RESIDENTIAL BURGLARY

Third Edition

RESIDENTIAL BURGLARY

How the Urban Environment and Our Lifestyles Play a Contributing Role

By

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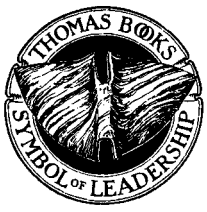

CHARLES C THOMAS • PUBLISHER, LTD.
Springfield • Illinois • U.S.A.

Published and Distributed Throughout the World by

CHARLES C THOMAS • PUBLISHER, LTD.
2600 South First Street
Springfield, Illinois 62704

ISBN 978-0-398-08678-7 (hard)
ISBN 978-0-398-08679-4 (paper)
ISBN 978-0-398-08680-0 (e-book)

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 2011017168

First Edition, 1985
Second Edition, 2000
Third Edition, 2011

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Printed in the United States of America
SM-R-3

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Rengert, George F.
Residential burglary : how the urban environment and our lifestyles play a contributing role / by George F. Rengert, Elizabeth Groff. -- 3rd ed.
p. cm.
Rev. ed. of: Suburban burglary : a tale of two suburbs / by George F. Rengert and John Wasilchick. 2nd ed. 2000.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 978-0-398-08678-7 (hardcover) -- ISBN 978-0-398-08679-4 (pbk.) -- ISBN 978-0-398-08680-0 (e-book)
1. Burglary protection--United States. 2. Suburban crimes--United States--Prevention. I. Groff, Elizabeth (Elizabeth R.) II. Rengert, George F. Suburban burglary. III. Title.
HV6658.R46 2011
643'.16--dc22

2011017168

To Reginald Golledge, friend and mentor, who taught us most of what we know about behavioral geography.
and
To my family for all the reasons you can think of and so much more.
George Rengert

To my family and friends for their support.
Elizabeth Groff

PREFACE

Most of us have a clear idea as to what is meant by residential burglary. However, the legal definition of residential burglary has not always been so clear. In fact, it has changed over the years. The common law definition of residential burglary used in preindustrial Britain was: "the breaking and entering of a dwelling house of another in the nighttime with the intent to commit a felony within" (La Fave & Scott, 1972: 708). A careful reader might question why "nighttime" is included in this definition of residential burglary when, today, most burglaries in the United States take place in the daytime (Rengert & Wasilchick, 2000).

The reason that nighttime was included in the common law definition of residential burglary is due to the fact that few houses were vacant during the daytime in preindustrial times. Miller (1982) documented this fact in Philadelphia: he found few homes vacant at any time of the day or night. It was uncommon for women to work outside the home and even middle class homes had household servants in those years. Therefore, if a house was illegally entered in the daytime, there would be a confrontation which would change the crime from a burglary to a robbery. In the nighttime, a thief might enter the home while the residents were sleeping and thus avoid a confrontation.

Today, things are very different. Many women work outside the home and few households can afford to hire a servant. Furthermore, many homes are built for privacy. These homes may have a privacy fence around the backyard, or tall hedges to block the view from the front and sides. These features, when combined with a vacant house, create an ideal setting for a residential burglary.

This manuscript offers an overview of residential burglary. It combines ethnographic research with study of official records. Much of the ethnographic research was conducted by George Rengert and John Wasilchick. John is an outstanding ethnographer. It was amazing to witness his knowledge of music, movies, and cars that matched that of the burglars we were talking to. He might spend several hours just chatting and gaining a rapport

that was invaluable. The job of George Rengert was then to convince the burglar that even though he was a college professor, he knew very little about residential burglary. Would they teach him so he could write a book? Most of the burglars were excited about providing information for a book. But the important thing was to maintain rapport and the teacher-pupil relationship that allowed information to flow.

Elizabeth Groff is one of the pioneers of place-based research in criminology. She regularly works with very large data sets associated with large cities such as Philadelphia. She is also one of the first to apply agent-based modeling to criminological questions. Our idea is to test information elicited from the ethnographic research using official data for the city. Together we think this is an excellent team to combine both the strengths of in-depth but small scale ethnographic with more rigorous large-scale official record study. This book combines the strengths of both approaches.

George F. Rengert
Elizabeth Groff

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Most large endeavors benefit from the efforts of people who are not listed on the cover; this book is no exception. We must first acknowledge the intellectual contribution of John Wasilchick. The book has drawn heavily from the ethnographic work he did in collaboration with George Rengert. Along the same vein, this book would not have been possible without the cooperation of the burglars who instructed Rengert and Wasilchick. The openness of the Philadelphia Police Department to sharing their data has allowed us to empirically test some of the proclivities revealed by the burglars. Finally, Cory Haberman, Brian Lockwood, and Carlena Orosco provided invaluable analytical and literature assistance along the way.

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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

> Everything is related to everything else, but near things are more related than distant things.
>
> –Waldo Tobler's First Law of Geography

Residential burglary is not considered a particularly serious crime by the public or the police. That is, unless it is you who has been burglarized. Especially if it is the first time you have been burglarized. In this case, you may have lost irreplaceable family heirlooms and other sentimental items. You also feel violated; much like it was a personal attack. Many victims cannot bring themselves to wear clothes a burglar has touched or even enter a room a burglar has been in. In extreme cases, victims change their residence rather than live in a home they feel has been violated. The cost is not only emotional. A British publication put the aggregate cost of burglary just after homicide and violence against persons with wounding (Brand & Price, 2000). Most often, the place where the burglar entered is repaired by the owner. If the resident is the owner, they are also likely to take steps to make their property more secure. They report the crime to the police and expect the police to take it very seriously. To them, burglary is a very serious crime. Unfortunately, the burglary clearance rate in the United States is a measly 12.5 percent, so the likelihood they will see any of their possessions again is very low (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2009).

People who live in high crime areas who have experienced several burglaries often have a very different experience. They learn to live with the inconvenience of reoccurring residential burglaries. Once

their home has been burglarized several times and items of sentimental value stolen, these residents are not likely to call the police after another burglary. They have learned by experience that little is likely to be done; stolen property is not likely to be recovered, and the offenders are not likely to be caught. Burglary becomes a part of life. They become hardened to its inconveniences. A typical scenario may go something like this: the first time is traumatic and the police are called. The police take a report but do little else. The second time is less traumatic since many of the valuables with sentimental value are already stolen, but the police are called again and again take a report and do little else. The third and following burglaries are "not again" type experiences and the resident does not bother to call the police who have proven ineffective in the previous cases. They learn to live with residential burglary and protect themselves as best they can.

In many of these high crime areas, the residents are renters who do not have complete control over the structure in which they reside. For renters, there is little that can be done to change the situation that provided an opportunity to a burglar(s) in the first instance. Clearly, those who live in different sections of our metropolitan areas will experience different crime levels and different reactions to crime. Our communities were built at different times for differing purposes. Consider first our post World War II suburban communities.

SUBURBAN COMMUNITIES

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, Americans 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 transportation to get to them or the housing available in them. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, many communities developed 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 involved specifying the value of construction to make certain home prices remained high. These actions ensured the poor were left out because they could not afford the new housing, and zoning ordinances made sure it would stay that way in these 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 suburban 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 responded as developers seized the opportunity to make good profits on apartment, condominium, and