SUBURBAN BURGLARY

Second Edition

SUBURBAN BURGLARY

A Tale of Two Suburbs

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For Ralph and Edna Rengert who gave their children a wonderful gift, a love for education.

George F. Rengert

For my grandfather, Charles E. Johnson, of Cushing, Oklahoma, for his lesson in perseverance and determination.

John Wasilchick

PREFACE

World War II changed everything for America's suburbs. It was a popular war against a terrible enemy, and Americans eagerly sacrificed to win. At the close of the war, America rushed to embrace a return to family life. For the men returning from the armed services this meant every advantage that a grateful nation could bestow, especially in the areas of job preference and home ownership. American women, who had filled the breech in the manufacturing jobs that built the war machine, were now being urged to leave their jobs in favor of returning military men. New suburban houses were constructed to meet the new demand, demand that was further stimulated by the new programs of the Veteran's Administration that guaranteed mortgages and gave preferences to returning veterans.

These new suburban communities were relatively safe havens due to two factors–seclusion and exclusivity. The new neighborhoods were secluded because development out-stripped public transportation in a way that would require generations to catch up. These new neighborhoods were not well connected to nearby cities by public transportation and could only be approached by automobile. Without a car, it was difficult to live in these communities and get to work and almost impossible to visit. It is easy to see why highways leading to the suburbs were referred to as

sanitized corridors (Gold, 1972), since the poor who did not own cars were not able to travel them.

Although many of these communities were middle class, they were exclusive since the poor could not afford the housing available in them. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s many communities concocted zoning practices to make sure that the character of their community would remain exclusive. These zoning practices included minimum lot sizes that guaranteed the development of single-family houses with yards, while excluding any other dwelling type (New Jersey, 1983; Pennsylvania, 1977). Other practices included specifying the value of construction. The poor were left out both because they could not afford the new housing, and zoning ordinances made sure it would stay that way in most municipalities.

Over time, suburban communities began to lose their seclusion and exclusivity. The metropolitan areas continued to expand outward. New transportation links were built to connect the more distant suburbs with the inner city. New highways made it possible for trucks to replace railroads for many of the needs of heavy industry–and heavy industry began to leave the cities as trucks became the dominant means of moving raw materials and finished products to and from factories. The result was the expansion of low skilled jobs in the suburbs, while the low skilled workers in the cities were left without employment. Many moved or commuted to the suburbs for jobs. These formerly secluded suburbs began to lose their seclusion.

At the same time suburbs began to lose their seclusion, they also began to lose their exclusivity. As they became less secluded, they became less desirable places for the wealthy to live. The upwardly mobile moved up to larger houses on larger parcels even farther away from urban centers. The market also responded as developers seized the opportunity to make good profits on apartment, condominium and town-

house developments more affordable to the new wave of low income workers seeking housing. Condos and townhouses are less expensive per unit but are a denser form of development, placing far more units per acre than many suburbs had experienced. Many municipalities found this undesirable, and developers sought their remedies in court.

Federal policies played a key role in changing the exclusive character of many communities. Federal assistance to communities arrived with the condition that it benefit low and moderate income families. The community development block grant program provided money to virtually every community, including the most affluent, for infrastructure development such as water systems, sewers, sidewalks and curbing. Other federal programs were even more demanding in their requirements for municipalities to provide housing opportunities for low income people as a condition of aid. The objective of the federal policy was to reverse income segregation and open access to the better schools and other public amenities of the suburbs. These communities began to lose their exclusivity as they became more diverse.

Finally, another change began to take place in our society. Many of the women who left jobs in favor of returning GI's, whose strong sense of family led to the "baby boom" of the 1945 to 1955 period, began to reenter the labor force in large numbers in the 1960s. The trend of working mothers and two-career households continues. This return to the workplace left many homes empty most of the day–homes designed for the traditional family emphasizing privacy (Cohen and Felson, 1979). Empty suburban houses behind privacy fences and hedges provide ideal opportunities for residential burglars. As a result, burglary rates began to increase in many of these communities. However, not all suburban communities experienced a rise in residential bur-

glary rates and not all homes in suburban communities were as vulnerable as their neighbors. Our concern is to determine which communities, and which homes in these communities, are most likely to be the targets of residential burglars.

In this book, two suburban areas are examined. First, Delaware County, composed mainly of communities that are suburbs of Philadelphia, is examined to determine how burglars choose among the many communities available to them. Ethnographic interviews with burglars incarcerated in Delaware County Prison provide insight into how burglars evaluate communities and how factors beyond the immediate control of the burglar can focus their attention on specific areas.

Next, our attention turns to a single suburban community to determine which houses are the most vulnerable. This community is Greenwich, Connecticut, a suburb of New York City. Data were collected from a survey of all residents of this community. The purpose of the survey was to reveal which houses burglars have chosen and to contrast them with houses that have never been burglarized while occupied by the current residents. The analysis of Delaware County data focused our attention on which communities attract burglars. In Greenwich, our attention is placed on which homes within a suburban community are chosen by residential burglars. In this manner, we complete the process a residential burglar faces when planning a crime–the choice of a community or neighborhood and the choice of a specific house within that community. We begin with a general discussion of residential burglary and a description of Delaware County. Later, we describe Greenwich, Connecticut and illustrate the results of the activities of many residential burglars within a single community.

G.F.R.
J.W.

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This book is the second edition of our book published in 1985 titled, *Suburban Burglary: A Time and a Place for Everything.* New material is added to the present volume. Chapter 5 is adapted from G. Rengert and S. Hakim, "Burglary in Affluent Communities: A Planning Perspective" in M. Felson and R. Peiser (Eds.), *Reducing Crime Through Real Estate Development and Management* (Washington, D.C.: Urban Land Institute), pp. 39–52. This material is used here with the kind permission of the Urban Land Institute. The primary research was conducted by the authors.

Many people contributed to this research. One individual stands out because his help, guidance and encouragement make this book possible. We would like to recognize and thank Mr. Vince Guarini. As Deputy Warden at Delaware County Prison, he not only allowed us to visit and interview prisoners, but he also took the time to make sure we understood what we were doing. His comments and insights gave us a head start in collecting data. He also made sure we knew how the prison operated so that we would understand the ground rules and fit into the routine rather than stand out. We were both pleased, but not surprised, when he was appointed Warden of the Lancaster County Prison not long after we began our work.

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SUBURBAN BURGLARY

Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

BURGLARY is a very common event. Every day in every community someone breaks into someone else's house, steals their possessions, damages their property, and seemingly is never caught. The victim's initial outrage usually subsides into a deep sense of psychological violation. Their dearest and most meaningful possessions are stolen or vandalized, never to be restored. It is an empty feeling. The victim's helplessness is only amplified when the local police confess the truth: nothing can be done. Seldom is the criminal caught and property is almost never recovered.

A great deal of time and effort has been devoted to understanding burglary. Scholars have analyzed and studied it. Criminal justice professionals have suggested many useful ideas to prevent it. Security experts have devised alarm and protective systems that range from simple locks to lasers. Local citizens organize and patrol their neighborhoods. Suburban police departments are usually totally frustrated by burglary. Occasionally, a burglar is caught and prosecuted. No matter what local changes are occurring, the general condition of burglary as a common event remains (Hindelang, Gottfredson and Garofalo, 1978). One in twenty households

were burglarized in 1994 (Department of Justice, 1997). In many communities, this is the equivalent of one house per city block. Its occurrence is all too close to each of us.

Our interest in burglary is somewhat different. We are less concerned with who is likely to commit a burglary than with how to make the burglary process more difficult for any burglar. This is not to demean the efforts of others who are attempting to identify criminogenic persons and situations. They have different priorities and obligations, and their interests reflect this. Our interests began to shift after reading much (and writing some) of the descriptive literature on burglary and burglars and realizing that we had nothing new to contribute. Our interests are not the same (Rengert, 1975, 1981; Rengert and Wasilchick, 1980).

Our fascination with the process of burglary began when we looked at police incident reports of burglaries and wondered why one house was burglarized and not the one next door or across the street. All seemed equally likely. Every victim must wonder "why me," and we became very curious about the burglar's side of this question. We also wondered about the communities which burglars preferred and why some communities are chosen over others. This is not a transparent question. Suburban counties are usually economically diverse. They are an economic smorgasbord that includes wealthy neighborhoods, distressed ghettos, and areas of every other economic description (Muller, 1981). Given this diversity, we wondered what process really led to the burglary of a single house in a specific neighborhood. How does a burglar discriminate between individual areas and targets when there are so many alternatives to accept and reject?

The burglary of a particular house in a particular neighborhood requires choices, evaluations, motives, some idea of what to do and how to do it, and nerve from the burglar (Bennett and Wright, 1984; Cromwell, 1996; Cromwell,

Olson, and Avary, 1991; Jackson, 1969; Shover, 1996; Walsh, 1980; Wright and Decker, 1994). We had no way of knowing what factors led up to the burglary and how the lives of the home's residents interacted with the life of the burglar (Cohen and Felson, 1979). Once we stopped thinking of burglary as a crime or an isolated event and began to consider it as the result of a process, we realized that the only way to find out more was to ask a burglar and to examine the results of many burglar's actions.

The idea of asking burglars about burglary was not as farfetched as it might seem. One of us was working for a county court system. This made it easy to telephone the deputy warden and ask how the prison felt about allowing prisoners to be interviewed. The deputy warden also lent the weight of his office to our effort by distributing our request for volunteers and collecting responses through his office. This made the request just official enough to be taken seriously. Our affiliation with Temple University made the request distant enough from the prison administration not to scare away any willing prisoners. The informality of the arrangements worked to our advantage in many unforeseen ways.

We became frequent visitors to this suburban county prison not far from Philadelphia, taking up residence in a small glassed-in room in the netherworld known as the "bull pen." This intermediate area, set off by immense metal gates, lies between the prison inside and the first step out–the prison lobby. The bull pen area has some privacy. It is far enough removed from the distractions of other prisoners and prison activities to hold a normal conversation.

Interviewing Convicted Burglars

Interviewing convicted burglars at the prison was a very surprising experience. The greatest surprise was their willingness to talk at length about their careers. Our greatest fear