

BURGLARY PREVENTION

Inmate Interview Project

46707

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ACQUISITIONS

## BACKGROUND AND METHODOLOGY

From February through July of 1977, members of the Crime Prevention Division, along with selected members of the Patrol Division, engaged in a project of interviewing persons who had histories of involvement in the crime of burglary. Most of these subjects were at the time of the interviews inmates in penal institutions, but one group interview was conducted at a halfway house for offenders.

All interviewees had been told of our purpose prior to our arrival, and had volunteered their participation. At the outset of each session, the subject was assured that we had no interest in prosecution, that we were not interested in developing any investigative leads, and that his answers would be held in confidence. Our agreement was that his name would not be linked to any information we gained, and indeed, he need not even tell us his last name.

Our first interviews were conducted at the Lookout Mountain School in Golden where we spoke to eleven boys ranging in age from fourteen to eighteen years. All admitted to having committed burglaries in the past, with the average number per subject at about twenty. Our approach was to have at least two agents present to interview a single subject, maintaining a fairly constant barrage of questions to prohibit him from giving too much thought to his answers. While some boasting and conning was evident in the responses by many of the boys, the format was such that we believe we were able to gain some factual information and weed out the invalid responses.

The following month, agents traveled to the Colorado State Reformatory at Buena Vista and there interviewed thirty-five inmates, ranging in age from eighteen to twenty-seven years. Our format for these interviews was

the same: two agents questioning a single inmate.

The reformatory inmates were noticeably less boastful in their comments to us. Indeed, our impression was that their answers were for the most part straightforward, matter-of-fact, and truthful. These subjects had also had a much greater involvement in the crime of burglary, many admitting to have committed a hundred or more.

In July, we interviewed six residents of a drug abuse rehabilitation center in Lakewood. These subjects were interviewed in a group setting which was much less satisfactory to us. We were not convinced that we could determine the credibility of the responses from this group interview. Nevertheless, some earlier findings seemed to be confirmed.

We were not successful in gaining permission to pursue our project at the Colorado State Penitentiary in Canon City. Initially we were met with enthusiasm by the CSP staff but the enthusiasm waned.

This report will not be a documentation of individual responses by the subjects interviewed. It was not our intention to produce a scientific research paper, but merely to get a subjective feel for the way a burglar thinks so that we might more effectively pursue those crime prevention programs which offer the greatest deterrence to burglars. A number of commonalities came out of this project, and we believe we can make some general statements which apply to most of the subjects interviewed.

#### BECOMING A BURGLAR

We were struck by the large number of offenders who told us that they had become involved in burglary as children, many of them having started at the age of twelve or thirteen years. Their careers began through associations with their peers who introduced them to the activity.

Often the items taken in these early burglaries were used for barter among friends or were used by the subjects themselves for their own enjoyment. These initial experiences became easier as more were committed, and finally developed into a lifestyle of crime, much as a legitimate career would be developed by one more responsible.

#### DRUGS

Surprisingly, we did not find many burglars who were heavy drug users. Most of them had at least experimented with marijuana and many had used pills at one time or another. However, there were few heroin users. Since there is a theory that crime is causally related to narcotics addiction, we asked the few former addicts we met about this. They admitted that they had committed a great number of burglaries in order to obtain cash for their habits, but they also admitted that they had begun committing burglaries before ever becoming addicted to drugs. It does not seem correct then to say that narcotics addiction "leads" to burglary.

On the other hand, the total number of burglaries per offender increases greatly as his need for cash grows with his drug addiction. Moreover, the former addicts we interviewed were more likely to have been armed during the commission of their crimes, and were more likely to have used their weapons to avoid arrest.

The drug most frequently abused by the subjects was alcohol. Many admitted to having had serious drinking problems during their burglary careers. Some said that they had got drunk to get up nerve to commit a burglary. Others said they would begin drinking socially, and the increased feeling of irresponsibility led them to consider a break-in as a good way to gain cash for more drinking.

## EFFECT OF INSTITUTIONALIZATION

We were impressed with the effectiveness that mere incarceration alone had on some of the inmates. This was especially apparent among the inmates at the reformatory. Although many complained that there had been no counseling or other rehabilitative efforts by the staff, they also admitted that the mere fact of their isolation from their former associates on the street gave them a breather, time to get out of "the life" and to think about their future. Only one or two of the subjects felt that they would return to crime careers on their release. (While recidivism figures prove the inmates wrong, their comments are interesting nevertheless, as we believe they were sincerely given at the time.) Some told us that probation had been ineffective because it allowed them to return to their associates and their former way of life.

## MODUS OPERANDI

Typically, our subjects cased a house by driving down the street looking over the neighborhood. While most of the older more sophisticated burglars left the immediate area of their own residence, many of the younger ones performed jobs within a few blocks of their own homes. Access to an automobile and degree of commitment to a lifestyle of burglary seem to be the determining factors here.

The things that attracted the subjects to a particular home are these. First, most of them looked for an affluent neighborhood made up of mostly detached houses. They tried to see inside a home in order to get a general feel for the level of affluence of the occupants. This is facilitated by open garages and open curtains on picture windows. Once this preliminary

neighborhood casing is accomplished, and a particular house is spotted, the subject then tried to get an idea of the habits of the occupants of that home, and also the habits of the neighbors nearby. He may sit in his vehicle inconspicuously in the neighborhood in order to watch the house to determine whether children are home, what time the occupants leave for work, whether they return for lunch and if so what time, the presence of police patrols in the area, and the presence of a dog at the residence.

Having settled on a particular residence, the burglar will typically drive to within a block to one-half block from the residence. He parks at a curb among other cars or in a nearby parking lot among other cars. He then walks to the front door of the house, usually making his approach from the front rather than from an alley or the rear. He then knocks loudly and long at the front door to ascertain that no one is home. He is facilitated in this by the presence of open curtains near the front door.

There are variations on this technique. A small number of subjects would ascertain the name of the occupants from the mailbox and telephone the residence first. A couple of those whom we interviewed used a "dummy," usually a small child who would knock at the front door for them. A homeowner is more likely to respond to the front door if he sees a child there than if he sees an adult. We met only one person who claimed that he searched the obituaries for funeral notices in order to learn which house would be vacant.

After gaining no response to his knock, the burglar will frequently go to a more concealed door or window to gain entry. If the front door seems particularly vulnerable, or concealed, he may try entry through the front door. However, if the front door seems conspicuous, or if it appears that it would take some work to get in that way, he will

typically go to the rear door. The most frequent way of entering through a rear door is by breaking out nearby glass or glass in the door itself, reaching through and unlocking the door from the inside. The next most popular way of gaining entry is by attacking a concealed rear basement window. Usually this is done by knocking out a small pane of glass within the window, reaching through and unlocking it. The burglar then crawls into the basement and goes into the upstairs part of the house. It seems to be true that burglars do not like the sound of breaking glass. We interviewed a few of them who would break out an entire window and crawl through. One who claimed that he had made such an entry stated that he did this by first cracking the glass, making a small hole, and then picking the shards of glass out piece by piece so as to avoid undue noise.

Once inside the house, the burglar works as quickly as he can. Many take only jewelry or cash. Other items of high value to them are stereos and portable TV's. Firearms do not appear to have the attraction that we had expected. Many of those whom we interviewed are nervous about guns for some reason. Some others feel that the penalty for burglary is more severe if guns are disturbed.

When the burglar leaves the residence, he may walk directly back to his car along the main street. There are variations to this. Some take a route through alleys with the stolen items, while others may stash the items in a culvert or ravine or some other concealed location, returning to pick them up later. If he is driving, he will attempt to get back to the main thoroughfares as quickly as possible.

We did not find any subjects who dealt with professional fences to any extent. Most of the items are sold to "street people," or other associates. They are aware of the hazards in dealing with pawnshops. Some

of them take specific orders for items before doing a job. That way, they have a ready market for fast disposal of the items.

We found wide variations in the time of day that the subjects worked. They seem to be evenly divided between nighttime and daytime as far as residential work goes. Furthermore, those burglars who worked residences during the nighttime hours expressed a wide range of preferences for the time of evening. Some preferred early evening when they thought that people would be out at particular events. Others preferred late night periods of time, specializing in homes where the occupants were on vacation.

There was no consensus on the type of clothing which would be worn on a particular job. A couple of subjects stated that they would wear dark clothing and quiet shoes. However, most simply wore whatever street clothing they had on at the time.

While there does not as yet seem to be any great use of radios-police band, CW, walkie-talkies - this technique is becoming more popular. Walkie-talkies especially seem to be gaining popularity. A few of the people to whom we spoke had used CB radios.

The tools carried by the burglars normally consisted of only a screwdriver, a butter knife, or perhaps a pair of pliers. We did not talk to many who used vise grips. Some said that they carried tape with them to tape the glass in the window before breaking it.

#### DETERRENTS TO BURGLARY

What sorts of things deter burglars? Probably the most effective program sponsored by police departments is the Neighborhood Watch Program. Nearly all of those to whom we spoke said that the mere notice of them



by a neighbor was enough to send them on their way. Interestingly however, some did not mind mere notice, citing the apathy of neighbors, and the general desire among the populace to remain uninvolved in their neighbors' affairs. All of the subjects said that if they were challenged by a neighbor, they would leave. The common, almost universal, answer to an occupant who answered the door or to a neighbor who challenged them, was something to the effect that they were looking for a particular family in the area.

Concerning Operation Identification, the most frequent response we got was that it is of no deterrent value. No one said he would not break in to a residence where a decal was displayed, although two persons claimed they would avoid taking marked items. Others claimed that marked or not, they would have little difficulty in disposing of the items. Moreover, many of the subjects claimed they normally took items which would not be marked anyway: jewelry, cash, etc. One imaginative subject claimed the decals worked to his advantage by clueing him that any items taken should be later scrutinized by him and the identifying marks purged. The majority of the subjects had never heard of the program however, until it was explained to them by us.

An apparently effective deterrent was locks. Many subjects told us that there was no lock that they could not defeat. They felt that there was nothing that one could do to protect one's property. Nevertheless, the subjects all agreed they did not want to spend a lot of time working for an entry. Some of them recognize deadbolt locks and would not even attempt entry through a door protected by such a lock. If entry is not possible in a fairly short time, the burglar looks for an easier access to the house. This usually means that he will look for a concealed and less well protected window usually at ground level. The lesson to be learned from this is that if a house is well protected with

adequate locks, and if other possible entrances do not afford great concealment, entry into the house will likely be foiled.

The information we got concerning the effectiveness of dogs was conflicting. Many of our subjects stated that they had been confronted by noisy dogs, but were able to quiet them by talking in an authoritative manner. This seemed to work with most barking dogs. Almost all subjects stated that they would not attempt to burglarize a residence or a business protected by trained attack dogs. There was some suggestion by a number of them that they would defeat the presence of such dogs by poisoning them or clubbing them to death. However, we can recall very few instances of that reported in Lakewood during our police careers, and tend to think this claim is exaggerated. Nevertheless, a loudly barking dog, which is persistent in its alarm, would probably deter most of the subjects we interviewed. Again, they do not wish to be noticed. Finally, a large dog inside the residence seems to be an effective deterrent, since the burglar has no way to determine if it is vicious or not.

Police patrol can be extremely effective. We gave each of the subjects three specific situations: What if you were about to commit a burglary and saw a police car in the area? What if the police officer drove by you and noticed you? What if the police patrol officer stopped, questioned you, and perhaps filled out a contact card? Many of the subjects would be deterred by the mere presence of a police car. Most are deterred by notice from a policeman. All are deterred by police contact. The active contact by the police officer might make some of them merely postpone the job, but a great many said that they would not return to the area for that specific job at all.

We asked the subjects specific questions about lighting, shrubbery, high fences concealing the back door, etc. The general response to this was that anything which offers concealment is to their advantage. Therefore, a light

at a rear door might not deter them if there was no other residence around which might contain a neighbor to notice them. However, lights in areas which would illuminate them to passersby or to other neighbors would be a deterrent.

We got conflicting reports concerning lights on in a residence. The general consensus was that a timed light would probably be effective, especially if the burglar were to see it come on or go off. He would have no way to know whether it was activated by a time device or by a resident.

Decals on windows advising of the presence of an alarm system can be a deterrent. However, a burglar often "tests" the validity of the warning by attempting entry. If no alarm sound is heard, he may retreat to a concealed vantage point to watch for a police response. If no car arrives, he decides the alarm decal is bogus, and continues with the burglary.

In summary, burglary deterrence is a question of increasing the burglar's perceived risk of being noticed either by residents of the targeted home, their neighbors, or the police. Thus, the Neighborhood Watch Program can be an exceptionally valuable tool when used in conjunction with a campaign to make citizens aware of what should be considered suspicious. On the same principle, intelligently applied physical security will increase the time a burglar must spend and the noise he must make in order to gain entry, thereby increasing the risk of notice. Police patrols can be an effective deterrent, providing the police appreciate their deterrent, rather than strictly enforcement, role. More on this last point later.

Operation Identification has some value, but at present it does not seem to be a very effective deterrent. While it may reduce the loss to homeowners in some cases, the program has as yet a long way to go before it becomes

an effective deterrent. Greater participation is needed, and a standard state-wide - and eventually nationwide - numbering system must be developed. The decals at present are simply not respected by burglars. Their "education" will come about only as more of them are arrested and convicted as a result of the program.

Still, while not at present a deterrent, Operation Identification does increase the likelihood that recovered items will be returned to their owners. It also increases the likelihood of successful prosecution of those in whose possession the marked items are found. As standardization and participation increases, the program will likely increase in deterrent value.

#### IMPLICATIONS FOR PATROL

One of our questions related to the subjects' past close calls with the police. From this type of conversation we gained information which we believe has implications for patrol procedures. First, obviously, a police officer should be aware that his presence, and especially his questioning of people in the area, can be an extremely effective deterrent to a burglar. All too often policemen hesitate to contact subjects because of a lack of probable cause to believe they have committed some crime. That is, the officer is more prone to look for those things which might lead to an arrest. It should be emphasized to patrolmen that their presence, and their active contact with persons, although perhaps not leading to an arrest, can be an effective deterrent to crime.

Second, the patrol officer's approach to a possible burglary in progress should be modified. While a burglar is in a house he is, needless to say, alert. Any sound that he hears heightens that attitude. Even at nighttime when the patrol car approaches silently with its lights off the burglar will often hear the engine as it is winding up from a block or two away. Two things should be done by the police officers as they are approaching a possible burglary in progress.

First, they should coordinate their approach from particular directions, and they should time this approach so as to reach the targeted house at the same time. Not only should one take the back while the other takes the front, but they should both reach those locations at the same time. Second, other units should begin a perimeter search. If a burglar succeeds in getting out of the house before officers arrive, he will likely not return immediately to his vehicle. If there is a foot chase, he will hide some place in the area, perhaps for hours until the police officers leave. The perimeter cars would be conducting a search for the subject should he escape from the officers at the scene. They would also be looking for the suspect's car in the area. Again, they could expect to find this vehicle within a block radius of the targeted house. Should the vehicle be found it should be staked out. It should not be impounded immediately. (Incidentally, we heard a few tales from our subjects about their hiding for hours inside a building, having been unexpectedly interrupted in their work, until the police left or the residents went to sleep, believing the burglar had escaped before his crime was discovered.)

Third, any items of value which are found abandoned in culverts or other concealed locations should not be immediately seized as recovered property. They may well be loot taken in a burglary and stashed for later recovery. These items should be staked out by unmarked cars and plain clothes officers.

Fourth, our responses to silent alarm calls need to be modified. The subjects to whom we spoke are exceptionally ignorant concerning alarm systems. They know that a taped window at a store indicates the presence of an alarm. However, they have almost no knowledge about ultrasonic alarms and other movement detectors which may be installed inside. Frequently, much more frequently than we had supposed, a burglar will test an alarm system by throwing a rock through the window. He will then back off to a concealed point where he can watch for the response of the police. When the officer arrives, he finds a rock through a

window, but no apparent entry. How many times have these calls resulted only in criminal mischief reports? Thus the need for a perimeter patrol tactic similar to that discussed earlier. Silent alarm calls should be dispatched to sufficient agents to cover the building and to perform an interior search. Once again, these agents should coordinate both their route to the targeted building, and their time of arrival. Perimeter search cars should also be dispatched. If it was an actual burglar and he has just left the premises, these perimeter cars would be looking for him. They would also be looking for a suspect hiding nearby, should the alarm turn out to be the result of a brick through the window.

Lastly, we learned that these subjects have a great deal of respect for the police. Even though departmental policies and state law strictly limit the use of deadly force, all of these persons to whom we spoke believed that a policeman would shoot a fleeing burglar. Many, however, qualified this by saying that the policeman's demeanor and tone of voice was all-important. This is, if the policeman tells them to halt as if he truly means it, they are more likely to halt.

We had expected to hear some bragging about how they had perhaps outwitted the police on various occasions. However, very little of that came out in these interviews. There is some feeling among the subjects that we, the police and the offenders, are merely game participants, and we believe there is an important implication in this. It is true that a policeman is likely to get more cooperation from a suspect if he treats him not in a hostile manner, but as an almost friendly adversary. The attitude should be something like "Well, you got away from us a lot of times, but this time we've got you. I win this round." I found little hostility among burglars we interviewed directed toward the police, and this fact can be used to our advantage during the interrogation stage.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR INVESTIGATORS

Most of the subjects to whom we spoke claimed that they usually worked alone. Some of them worked in teams primarily so that they could carry more items from the house. However, almost all of them had stories about being "burned" by their partners. Furthermore, all of them, when they worked with a partner, knew that person extremely well. They knew his full name, where he lived, where he could be found. Nevertheless, they did not fully trust them to split the take equally. There was also a great deal of apprehension that they might be "snitched off" by their partners. This almost universal feeling among the subjects we interviewed has implication for investigating officers, and the way they might interrogate arrestees. It should be a relatively simple matter to sow mistrust in an arrestee in order to gain his partner's identity.

A couple of other interesting points came out during these interviews. First, almost all of our subjects claimed that they worried about fingerprints left at the scene and that they wore gloves when committing a burglary. However, this does not appear to be true among the novices whom we talked to. Also, we do not know whether to take this claim about the wearing of gloves seriously, since it has been our experience that fingerprints are frequently found at crime scenes and often suspects are identified through them.

A couple of subjects said that while they did not wear gloves, they were careful where they touched. One claimed that he taped the first joints of his fingers in order not to leave prints. This of course has implications for the crime scene investigator who processes the scene. He must be aware that he should use his imagination in looking for prints. Not only should he be searching the obvious places, but he should, for example, dust the edges of the bureau drawers as well as the handles. The policy of taking palm prints for burglary arrests should of course remain in effect.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR COMMUNICATIONS

Our Communications personnel need to be made more aware of the implications of particular calls. For example, what constitutes a "barking dog"? There is a difference between a call from a neighbor whose dog has just begun barking in the backyard, and a call from a neighbor who is complaining about the incessant barking of a neighbor's dog which has been making a pest of itself. The first call may indicate a prowler or potential burglar. The second call is of a simple neighborhood problem. However, frequently there is no distinction made between these two types of calls. Both go out as "barking dog" calls. This results in a feeling of apathy on the part of the responding officer. Prowler calls too need to be treated as potential attempted burglary calls. Not only should Communications employees be aware of this, but we need to emphasize the importance of these kinds of calls to our patrol officers too.

## CITIZEN AWARENESS

We also need to make our citizens more aware of suspicious circumstances, and encourage them to call us. They should be made aware that suspicious persons in the area, especially strangers who are looking for unknown families in the area, should be checked out. By the same token, we should convince our patrol officers that these calls from citizens should be taken more seriously. All too often, patrol officers handle these suspicious persons calls in much too cavalier a fashion.

## CONCLUSION

We are convinced that burglaries can be reduced. However, it requires the efforts of citizens themselves, as well as the police. The role of the latter, aside from enforcement, is to make our citizenry aware of the seriousness of the problem first, to educate them in ways of protecting themselves second, and third to encourage them to report suspicious circumstances to us.



Those of us in crime prevention have an additional duty. We must convince all our officers that they have an important role to play in deterring crime, a role fully as essential as arresting criminals after the fact. With full cooperation among the police and the citizens, we have every reason to believe that the crime rate will decline.



**END**