

The Research, Development and Statistics Directorate exists to improve policy making, decision taking and practice in support of the Home Office purpose and aims, to provide the public and Parliament with information necessary for informed debate and to publish information for future use.

Findings are produced by the Research, Development and Statistics Directorate. For further copies contact:

Communication Development Unit  
Room 264,  
Home Office,  
50 Queen Anne's Gate,  
London SW1H 9AT.

Tel: 020 7273 2084  
Fax: 020 7222 0211  
publications.rds@homeoffice.gsi.gov.uk

## Decision-making by house burglars: offenders' perspectives

Ian Hearnden and Christine Magill

Research has rarely asked offenders for their perspectives on the crimes they commit. This Findings describes a study that interviewed burglars in southern England. Interviewees were asked to describe decisions they had taken when planning and carrying out domestic burglary. They also offered views on the deterrent value of various interventions.

### Key points

- The main reasons given by interviewees for starting burglary were the influence of friends, the need to fund drug use and boredom.
- Need of money for drugs was the main reason given for more recent burglaries.
- The likely 'yield' was a burglar's key consideration when deciding which house to target.
- Offenders were more likely to base decisions about the attractiveness of a property on *beliefs* that the occupants had goods worth stealing than on structural aspects of the building.
- Offenders were most likely to take cash, jewellery, laptops and credit cards.
- Over two-thirds of the sample said they had returned to a property they had burgled before and taken items from it on a second occasion.
- Over half of the sample knew who lived in the property they were burgling.
- Interviewees did not believe burglary to be risky, especially once they had disposed of the goods taken.

In 1999 the Criminal Policy Research Unit at South Bank University began an evaluation of 21 Strategic Development Projects. These projects were funded as part of the Reducing Burglary Initiative, which formed the initial strand of the government's Crime Reduction Programme. Each project set out to implement a range of interventions designed to reduce burglary in a defined area. The findings reported here are from research which examined the views of those offenders towards whom crime prevention measures were targeted. Semi-structured interviews were

carried out with offenders who either lived or offended in an area where a project had been implemented to see if they had noticed the schemes and if they thought them effective. Information was also collected on broader aspects of offenders' approaches to burglary:

- reasons for committing burglary
- the basis for selecting targets
- means of gaining entry
- goods taken
- beliefs about deterrence.

These more general findings are presented here.

## Methodology

'Snowball' sampling was used to locate burglars. The initial focus was on known burglars who had previously been convicted for this offence, referred by the police and probation services. Thereafter researchers also asked respondents to put them in touch with other burglars.

There has been some debate about the value of recruiting offenders through official criminal justice sources – compare Wright and Decker (1994) with Nee and Taylor (2000). The ideal would have been to develop a snowball sample entirely through networks of offenders and ex-offenders but, in this case, there were too few resources and insufficient time to do this. A more important issue, perhaps, is the credence that can be given to offenders' own accounts of their offending. Some will under-report their offending; others may exaggerate or over-rationalise their behaviour in order to appear daring or sophisticated. For offenders recruited via criminal justice agencies, researchers were able to compare information given during interviews with evidence drawn from criminal histories, pre-sentence reports and other official documentation.

82 interviews were conducted, drawn from six Strategic Development Project sites. The first nine were effectively pilots. At that stage, many of the variables relevant to this report were not included in the interview schedule or were not included in a format comparable with subsequent versions. As a result, the number of interviewees responding varies from issue to issue.

## Details of the sample

All offenders interviewed were male; 67 were white. The youngest was 17; the oldest 50. The average age was 27 years; the median was 26 and the mode was 22 years compared with a modal band of 21–25 for offences in the Kirkholt burglary sample (see Forrester et al., 1986). Three-quarters of the sample (62) were in custody at the time of the interview. A further 11 were on a post-prison licence. Only six were in full-time employment. Between them the 82 interviewees were currently (or had most recently been) under supervision for 157 offences (Table 1).

**Table 1 Offences for which interviewees were under supervision**

Offence type	No.	%
Residential burglary	67	43
Theft	30	19
Violence*	25	16
Drugs	16	10
Commercial burglary	10	6
Other**	9	6
Total	157	100

Notes \* 'Violence' includes 6 robbery offences. \*\* 'Other' includes criminal damage; breach of licence; motoring; escape from lawful custody; and drunk and disorderly.

**Table 2 Reasons for committing first and most recent burglary**

Reason	First burglary reasons	Most recent burglary main reason
	No.	No.
Influence of friends	25	–
Funding drug use	18	34
Boredom	14	–
Problems with parents	7	–
Buying luxuries	5	2
Funding alcohol use	4	6
Buying essentials	4	3
Saw an easy target	2	–
Coerced by others (not friends)	1	–
Responsibility for children	–	3
Total reasons offered	80	48

## Reasons for committing burglary

Offenders were asked why they started to burgle homes, and what motivated them to continue (Table 2). The main reasons given were the influence of friends, the need to fund drug use and boredom.

Money for drugs was the main reason given for more recent burglaries. Of 57 offenders asked, 34 said that at its height their drug use was costing more than £100 per day. This offers some support for the findings of Cromwell et al. (1991). While most of the respondents committed their first burglary before becoming a regular drug-user, more regular use led to an increasing reliance on criminal activity to maintain their habit.

Interviewees were not asked explicitly if they started off committing house burglary in the company of others, but it appears likely that most were doing so. By the time of the interview, the balance between those who would most often burgle alone (34) and those who would break in with others (35) was roughly equal. This may reflect the greater confidence of offenders in their own ability at the point of interview, resulting from several years' experience in committing house burglary undetected. It may also stem from a desire to keep a greater share of the profits.

## Targeting a property

Less than a fifth of interviewees (14 out of 73) described their most recent burglary as completely pre-planned. However, barely a quarter (20) considered it a spur of the moment decision. For the majority, the intention to burgle was formulated well in advance, while the specifics of the burglary, such as the precise target and the methods to be used, were decided later. This may reflect the fact that the sample was made up of relatively experienced burglars. However, it may also provide an example of 'rational reconstruction' (see Cromwell et al., 1991).

Offenders were asked what was the furthest distance they had ever travelled to commit house burglary. Of 70 asked, 35 had ventured up to 30 miles. While this might seem a considerable distance, it is perhaps surprisingly low, given that on average, interviewees had committed their first house burglary 12 years before the interview. Stories of lucrative offences in large country houses were recalled but were not described as typical. A more commonplace scenario was a victim closer to home, based on a range of pragmatic factors such as:

- the need to obtain money quickly for drugs
- the practicalities of walking far with heavy objects
- the advantage of knowing an area in great detail
- laziness.

In this respect the research appears to support Wiles and Costello's (2000) earlier finding that most offenders travel limited distances to commit offences.

Journeys to commit house burglary were most often made by car, though some offenders were most likely to reach premises on foot. However, the main reasons given for the means of transport used were not related to the distance offenders were travelling (see below).

#### Mode of transport used to reach targeted premises

##### Main reasons for using car (48 of 70 asked):

- the likelihood of a speedier escape
- the need to transport heavy items
- the greater possibility of drawing attention to themselves by walking around in public with valuable goods removed from their original packaging.

##### Main reasons for reaching on foot (17 of 70 asked):

- greater ability to stash goods
- more possibilities for approaching and leaving a property – (i.e. via alleyways and cut-throughs)
- better chance of establishing the attractiveness of premises in a non-suspicious manner.

Interviewees were asked about factors that might influence their decision whether to burgle a property. Belief that there were goods worth taking was most commonly mentioned. The key concept here is 'belief' – interviewees tended to target properties on the basis of impressions rather than knowledge. This is reminiscent of Bennett and Wright's (1984) respondents when asked to view videotape of dwellings and assess their potential as targets. Many relied on inferences about the occupants rather than objective features of the buildings.

When offenders were asked which features of a particular type of property appealed to them, preferences were not solely dependent on structural considerations. Of 72 interviewees asked, 35 considered the type of property of at

least some importance. However, the single most attractive feature was the perceived likelihood of finding high value goods. Aspects strongly favoured by some offenders were regarded as highly offputting by others. For example, six respondents said they would not burgle flats, as:

- there were fewer escape routes out of the property
- there was more chance of being observed by other residents in the block
- flats (like bungalows) were often inhabited by old people, a group whom many declared they were unwilling to victimise.

On the other hand, three respondents preferred burgling flats to any other type of property because of the large number of potential victims available once past the main entrance to the building.

These findings suggest that offending styles cannot be generalised and are determined by a mix of individual skills and attributes and the structure of local offending opportunities. In turn, this reinforces Hough and Tilley's (1998) view that off-the-shelf solutions to burglary problems are less appropriate than tailored ones, and underlines the importance of determining which aspects of the local context have contributed to burglary patterns.

Almost two-thirds (53 out of 82) said that they had returned to a property they had previously burgled and taken goods from it on a further occasion. Of these, 38 were able to estimate the time gap between burglaries committed at the same premises. More than half (21) revisited a property and burgled it again within one month. The main reason for returning, given by 23 interviewees of the 47 who offered an explanation, was that they knew for certain that there were still goods worth taking, either because:

- associates had told them that the goods had been replaced (n=2)
- they themselves had watched goods being delivered or noticed empty boxes from recent purchases being placed outside for refuse collection (n=11)
- they had left goods behind on the previous occasion because they were too bulky to transport (n=10).

To some extent, this counters the view that repeat victimisation is related to the notion that a victim or a building has enduring characteristics which make the risk of further victimisation high ('risk heterogeneity'). Instead, the findings suggest some support for the explanation of repeat victimisation ('event dependence') which has become more prominent recently, i.e., there is a link between an initial victimisation and that which subsequently occurs.

Over half the sample (38 out of 72 asked) had previously burgled a property whose occupants were known to them. They were most likely to class the victim as either a friend (14), an associate in crime (9) or a neighbour (9). This suggests that the mix of 'risk heterogeneity' and 'event dependence' is more even. It also offers some support for

Bottoms and Costello's (2001) finding, drawn both from police data and research interviews, that offenders are disproportionately likely to be victims of burglary.

Although willing to revisit premises on the basis that others told them that the stolen goods had been replaced, interviewees were more reluctant to target a property which they knew or believed had previously been burgled by someone else. This was usually because, without any prior first-hand knowledge of the premises, they were unwilling to trust the source of the information. Of 80 asked, only 18 said they had ever done this.

### Entering and searching a property

71 interviewees were asked to provide a chronology of their actions when breaking into and searching a property. They were encouraged to draw on the most recent burglary they had committed, as this would aid recollection. Three-quarters said this burglary was typical of all house burglaries they had carried out.

Of 65 interviewees asked, 44 entered from the rear of the property during their most recent burglary. Slightly more gained access by using force (25) than by prising open a window or door using a screwdriver or other type of tool (22). Ten had not needed to break in, as the door or window was already open.

Offenders were asked what their first action had been once inside. Over a third of interviewees searched for specific types of property. This was because:

- they knew likely buyers for certain goods
- they knew/believed these goods would be in the house
- they had the capacity to remove them.

Offenders classed themselves 'very likely' to take cash (96% of those asked), laptop computers (90%) and jewellery (82%). A secondary bonus was that these could all be easily carried and concealed.

Over half of those asked (36 out of 69) said that, during their most recent burglary, they had spent no more than ten minutes inside the property; 19 offenders had left within five minutes. At the other extreme, three offenders were inside the property for at least an hour.

Table 3 shows offenders' perceived likelihood of being arrested at three separate points during and after carrying

out a house burglary. Despite the fact that most had previously been arrested for the offence, few considered it to be risky at any stage.

### Beliefs about deterrence

Offenders were asked two sets of questions about deterrence. They were asked to:

- consider specific recent efforts to address burglary in the locations in which they had historically burgled
- offer general ideas about how they might be dissuaded from committing residential burglary.

### Specific interventions

Specific efforts to tackle burglary that interviewees had picked up on were in turn separated into situational and operational interventions.

#### Situational interventions

These interventions comprised structural features of properties (e.g., fitting burglar alarms) and the nature of the immediate surroundings (e.g., the gating of alleyways).

26 offenders said they had observed at least one alteration to the environment, although none had completely abandoned burglary as a result – 15 said these alterations had had no effect on their behaviour. They had not been dissuaded from residential burglary, continued to burgle the same sorts of property and had not felt the need to shift their attention to properties in different areas. This was not necessarily because offenders saw the improvements made as poorly implemented or inappropriate. They simply did not believe they would lead to their arrest. Nine acknowledged that preventive efforts had increased in sophistication and number but did not see the obstacles as insurmountable. One had noticed that more properties were protected by security alarms but considered it relatively straightforward to disarm them.

These findings run counter to a large body of evidence which demonstrates that well-targeted situational measures do deter offenders (for instance, Millie and Hough, 2004; Forrester et. al., 1986 and Budd, 1999). It is therefore likely that these responses may in part be influenced by bravado. Their confidence in overcoming situational measures may also partly reflect the fact that this group of offenders were relatively experienced, in terms of the average length of their offending career.

**Table 3 Offenders' perceived likelihood of being arrested**

	During a burglary	Afterwards while still in possession of stolen property	Afterwards having disposed of stolen property
	No.	No.	No.
High likelihood	6	6	4
Medium likelihood	14	15	3
Low likelihood	29	25	24
No likelihood	12	13	30
Number asked	61	59	61

### Operational interventions

These interventions typically involved issues around police tasking and deployment. Of the 29 offenders who were aware of operational changes, 17 said that their approach to burglary had altered as a result of police changes. Twelve continued to burgle in the same areas but commented that when doing so they were now more cautious. Three interviewees felt the police changes were sufficient threat for them to begin focusing on different areas for potential targets. Reduced risk-taking included:

- greater awareness that they may be under surveillance
- less willingness to walk around in public with tools (such as screwdrivers) on their person which could be used to gain entry to premises
- more appreciation of the forensic capabilities of investigators in relation to prints, blood and DNA.

However, eight of those who felt alterations to police practice had occurred said they had continued to burgle in the same areas and to the same degree. This was not necessarily because they thought these operational factors were not effective in themselves but that the offenders themselves were too dependent on drugs to alter their own burglary behaviour in response or that they believed the measures were unsustainable over time.

### General factors

General reasons for altering burgling behaviour independent of any Reducing Burglary Initiative project intervention were given by 18 offenders – there were 32 suggestions in all. Of these offenders, 13 believed that they were burgling less often because their drug use had also decreased. This provides support for approaches that try to incorporate measures to address substance misuse into their programme of work.

General ideas about dissuasion also drew on offenders' responses when asked which situational factors might influence their decision whether to burgle a property. Table 4 shows the main responses, though only factors over which residents, police or others could have some practical control are presented.

There are evident contradictions in the findings presented here. Offenders played down the impact of situational changes observed in their areas whilst, as shown in Table 4, rating individual situational measures as having a deterrent effect. One explanation is that offenders, in rating the impact of situational changes observed at the area level, judged their impact as limited in terms of their *overall propensity* to offend. However, in rating *individual* situational measures, offenders acknowledged that these would deter them from victimising protected properties. Thus, it is plausible that whilst the introduction of situational measures in Reducing Burglary Initiative areas may not have eliminated an individual's overall propensity to

**Table 4 Main situational factors influencing decision to offend**

Deterrents rated with high frequency	Percentage rating as a deterrent*
Presence of alarms outside property	84%
Belief that house is occupied	84%
Presence of CCTV/camera nearby property	82%
Deterrents rated with medium frequency	
Apparent strength of doors/window locks	55%
Deterrents rated with low frequency	
Poster campaigns	18%
Property marking campaigns	25%
Evidence of membership of Neighbourhood Watch or similar	29%

Note: \* The total number of respondents varied depending on the applicability of each deterrent item. The average number of responses was 74 with a range from 72 to 79 offenders responding.

offend, an increase in the number of houses covered by situational measures may have reduced an offender's rate of offending, thus leading to reductions in crime.

### Discussion and conclusions

It should be noted that caution is required when applying these results to all burglary offenders, as these findings were from a small group of offenders concentrated in one area of the country. It would, therefore, be useful if future research recruited more offenders from more areas.

The situational cue most strongly linked with an offender's decision to burgle a particular property was whether there were plenty of goods inside worth taking. This implies that, where possible, occupants should attempt to conceal indicators of desirable goods. Other factors typically rated as of at least some importance were:

- convenient approach and exit routes
- absence of alarms, CCTV and other cameras
- evidence that residents have gone out
- knowledge that there is a ready market for the goods to be taken.

Offenders' views on the attractiveness of different types of property were based not just on structural considerations but on beliefs about the likelihood of residents possessing valuable property. These beliefs were also supplemented by facts – the main reason for returning to a property and burgling it again was that the offender knew for certain that



there were still desirable goods inside. Most had burgled the property of someone they knew. It is likely that knowledge about what they would find there played a part in this.

Three key obstacles to prevention emerged:

- offenders may not feel inconvenienced by the intervention
- offenders may feel inconvenienced but not believe they will be caught as a result
- offenders may feel inconvenienced and at risk of being caught but may be too desperate or committed to burglary to change their behaviour.

Several repercussions follow:

- Offenders are well aware that some interventions, particularly those such as high visibility policing, require large amounts of personnel time and therefore only have a limited lifespan. This provides an argument for the 'crackdown and consolidation' approach to burglary reduction (Home Office, 2003). This is where targeted police enforcement activity is periodically repeated to maximise offenders' perceptions that they are at risk of apprehension.

- Once in a property, residential burglary for this sample of offenders was regarded as virtually risk free. The threat of detection during the course of a burglary or after disposal of goods was considered an insufficient deterrent. However, if neighbours or others do realise that a burglar has entered or is inside a property, this threat could be felt more keenly if the police are able to react swiftly to 'in progress' calls (see Coupe and Griffiths, 1996).
- At the time of the research, offenders' main motivation for committing residential burglary was the need to fund drug use. Assistance with drug misuse issues was said to be the most common reason for reducing involvement in burglary. Often this meant that while offenders appreciated the greater risks involved in burglary following crime prevention measures, the need to obtain money for drugs overrode this.

## References

Bennett, T. and Wright, R. (1984). *Burglars on burglary: Prevention and the offender*. Aldershot: Gower.

Bottoms, A. and Costello, A. (2001). Offenders as victims of burglary and other property crimes. Paper for the 10th International Seminar on Environmental Criminology and Crime Analysis. Liverpool. 18 June 2001.

Budd, T. (1999). *Burglary of domestic dwellings: Findings from the British Crime Survey*. Home Office Statistical Bulletin 4/99. London: Home Office.

Coupe, T. and Griffiths, M. (1996). *Solving residential burglary*. Home Office Police Research Group Paper 77. London: Home Office.

Cromwell, P., Olson, J. and Avary, D'A. (1991). Breaking and entering: an ethnographic analysis of burglary. *Studies in Crime, Law and Justice*, volume 8. Newbury Park: Sage.

Forrester, D., Chatterton, M. and Pease, K. (1986). *The Kirkholt burglary prevention project, Rochdale*. Crime Prevention Unit Paper 123. London: HMSO.

Home Office. (2003). *Reducing Burglary Initiative Project Summary – Yew Tree, Sandwell*. Supplement 3 to Home Office Findings No. 204. London: Home Office.

Hough, M. and Tilley, N. (1998). *Getting the grease to the squeak: research lessons for crime prevention*. Crime Prevention and Detection Paper. London: Home Office.

Millie, A. and Hough, M. (2004). *Assessing the impact of the reducing burglary initiative in southern England and Wales*. Home Office Online Report No. 42/04. London: Home Office.

Nee, C. and Taylor, M. (2000). Examining burglars' target selection: interview, experiment or ethnomethodology? *Psychology, Crime and Law*. 6 pp 45–49.

Wiles, P. and Costello, A. (2000). *The 'road to nowhere': the evidence for travelling criminals*. Home Office Research Study No. 207. London: Home Office.

Wright, R. and Decker, S. (1994). *Burglars on the job*. Boston: Northeastern University Press.