

Residential burglary during a pandemic

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The problem

Residential burglary occurs when someone enters or attempts to enter a dwelling or other related building (e.g. a shed) without permission, to commit a crime. This includes the classic depiction as 'break-ins' where entry is forced, but it also includes, amongst others, incidents where no items are taken or where entry is unsuccessful (on the balance of probabilities) and when entry is gained without force. *Distraction burglary* occurs where entry is gained by deception (e.g. by posing as a gas board official); however this has its own unique dynamics and so is not covered here (please see 'relevant resources' below).

What we know about residential burglary and how we know it

Currently, following long terms falls in England and Wales around one in forty households is burgled at least once over a given twelve month period.

- Burglars generally prefer to avoid confrontation. They therefore target dwellings that are, or are believed to be, unoccupied. Offenders may ring the doorbell, for example, to see if anyone answers. Hence, burglaries occur more commonly during the day on weekdays when many people are out at work. Burglaries may also occur at night when offenders can expect any occupants to be asleep.
- Burglars are concerned with being seen and confronted by neighbours or passers-by. This means they tend to target houses which are less visible in terms of the distance to the street or its neighbours, where there is poor lighting, or where trees or large hedges/fences block sightlines. There is also evidence they target mixed (e.g. ethnically or socioeconomically) neighbourhoods or those with high residential turnover where neighbours are less likely to know each other. Burglars prefer areas where there are multiple routes to enter/leave. They favour properties with more entry points (e.g. a rear door and especially when this can be accessed from the rear of the property) and which are insecure (e.g. poor quality window frames or a lack of target-hardening devices).
- Burglars prefer to target houses likely to contain valuable items. They can judge this from observing valuable goods (e.g. TVs) from outside or from cues such as the condition of the property or any vehicles on the driveway. Once inside the house, burglars target CRAVED goods (those that are concealable, removable, accessible, valuable, enjoyable, and disposable). Money is the most favoured target.
- Burglars prefer to offend in familiar neighbourhoods and to target dwellings about which they know something in advance. This means offending near their home or other places they visit often. Some offenders also commit repeat burglaries at the same addresses or similar ones nearby, given that they will know about their internal layout.

What we think might happen in the COVID-19 pandemic

In general, COVID-19 will lead to an overall decrease in residential burglary. This is because most people will less frequently leave their homes and so most dwellings will be occupied for most of the day. That said, there is likely to be some displacement:

- With houses occupied through the day, some burglars may switch to committing their burglaries during the night-time when confrontation is less likely as occupants are likely asleep.

- Burglars may also change their methods and attempt burglaries where occupation is not a constraint, for example, distraction burglary or non-residential burglary.
- Homes which are less likely to be occupied, for example, second homes, are at increased risk and so burglaries may become more concentrated there.
- Burglars may also attempt to exploit the crisis by wearing masks to hide their faces or tailgate into communal areas under the pretence of not wanting to touch surfaces or entry systems. Blocks of flats or HMOs with shared entrances may therefore become at increased risk.
- As movement is constrained, burglars will be less able to find or reach novel areas to offend. Burglaries are likely to become more concentrated, and particularly around the burglars' homes.
- Also, as we head into summer and the weather becomes warmer, occupants may not shut or lock their windows or doors providing easy opportunities for burglars.
- Lastly, it is likely that residential burglary will revert to normal in the long-run after COVID-19. However, in the short term there may be a spike when the lockdown is lifted. There may be a sudden and abnormal number of dwellings left empty and thereby more attractive to burglars. At the same time many offenders recently constrained in their offending, may be hungry for opportunities to commit burglaries.

Some ideas in response

- Analyse past crime patterns to try to predict post COVID-19 spikes. Then, mobilise neighbourhood or cocoon watch schemes to deter offenders from returning to the same offence locations or to neighbourhoods following lift of lockdown.
- For vulnerable sub-sets of dwellings (for example second homes or student accommodation left empty) increase police patrols, alert permanent residents to increase guardianship, and advise owners to improve security. WIDE measures have been found to be most effective (Window locks, Internal lights, Double deadlocks or double locks, and External lights)
- Property managers, or equivalent persons, should provide specific advice, for example, signage at entrances, to their occupants to prevent tailgating during the pandemic.
- Specific and new advice should also be given with regards to household security and leaving windows or doors open, and especially at night and during or immediately after the lockdown.

Relevant resources

Armitage, R. (2017). What Works in Reducing Burglary: A Review of Secured by Design. Available at: <http://eprints.hud.ac.uk/id/eprint/31236/>

Bernasco, W. (2014). Residential Burglary. In *Encyclopedia of Criminology and Criminal Justice*, pp. 4381-4391. Also available at: <https://www.wimbernasco.nl/Manuscripts/English/Bernasco2014a.pdf>

Laycock, G. (2020). Distraction burglary during a pandemic. Available at: <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/jill-dando-institute/sites/jill-dando-institute/files/distraction-burglary.pdf>

Office of National Statistics. (2019). Nature of crime: burglary. Available at: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/datasets/natureofcrimeburglary>

Tseloni A., Thompson, R. and Tilley, N. (2018). Reducing burglary. New York: Springer.

About this series:

This is brief 12 of a series of short, speculative papers developed by the UCL Jill Dando Institute to support the police services during the current pandemic. The raison d'être of the series is fully described at: <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/jill-dando-institute/research/COVID-19-special-papers>