems and find jobs which will result in payoffs of large sums of money or valuable merchandise. Most researchers, however, do not consider people who commit burglaries to be “specialists,” in the same way a white collar criminal might focus solely on accounting fraud, for example. Even though burglars may commit large numbers of break-ins, they tend to diversify their efforts in other types of crimes, as well (Shover, 1991, p.90; Nee & Taylor, 1988).

Youths who commit burglaries do not begin by working alone. They are brought into the

lifestyle by someone they know. Burglars often work with others in small groups, made up of friends, family members, street associates, or older peers who have more experience burglarizing (Mullins & Wright, 2003; Tilley, Pease, Hough, & Brown, 1999). Most burglars began committing crimes while still quite young – around 14 years of age (Decker, Logie, & Wright, 1993, p.136). Some burglars may commit hundreds of burglaries over the course of their criminal years. Older, more prolific burglars often work alone and have better established networks for selling stolen goods (Decker, et al, 1993; Weisel, 2004). Shover (1991, pp.87-88) and Weisel (2004, p.16) found that burglars tend to have some of the highest recidivism rates of all property criminals.

There is an empirically-established link between burglary and substance abuse problems. Many burglars are seeking to finance lifestyles, which sometimes involve alcohol or drug abuse (Benson, Kim, Rasmussen, & Zuehlke, 1992; Mullins & Wright, 2003; Parker & Newcombe, 1987; Sorenson, 2003; Walker, Golden, & Ervin-McLarty, 2006). One of the reasons for this may be a function of age:

younger people who have substance abuse problems may lack the means to finance their addictions through legitimate means (Benson, et al., 1992, p.681). In a survey of known burglary offenders, Mullins & Wright (2003, p.821) found that most offenders said that they committed residential break-ins “to finance a ‘party’ lifestyle centered on illicit drug use, and incorporating the ostentatious display of various status-enhancing items like designer clothing and jewelry.” According to Martin (2002, p.141), to put it simply, burglary is largely a problem of young people stealing from homes near where they live. His research showed that the age distribution of neighborhood residents was the biggest single predictor of burglary rates for that neighborhood (i.e., the more young people there were living in a neighborhood, the higher the burglary rate was in that neighborhood).

Modus Operandi (M.O.) of Offenders

In analyzing the behavior of offenders, it becomes clear that there is a consistent theme in the behavior of offenders: they attempt to maximize their chances for success with the least amount of confrontation and risk, yet they are faced with many tradeoffs when it comes to assessing the potential rewards and risks. Research has found that most burglaries occur during the day, when houses are less likely to be occupied (Shover, 1991, p.83; Grabosky, 1995, p.3). Occupancy is usually lower in the daytime than at night, but the risk of being spotted by a neighbor or passerby is greater in the daytime. The would-be burglar must then make a choice (conduct a risk-of-being-

observed vs. likelihood-of-entering-an-empty-house cost/benefit analysis) before deciding to commit the offense. Coupe and Blake (2006) found that properties which are more expensive and those which are less closely guarded are more likely to be targeted during the daytime, whereas residences which are better guarded and those which are of lower value are more liable to be targeted during the night.

A burglar’s selection of potential targets also reflects his or her desire to find the most accessible dwelling with easy entry and exit. Bernasco and Nieuwbeerta (2005) found that single-family dwellings were 15% more likely to be burglarized than apartments. They reasoned that single-family dwellings have more windows and doors on the ground floor and overall are more

accessible than apartments, which are often located above ground level and in close proximity to neighbors. Offenders who travel on the same route, or drive down the same street as part of their routine activities can gain knowledge of an area and the residents' schedules. The geographical area with which burglars are familiar is known as their "awareness space" (Beavon, Brantingham, & Brantingham, 1994, p.117). Ratcliffe (2001, p.3) found that burglars appear to be calculating in how far they strike from their own home. They generally will not commit burglaries on their own street, due to fear the increased chance of being recognized and identified by neighbors. Other research suggested, though, that potential burglars are also unlikely to travel too far from their own homes, partly because they prefer stay in their "awareness space" (Beavon, et al., 1994, p.138; Bernasco & Nieuwebeerta, 2005; Pettway, 1982; Ratcliffe, 2001). When they travel farther away from home, the perceived risk of capture increases and more effort is required to complete the job and to bring the stolen goods back to their base of operations (Ratcliffe, 2001, p.3). It appears then, that the M.O.s of most burglars is to stay close to their homes; in their "awareness spaces," but to commit crimes far enough away from their homes that they will not be recognized by neighbors.

Research does not indicate that burglars target more affluent neighborhoods. Bernasco and Nieuwebeerta (2005) found that affluent neighborhoods were not more likely than middle or lower income neighborhoods to be burglarized. Mullins and Wright (2003, p.823) also found that burglars were not willing to tolerate any risk unless they were certain something of value was in a residence. They would often use their own first-hand knowledge of a house to obtain such information, rather than base decisions to commit a burglary on real-estate value, alone. Some of the men in the Mullins and Wright study reported they had worked as remodelers, cable installers, or gardeners and had, therefore, obtained information regarding the house and its contents through legitimate jobs. Overall, it appears burglars are more likely to commit their crimes close to their own homes, rather than seeking attractive targets in affluent (and possibly heavily guarded, therefore more risky) neighborhoods with which they are unfamiliar. Most burglars do not want to spend much time at the crime scenes or nearby and they want to avoid confrontations with residents/victims (Nee & Taylor, 1988; Shover, 1991). A confrontation could increase the possibility of being caught by the police as well as the possibility of the victim using a weapon against the burglar. Kleck (1988) argued that gun ownership by private citizens causes burglars in the United States to spend considerable effort avoiding occupied homes, much more than in countries with restrictions on gun ownership. Kleck also claimed that "victim gun use in crime incidents is associated with lower rates of crime completion and of victim injury than any other defensive response, including doing nothing to resist" (p. 16).

Would-be criminals contend that surveillability is a significant factor when making target selections (Grabosky, 1995; MacDonald & Gifford, 1989; Sorensen, 2003; Winchester & Jackson, 1982). As mentioned earlier, burglars want to avoid being seen by neighbors or other people from outside a residence. MacDonald & Gifford (1989) showed pictures of various residences to convicted burglars, asked them to identify which homes were considered better targets, and asked them to explain their rationale. Other than no obvious signs of occupancy, low surveillability from the road or from neighboring houses was the most commonly stated reason for choosing a target.

Prevention

We reviewed 37 articles containing information relevant to prevention of residential burglaries. We organized the articles into five categories: community prevention, home prevention, social prevention, police prevention and combined approaches.

Community prevention refers to the ability of residents to work together to address crime problems in their communities. An example would be the Neighborhood Watch program, which is based on the idea that community members can watch over each other's dwellings and report suspicious activity to the police. Another similar program is Cocoon Watch, which involves people paying attention to their immediate neighbors' properties, but not necessarily the entire community. Sorenson (2003, p.27) and Hope (1995, p.51) claimed their research indicates such programs have no proven crime-reduction value. Hope (1995) contended the main problem with neighbor-watch programs is that they are voluntary. They are likely to work in neighborhoods where residents are already well-connected to each other, but are unlikely to demonstrate much effectiveness in high-crime neighborhoods already suffering from social disorganization. Weisel (2004) claimed Neighborhood Watch works better when neighbors are home during the day and when participants follow the recommendations for target-hardening and property marking. Home prevention involves specific actions residents can take to make their properties less vulnerable to burglaries. This can entail several different strategies, including target hardening, using mock occupancy indicators, increasing the surveillability of the property and using burglar alarms or security cameras. Because these measures are often used in combination, there are few studies which have tested each intervention individually in a controlled experiment (Sorenson, 2003; Weisel, 2004; Winchester & Jackson, 1982). One problem with target hardening is that burglars will often force entry. According to the FBI Statistics ([U.S. Department of Justice, 2009](#)) 61.2% of burglaries involve forced entry, regardless of which deterrent is used. Using double-paned windows, deadbolt locks, and reinforced doors, however, will increase the effort required to break in as well as increase the perceived risk for the burglar. Sorenson (2003) conducted a thorough review of research in the U.K. and the U.S. and concluded that target hardening has substantial evidence confirming its effectiveness. Winchester and Jackson (1982), on the other hand, argued that occupancy and surveillability are more important cues for burglars and target hardening will have limited value.

Social prevention involves conducting interventions into the lives of people, especially potential or actual offenders, in order to reduce their propensity to commit burglaries. The most commonly used mechanism involves the arrest and incarceration of burglars. The problem is that only about half of all burglaries are reported, two thirds of those charged are convicted, and only an eighth of the known offenses are cleared. This means there is about a 5% chance of a burglar being caught and sentenced (Weisel, 2004, p.39). Because punishment is not swift, and far from certain, policy changes of increasing criminal sanctions are of dubious value. Walker, Golden, and Ervin-McLarty (2006) found, nevertheless, that offenders released on pre-trial or pre-incarceration bail commit a significant number of burglaries, in addition to other crimes. In view of this finding, there does seem to be some value in incapacitating specific offenders, if for no

other reason than to physically prevent a specific individual from involvement in more crime for a short period of time.

Social prevention can also involve long-term strategies, such as more generous social welfare policies, intervention through early-childhood programs, and drug and alcohol treatment programs. For example, a study by DeFronzo (1996) showed that higher amounts of AFDC (welfare payments) were correlated with a lower rate of burglaries, across 141 U.S. cities. A study on drug treatment in the U.K. (Gossop, Marsden, Stewart, & Rolfe (2000) showed that one year after completion of a drug treatment program, the participants were only committing one quarter as many burglaries as they were right before the program began.

Policing agencies are probably not in ideal positions to prevent most burglaries. As mentioned earlier, only half of burglaries are reported, only 10% are reported while they are in progress, and in 90% of those cases, the suspect is not apprehended (Weisel, 2004, p.38). Some studies have suggested that crime mapping will help police identify “hot spots” and those areas of interest could then be monitored more often, especially at times of the day when burglaries are believed to occur (Blake & Coupe, 2001; Braga, 2001; Groff & LaVigne, 2001; Townsley, Homel, & Chaseling, 2000). Braga (2001), for example, reviewed nine studies on focused patrols. Seven of them were shown to have reduced crime in the target areas. None of the nine studies were specifically focused on reducing burglary, however. Critics of the focused patrols often point to the possibility of crime displacement (i.e., criminal activity moving to another location when the law enforcement patrols are present in a particular geographical area) and insist that research studies must test for possible displacement in order to be valid (Sorenson, 2003, pp.51-56).

Most experts who have studied burglary prevention advocate using a variety of approaches, rather than one single approach. Wilcox, Madensen, and Tillyer (2007) analyzed survey data from 4,227 residents across 100 neighborhoods in Seattle, Washington and found that when interventions on the community-level were combined with the interventions on the household/individual level, the aggregate effect was greater than each would have been alone. For example, target hardening of individual homes might be more successful if combined with modifications to the neighborhood, such as clearing brush, better lighting at night, or other alterations which allow neighbors easily to see each other’s properties. The latter is an example of “defensible space” or CPTED “Crime Prevention through Environmental Design.” Taylor and Gottfredson (1986) took the CPTED concept a step further. They argued that environmental modifications alone will only have a small to moderate effect and that real change will occur only when more attention is paid to community dynamics and to how residents’ concern for their streets or immediate neighbors will translate into increased risk for offenders.

If the police do have an important prevention role to play, it may be in preventing or reducing repeat victimizations. There is much data (cited above in the victim section) indicating that burglarized properties are at higher risk for repeat burglaries, especially within two months of an incident. Visiting burglarized properties more frequently, advising victims on target hardening and/or property marking, and alerting the immediate neighbors of victimized residences are some ways the police could help reduce repeat victimizations (Sorenson, 2003, pp.48-49; Townsley, et al, 2000, p.59; Weisel, 2004, pp.35-36).

The Kirkholt Project in the U.K. is an example of a successful intervention that used multiple approaches. The project was based on preventing repeat victimizations and it resulted in a 75% reduction in residential burglaries over a 3-year period. Households that had been victimized were given assistance in the form of a community support team, which assisted victims through target hardening, property marking, and referrals to appropriate agencies. A “cocoon watch” program was also developed in the neighborhood (Pease, 1991; Sorenson, 2003, pp.51-56). This program is one of several repeat victimization programs studied, but according to Sorenson, only two out of five of the programs were successful at reducing burglary rates.

Overall, the research we reviewed on burglary prevention does not provide any “magic bullets.” Burglars seem to be numerous and resourceful, with newer generations continuously emerging. Different approaches have been proposed, some focusing on victims and residences, others on offenders, their M.O.s, and societal factors. No one approach will work for all situations. When multiple approaches are combined, however, the results are likely to be greater than when using a single approach, alone. It appears that a more effective strategy for preventing burglaries would be to tackle each problem on multiple levels, working with individual households, as well as with community watch groups, and in the area of environmental design

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