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Experiences of older burglary victims

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People over the age of 60 are less at risk of burglary than other age groups. However, for those older people who are burgled, this research looks at the consequences of burglary for them compared with their non-burgled neighbours and suggests ways in which the effects of victimisation can be addressed. This project was carried out as part of the Reducing Burglary Initiative.

Key points

- The study was on a small scale but it does suggest that elderly victims of burglary decline in health faster than non-victims of similar age and the impact of burglary is typically great. Two years after the burglary, they were 2.4 times more likely to have died or to be in residential care than their non-burgled neighbours.
- Keeping victims informed about the progress of prosecutions was important in providing reassurance. The research found that information can help to alleviate distress.
- More attention could be given to the appropriate location of sheltered accommodation and the inclusion of security design features.

Recent British Crime Surveys indicate that older people are generally less at risk of burglary than other age groups (Simmons, ed. 2002). However, the researchers hypothesised that when a burglary did occur, the effects of victimisation on older people could be more serious for the individuals concerned. The Reducing Burglary Initiative (RBI) aimed to reduce burglary in geographical areas suffering high rates of victimisation. In addition, 'virtual communities' at higher risk of burglary were also targeted. These are socio-demographic groups, not geographically defined, linked by some common factor which makes them prone to high rates of burglary victimisation. The 'virtual community' approach was used for this research – the virtual community comprised elderly people living in small units of sheltered accommodation in Flintshire, who were identified as suffering a high incidence of burglary. The virtual community so defined had a rate of burglary

high enough to render it eligible for RBI Home Office funding.

Identifying the virtual community

Flintshire Care-Link (FCL) ran the sheltered housing from which the virtual community was drawn, providing wardens who visit daily and assist the tenants to maintain independent living.

The identification of this virtual community involved co-operation between FCL and North Wales Police. The crime information records of the North Wales Police identified households burgled during the two-year period April 1997 to March 1999. This listing was checked against FCL records to identify which of the burglaries were in sheltered accommodation. Having identified the relevant households, research was conducted to establish what happened to elderly burglary victims living in sheltered accommodation in the wake of the burglary.

From its records, FCL was able to identify all those who had died since their burglary or had moved into hospital or residential care. Other victims stayed in the home where they had been burgled. Comparison was made with their non-burgled neighbours over the same period.

Methodology

The intention was to interview all burglary victims capable of coherent interaction, both those still living in the sheltered accommodation and those in residential care. However, the participants in this project who had moved into hospital or residential care were generally in a distressed condition. Their relatives were contacted in the first instance to enquire whether it would be possible to interview them. All the families requested that no interview take place, since to be reminded of the burglary would occasion further distress.

Burglary victims still resident in sheltered accommodation and the neighbours of all burglary victims (whether or not the neighbour-victim was still resident) were interviewed. A semi-structured interview format was used, under topic headings exploring length of residence, general health, circumstances surrounding the burglary, support needed to complete daily tasks, walking aids, medication and sleeping pattern. This approach allowed the interviewees to address the topics in the order they preferred, with sufficient time to cover the topics in depth. Those who had moved on since the incident were not interviewed. It was therefore possible to compare the health of burglary victims who continued to be residents with the health of their neighbours. The interviews were conducted in the presence of an FCL warden wherever possible, to reassure those interviewed. To supplement the data from the interviews, comments and suggestions on the issue of burglary and older people were invited from the wardens and families of those interviewed.

Results

It was clear from the interviews that a substantial proportion of those who had been burgled were declining in health or had died, compared with the non-burgled sample. Of the 56 burglary victims, 11 had died, and a further nine had gone into residential care at the time of interview, two years and eight months after the burglary which led to their inclusion in the sample. Three of those burgled were the target of repeat victimisation. Two of these died within two years of the offence. Of the neighbour group, six had died and a further two had gone into residential care at the same point in time (see Table 1).

Although the sample numbers were small, comparing those still resident with all those who had declined or died suggests that those burgled were significantly more likely to be dead or have become more dependent than their neighbours two years after the event ($p < 0.01$). In other words, those burgled were 2.4 times more likely to have died or to be in

residential care than their non-burgled neighbours.

The effect that being burgled appeared to have on some of the elderly victims can be gauged from statements made by the wardens, neighbours and families of those burgled. The main impact appeared to be health related – respondents described victims' health as deteriorating faster than anticipated as a result of the burglary. Emotional state was also affected – victims in some cases were described as becoming 'very twitchy' and more nervous. Changes in behaviour were also observed: the victim either became housebound after the incident, or spent more time with family and avoided returning to their own sheltered accommodation.

The sample

The burgled sample

There were 56 older people: 36 women; 20 men. Average age: 81 years.

The non-burgled neighbours sample

There were 53 older people: 34 women; 19 men. Average age: 80 years.

The sheltered accommodation subject to burglary was of varying types: in tower blocks of flats or maisonettes in the middle of a town, a terrace of bungalows set within a village and small complexes of bungalows set on the edge of residential estates in towns and villages.

(Note: There were three less 'non-burgled' as in three cases there was no clear 'non-burgled' neighbour.)

There was an additional finding of some importance: it appeared that surviving victims were often not kept up-to-date with the progress of their case. This research suggests that providing this information can help to alleviate distress. In one case, for example, the interviewee was informed that the offender had been caught and convicted of another offence and the burglary suffered by the interviewee was taken into consideration in sentencing. This news reassured the individual to a considerable degree.

Linking decline to the burglary

Frailty or poor health of the victim could have been a factor in the burglar's target selection rather than a consequence of the burglary. However, this study suggests that the decline in health can be linked to the burglary for the following reasons:

- the burgled and non-burgled groups were of almost identical average age and the distribution of ages was virtually identical
- victimisation appeared, from the visits to the burgled homes and neighbouring homes, to be a function of

Table 1 Status of burgled and non-burgled elderly at time of study

	Burgled	Not burgled
Still resident	36	45
Declined	9	2
Deceased	11	6
Total	56	53

living in a vulnerable dwelling unit rather than personal vulnerability. Insofar as residence location and design determine target selection, frailty or poor health of the victim as a factor in target selection is limited.

- the victims' families, neighbours and wardens who were interviewed felt strongly that the burglary contributed to the decline in health of the victim.

Discussion

The study provides some evidence that those burgled are more likely to die or be moved to more dependent living arrangements than their non-burgled neighbours. It is perhaps surprising, with such a small-scale study, that the significant relationship was so strong – the decline/death of the burgled group was 2.4 times more likely than that of the non-burgled group. Interview responses from victims' wardens, neighbours and families – with their strong impression that burglary was a major factor in the subsequent decline of older victims – supplement this evidence. One point to bear in mind is that the sample were already living in sheltered accommodation, they may be frailer and more vulnerable than older people living in their own homes.

It was always recognised, given the scale of this study, that the results would be suggestive rather than conclusive. However, given the practical and ethical difficulties in mounting a 'matched pairs' design, it was thought worthwhile to use the data to hand to establish whether there was, *prima facie*, an effect of burglary on subsequent life duration and quality. More ambitious research would be needed to test the relationship more closely. Meanwhile crime reduction partnerships may wish to take into account the results of this exploratory study in their work with sheltered accommodation clusters.

Location of sheltered housing and physical security of individual properties

Circumstantial evidence suggests that a major factor in burglary of the elderly is the lack of protection provided by the location of the sheltered housing and the physical

security of individual properties. Attention should be given to the overall physical security of sheltered accommodation.

The quality of housing looked at in this study varied tremendously in age and standard of maintenance. Some housing was in tower blocks of flats or maisonettes in the middle of a town, some in a terrace of bungalows set within a village. In other cases, small complexes of bungalows were set on the edge of residential estates in towns and villages. In the more modern properties, little thought appears to have been given to designing-out crime. Whilst many of the older properties require 'target hardening' (such as fitting locks on doors and windows), a number of the more modern properties appear to have an excessive number of access points, through-routes and footpaths.

Town (2001) identifies two main types of housing, usually provided by local authorities, for the elderly:

- large sheltered complexes managed and staffed with a distinctly communal nature
- those that enable the elderly to live independent lives in their own homes, which are usually bungalows grouped together.

In the first category, the housing is often anything but 'sheltered' having no effective perimeter protection and no control over its space. According to Town, the building is usually of a complicated shape providing offenders with numerous opportunities and hiding places. It is also isolated, with little natural surveillance.

The second category of sheltered housing, the main type encountered in this project, comprised grouped bungalows. They have one fundamental flaw according to Town – the removal of protection from an individual dwelling and a failure to compensate with shared protection.

Flintshire Care-Link has developed a five-year rolling programme of 'target-hardening' measures for all their properties. Consideration will be given to guidance for local authorities, developers and designers on planning considerations relating to crime prevention (Department of Environment Circular 5/1994 'Planning out Crime' and their statutory responsibilities under Section 17 of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998).

Keeping burglary victims up-to-date with the progress of their case

Attention should be given to procedures for ensuring that elderly victims of burglary are routinely kept in touch with the progress of their cases. This ties in with the work of the Distraction Burglary Task Force. It emphasises the importance of ongoing support for the older victim from crime reduction partnerships and voluntary organisations, once a burglary has occurred.

References

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Thornton, A., Walker, D. and Erol, R. (2003). *Distraction burglary amongst older adults and minority ethnic communities*. Home Office Findings No. 197. London: Home Office.

Town, S. (2001). *Town Designing out Crime, Building Safer Communities. A residential Guide for Planning Authorities and Developers*. Wakefield: West Yorkshire Police.

Reducing Burglary Initiative evaluation

The Reducing Burglary Initiative

In 1998 the Home Office announced the Crime Reduction Programme. This was intended to develop and implement an integrated approach to reducing crime and making communities safer. The Reducing Burglary Initiative (RBI), launched in 1999, was one of the first parts of this programme to commence. The aims of the RBI are to:

- reduce burglary nationally by targeting areas with the worst domestic burglary problems
- evaluate the cost-effectiveness of different approaches
- find out what works best where.

The 247 burglary reduction projects which have been funded have covered over 2.1 million households which between them suffered around 110,000 burglaries a year. Three 'distraction' burglary projects have also been funded (see Thornton et al., 2003).

The evaluation

Three consortia of universities have intensively evaluated the first round of 63 RBI projects. A further five projects from subsequent rounds of the RBI (rounds two and three) are also being evaluated.

This Findings is part of a series of studies examining burglary reduction practice being published during 2002/03. Also to be published are a summary and full report on the overall impact and cost-effectiveness of round one of the RBI. Other themes to be covered in this series are:

- the delivery of burglary reduction projects
- working in partnership
- police detection strategies
- publicity and awareness of burglary reduction schemes
- the use of lockable alley-gates as a means to reduce burglary.

The Reducing Burglary Initiative published reports

Early lessons from the RBI have already been published in the following reports, which are available from www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/pubsintro1.html

Tilley, N., Pease, K., Hough, M. and Brown, R. (1999). *Burglary Prevention: Early Lessons from the Crime Reduction Programme*. Crime Reduction Research Series Paper 1. London: Home Office.

Curtin, L., Tilley, N., Owen, M. and Pease, K. (2001), *Developing Crime Reduction Plans: Some Examples from the Reducing Burglary Initiative*. Crime Reduction Research Series Paper 7. London: Home Office.

Hedderman, C. and Williams, C. (2001). *Making Partnership Work: Emerging Findings from the Reducing Burglary Initiative*. Briefing Note 1/01. London: Home Office.

Johnson, S. and Loxley, C. (2001). *Installing Alley-gates: Practical Lessons from Burglary Prevention Projects*. Briefing Note 2/01. London: Home Office.