



Departments : Patrol Response To...

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Burglaries

Your first actions on the scene can go a long way toward closing a burglary case.

by Joseph Petrocelli



Burglaries affect all strata of society and losses can range from under \$50 to more than a million dollars. But despite their frequency, the clearance rate for burglaries is amongst the lowest for all felonies.

Many times the low clearance is tied to a weak initial investigation. Patrol officers usually investigate burglaries in the absence of seasoned crime scene investigators. These officers are often over-burdened with other competing interests that minimize the time they can dedicate to the burglary investigation. Also many patrol officers have not been fully trained on how to conduct a successful burglary investigation.

Here are some things we know about burglaries:

- Most burglaries of residences occur during the day.
- Commercial properties are usually hit at night.
- Homes in middle-class and lower-middle-class areas are usually victimized by people under 24 years old.
- Most burglars are known to the police. They are usually habitual drug users or low-level criminals.
- If a burglary occurs in a hotel or at a business, it is usually the work of an experienced, adult actor.

On the Scene

Upon initial approach, assume the criminal actor is still on the scene. You can respond "lights and sirens" from across town, but as you near the scene a more stealth and tactical approach should be adopted. Deactivate emergency lights.

Within a quarter-mile of the scene, drive very slowly; this low speed will allow you to observe vehicles and pedestrians leaving the scene. Make sure your dashboard camera is active. You may capture footage of a suspect attempting to flee.

Upon arrival, do not park in front of the reported location. Wait for backup. Make a tactical approach from the corners, positioned to detect anyone exiting the scene. Conduct an entire building search to make sure the scene is truly absent of any criminal actors.

Elements of the Crime

Once the scene is secure and you are sure the perps have departed, start your investigation. There are different ways to conduct burglary investigations but all investigations should focus on three basic elements of the crime:

- Means of entry
- Targeted items
- Unusual behaviors

Remember most burglars are repeat offenders. Not only do they repeat the crime, they repeat the method in which they do the crime. These modus operandi (MO) can help you narrow the field of possible suspects.

Means of Entry

Experience has shown that burglars gain entry in different ways. A burglar will find one favorite method and stick with it. Common methods of entry include:

Sheer Force - They kick a door in or "shoulder" a door. The usual point of entry is the back door of a residence or the door to a detached storage area. If the door is kicked in there may be shoe impressions left on the door. If the door is shouldered there may be shoe impressions on the ground where the burglar pressed down to gain leverage.

Breaking a Small Door Window - A small decorative window on a door can be broken and the burglar can reach in and unlock the door. Check for blood on the glass; the burglar may have scraped his wrist.

Cutting Glass - A glass cutter is used to gain entry through a window. Advise other officers to be on the lookout for this tool during pedestrian contacts and motor vehicle searches.

Smash and Grab - A store window is broken and the items displayed in the window are taken. This is a very sloppy technique. There may be blood left behind or the subject may have been observed by someone in the area. Also, this technique is usually followed by a reckless getaway.

Entry Through Unlocked Door - This is common in inner city high rises. The subject usually walks through hallways checking doorknobs. He or she may have been observed by other residents. Canvass residents on other floors about presence of a non-resident.

Prying - Using a tool similar to a screwdriver to force open a door or window. Look for tool marks at the point of entry.

Picking - Defeating the lock using locksmith's tools.

Key Entry - The subject searches the exterior of the home for a spare key. Your canvass should focus on locating unidentified workers, repairmen, and/or servicemen who may have been snooping around.

Transom Entry - Entry is gained by removing a window air-conditioner. Check for ladder marks in the ground. Ask about any unusual work trucks parked in front of the scene of the crime.

"Beeping" the Garage Door - An electronic device simulates the proper frequency for opening the garage. The burglar probably will not be seen but often his vehicle will be seen. When you canvass, ask if a vehicle was parked out in front of the residence for an extended time.

Alarm Bypass - Neutralizing the alarm system. This is a very advanced technique. Canvass alarm companies in the area for any new hires or recently fired and/or disgruntled employees.

Lock In - The burglar remains concealed in a place of business until after closing. While escaping he or she may be observed walking through an empty parking lot.

Targeted Items

One of the first steps in any burglary investigation is to determine what was taken. But remember what was not taken is often just as telling.

The victim should assist you with this portion of your investigation. Make sure the property has been rendered "safe" by an extensive search for a perpetrator by several members of your department. Then have the victim slowly walk you or another investigating officer through the property to determine what was taken.

Initially, you will want to determine what type of search pattern the perp used. Has the house been ransacked with every drawer and closet overturned? Or were certain items specifically targeted so the criminal actor could work with surgical precision? A ransack situation will probably point to a younger, more inexperienced (more desperate?) criminal actor.

When specific items are targeted, the investigation can be a little more specific. If small electronics were taken and high priced items were left behind, the transgressor may be a local drug abuser. Drug abusers favor smaller electronics because they are easily removed, quickly sold on the streets, and hard to trace. Larger electronic items may bring more money but they are harder to dispose of.

The more specialized the item, the more specialized the criminal. When specialized items are involved, the investigation should focus on how the burglar knew the items would be there. You also want to extend this investigation beyond immediate relations. Was the victim's absence from the location trumpeted in the newspapers? This is often the case when a prominent (and wealthy) member of a community dies. The newspaper publishes the funeral arrangements. Astute professional burglars know the hours the family and friends will be attending the funeral and the house will be unoccupied.

In general, an investigating officer may want to consider the following guidelines: Vandalism=juvenile offenders; expensive items (jewelry, art, etc.)=adult professionals; secreted items or items locked away=inside job; heavy items=multiple offenders and vehicle to move items; small electronics= street-level drug users; inexpensive items of sentimental value= revenge; personal items (lingerie, shoes, etc.) =possible sex offender or stalker.

Unusual Behaviors

An escort by the victim through the crime scene will help you locate items that are out of place. These items that have been touched by the burglar are certainly a potential source of fingerprints. The actions of the burglar may lead to the collection of other types of evidence. These actions will also help the investigating officers note similarities with other pending or previously solved cases.

Some burglars make a habit of making a little snack while burglarizing a home. Food sources will have been touched. Empty beverage cans in the garbage or around the residence may be excellent sources of evidence. Half eaten food may reveal DNA evidence or bite mark evidence. Spilled beverages may be a source of sole prints from shoes.

Elsewhere in the house, documents may have been handled. If a bathroom was used, there is a high potential for trace evidence.

Some burglars engage in activity that may not leave evidence but may act as a sort of "signature." Some burglars play video games, surf the Internet (for specific sites), or make phone calls. Some burglars clean the area with disinfectants in an attempt to remove trace evidence.

The unusual behaviors of your suspect should be shared within the department and with other surrounding jurisdictions.

Burglaries are usually committed in clusters and go unsolved for a period of time. Observing and noting unusual behaviors will help draw a profile on an actor. When a burglar is arrested for one burglary, unusual activities may tie him or her to other burglaries. Noting unusual behaviors may clear several burglaries.

Further Investigation

Upon completing the interview and scene escort with the victim, conduct a complete canvass of the neighborhood. Ask neighbors to describe persons, vehicles, or circumstances of suspicious nature. Do not just limit the canvass to neighbors. Ask the same questions of mail carriers, service people, landscapers, or any other workers in the area.

Also ask other members of the department if they observed anything out of the ordinary. Be aware of common burglar techniques used to case a residence. A burglar may appear as a solicitor, knocking on doors (and checking locks). One of your fellow officers may have encountered a burglar posing as a disabled motorist or as a lost visitor. Burglars have also been known to pose as salespersons, delivery persons, and repair persons.

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