

BURGLARY: PRACTICE MESSAGES FROM THE BRITISH CRIME SURVEY

Briefing Note 5/01

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Summary

This report draws on data from recent sweeps of the British Crime Survey (BCS), presenting those findings that have implications for the reduction of domestic burglary. The report:

- identifies areas and households with particularly high risks of burglary victimisation;
- considers the extent of repeat victimisation;
- examines how burglars gain entry to homes;
- evaluates the effectiveness of home security devices.

The findings are directly relevant to police and crime reduction partnership practice, in that they identify groups and circumstances which could profitably act as the focus for local analysis and prevention priorities. Much of the statistical information in this note was contained in the main report on the 2000 British Crime Survey (BCS – see Kershaw et al. (2000)), but here more explicit links are made between BCS results and implications for local crime reduction practice. Analogous notes on violence (Mattinson, 2001) and vehicle-related thefts (Kinshott, 2001) have also been published.

The BCS asks respondents whether they or their household have been a victim of crime since the beginning of the previous year. The BCS includes, in addition to crimes recorded by the police, those not reported to the police or recorded by them. It thus provides a more complete picture of domestic burglary than police figures alone and is important in showing to what extent changes in the level of recorded burglary reflect changes in rates of reporting or recording. The BCS estimates that a quarter of burglaries with entry and a half of attempted burglaries were not reported to the police in 1999. Box 1 provides further information about the BCS. For more detailed BCS domestic burglary results see Budd (1999) and Kershaw et al. (2000).

How big is the problem?

Burglary is a high volume crime, affecting around one in twenty-five households annually. The BCS estimates that there were 1.28 million domestic burglaries in England and Wales in 1999, almost one in ten of the crimes measured by the survey. Of these, just over 500,000 were attempts. In about 750,000 cases entry was gained, including 540,000 incidents where property was stolen. Property stolen was worth £680 million.

The number of domestic burglaries has fallen in recent years, reversing the increases of the 1980s and early 1990s. The BCS estimates a 27% fall between 1995 and 1999, while police recorded crime figures show a fall of about 30% over the same period.¹ The Government has set a target of a 25% reduction in domestic burglary between 1999 and 2005. Details of the Home Office Reducing Burglary Initiative are given in Box 2.

Identifying those at high risk

Less than 1% of households in England and Wales accounted for 42% of all burglaries in 1999. It is clearly cost-effective to target burglary reduction initiatives on those most at risk, and this targeting will form an element of many successful burglary reduction initiatives. There are several approaches which police forces and crime reduction partnerships may choose to adopt in identifying high-risk households.

- One approach is to identify *localities* where the risk of burglary is high and to target crime reduction measures on all households in the identified areas.
- A second approach is to identify the types of household at high risk and target only these, wherever they are. An example of such 'virtual communities' would be student households.
- Combining both approaches would involve

¹ The recorded crime figure for 1999 is an estimate based on counting rules used prior to April 1998.

identifying the highest risk households and high burglary areas.

The BCS shows what types of household and area are most at risk of burglary nationally. Assuming local patterns reflect the national picture, the BCS findings are a good indication where to begin looking for local problems. Practitioners should be aware that just targeting high-risk areas will neglect individual households at high risk in areas of generally low risk. Conversely, just targeting households whose characteristics make them vulnerable would neglect households whose characteristics would mean that they were at little risk, were it not for the fact that they are located in high crime areas. Thus local strategies need to respond to the risk picture as a whole, giving attention to both individual and area risks.

Households at risk

Figure 1 below lists types of household experiencing rates of victimisation markedly above the national average. For example, students suffer just over double the national rate with 13 burglaries per 100 student households. Households of these types merit attention in any burglary reduction programme aspiring to be comprehensive.

Historically, it has been difficult for the police, having recognised the existence of high-risk groups, to locate them efficiently. Some types of high-risk household remain difficult for the police to identify. Partner organisations may be able to help in this respect. Providers of tertiary education can identify student households, while Local authorities and housing associations may aid the identification of social housing. S115 of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 was intended to facilitate the exchange of information in the pursuit of crime reduction.

Identifying areas

The BCS is able to indicate what *types of area* are most likely to have a high burglary rate. Thus, although analysis of specific areas with chronically high rates of

burglary is best done locally, the BCS can suggest the area characteristics usually associated with high rates. Using the well-known ACORN area classification (see Box 3) the BCS indicates types of area with particularly high domestic burglary risks. Those with risks between two and three times the national average are listed in Table 1, which shows the number of burglaries per 100 households and how much they differ from the national average. For instance, areas characterised by council flats and high levels of unemployment had 23.2 burglaries per 100 households, or just over three times the national average (indexed risk in Table 1).

Using ACORN to identify high-risk areas is an approach to consider. The commercial supplier of ACORN (see Box 3 for contact details) can identify the ACORN types of enumeration districts in police force areas. This could indicate geographic areas where risks are likely to be high. Alternatively, police forces may feel that Table 1 of itself gives enough information to choose areas to check against the national experience reflected in BCS.

Households within areas

Both household and area characteristics are associated with levels of burglary risk. Further analysis of BCS data has indicated that while crime risks are relatively evenly spread across different types of household in affluent areas, in poorer areas crime risks are higher for the more affluent households within the area (see for example, Trickett et al., 1995).

Targeting those at risk

BCS findings provide some guidance as to where local problems may be concentrated. However, the results do not indicate why such households or areas have higher risks. It is important to establish what factors are most influential in increasing risk in considering the design of an effective burglary reduction initiative. For example, low-income households may be at risk because of poor security levels, some council properties may have weak doors or windows, while the layout of terraced housing

Figure 1: Households at high risk of burglary in 1999

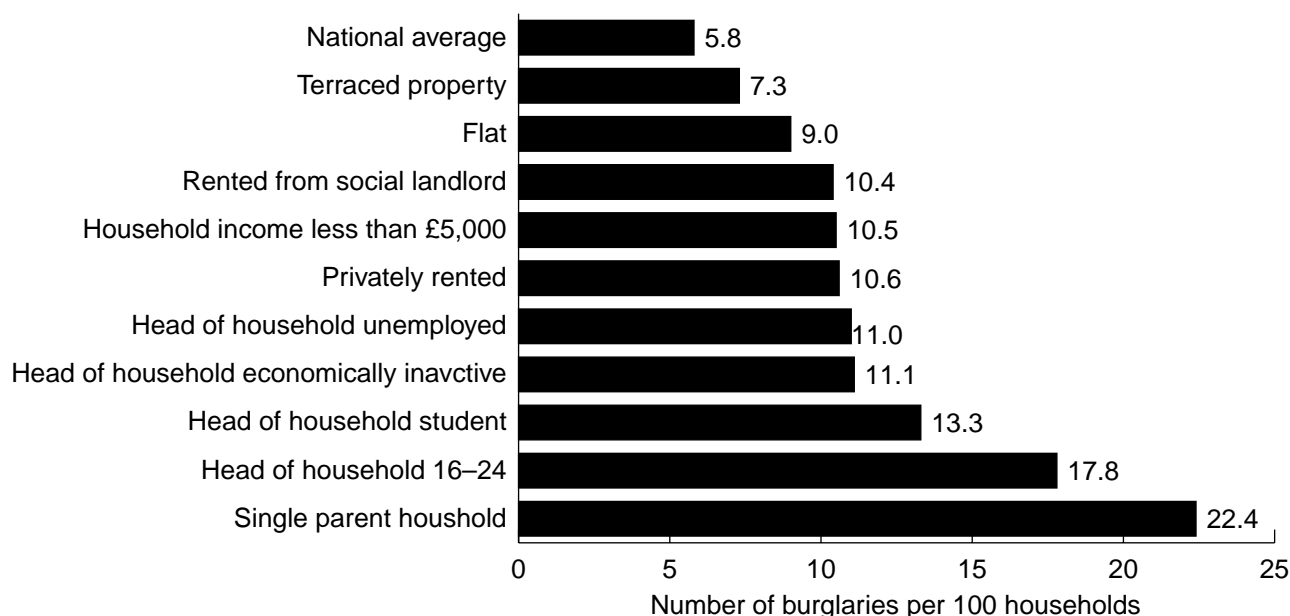


Table 1: Types of area with high burglary incident rate (1996-2000 BCS)

ACORN area	Incident rate per 100 households	Indexed risk
Council flats, very high unemployment, singles	23.2	3.1
Multi-occupied terraces, multi-ethnic areas	23.0	3.1
Council areas, high unemployment, lone parents	21.3	2.8
Academic centres, students and young professionals	19.7	2.6
Council flats, greatest hardship, many lone parents	18.4	2.4
Furnished flats and bedsits, younger single people	18.2	2.4
Council areas, residents with health problems	15.5	2.1
National average (1995, 1997, 1999)	7.5	1.0

Note:

1. Source: 1996, 1998, 2000 BCS. Data sets combined to improve the accuracy of the results.

(for example, public alleyways at the rear of properties) may make life easier for the burglar. An evaluation of housing estates in West Yorkshire indicated that estates which adopted Secure by Design standards (for example, minimum levels of physical security, maximising natural surveillance, and minimising access/egress points) had lower incidence of recorded crime than other estates (Armitage, 2000).

Tackling repeat victimisation

One of the best predictors of the risk of a household being burgled is whether it has had a burglary in the recent past. Prior victimisation is particularly useful because this is information that the police acquire routinely. Action in the wake of a burglary combines elements of both victim support and targeted crime prevention. This action does not have to be restricted to the burgled home, since there is recent evidence (Shaw and Pease, 2000) that elevated risk of burglary is shared by approximately three homes on either side of a burgled dwelling.

The BCS shows that a fifth of burglary victims in 1999 had been burgled at least once before in the same year; 7% had been burgled more than twice in the year. This is likely to be a much higher figure than the police know about because of unreported burglaries. The practical implication here is that the first officer attending a burglary incident could profitably ask whether previous crimes had been committed against the same dwelling, or against occupants in ways which might be linked to the burglary.

Research has indicated that victims are most likely to be re-victimised shortly after the first incident (Polvi, 1991, Robinson, 1998). It also shows that offenders who commit repeated crimes against the same target are in general more prolific offenders (Everson, 2000; Everson and Pease, 2001) This adds to the case for targeting such offences and increased efforts in detecting those who commit them. Pease (1998) reviews the crime prevention implications of repeat victimisation.

Repeat victimisation offers a prime opportunity for highly targeted burglary reduction initiatives. Strategies include (see Farrell et al., 2000):

- Crime prevention officers advising victims on security improvements, for example, upgrading locks or removing trees or shrubs that give an offender cover.
- Guidance being given to neighbours about the need for extra vigilance, and the concentration of police patrolling around the burglary site for some days or weeks after a crime.
- Fitting covert alarms to victimised households in order to alert the police if there is an attempt to burgle the home again. This could assist in the apprehension of prolific burglars, if the police are able to respond quickly enough. However, this approach does require householders to be left vulnerable for a period to be effective.

Modus operandi

Establishing how burglars operate is particularly important in terms of advice about crime prevention measures. It may also provide a baseline against which to measure local experience, including prolific offenders using unusual techniques. The BCS paints a national picture - but the findings provide useful pointers for local action.

When burglaries occur

The BCS suggests that burglaries are as likely to occur at weekends as during the week.² Weekend burglaries were most likely to take place during the evening or night (6pm to 6am) – two-thirds did so. Weekday burglaries were more evenly spread – around a half took place during the morning or afternoon and a half in the evening or night. Burglaries were more likely to result in successful entry if they occurred during the day. 68% of daytime burglaries resulted in entry, compared with 55% of burglaries that took place during the evening or night.

Method of entry

In most burglaries where entry is gained, the offender uses some form of force. The BCS estimates that:

² The BCS asks if the incident happened during the week or weekend (week-end being Friday 6pm to Monday 6am). 71% of burglaries took place during the week. Victims were not asked the exact day when the incident occurred.

- door locks were forced in a fifth of incidents (20%);
- door panels were broken in just over a tenth (12%);
- a window lock was forced in 14%; and
- a window pane was broken in 10%.

In 21% of incidents the offender gained access via an unlocked door, and in 6% via an open window. Incidents during the day were particularly likely to involve access being gained through an unlocked door (28%). Those during the evening or night were most likely to involve forcing door locks or panels (34%).

Under a tenth of burglaries with entry (6%) involved the use of false pretences (such as the offender claiming to be an official from a utility company). Distraction burglaries are particularly likely among households headed by someone aged 60 or over – 14% of their burglaries involved false pretences. The BCS may well underestimate the extent of distraction burglary, as victims of such incidents may be among those least likely to recognise the fact of their victimisation. Victims may also be unwilling to disclose the incident because they feel partly culpable. To counter such distraction burglaries requires both target hardening and awareness raising among vulnerable groups.

These findings suggest two fruitful approaches:

- encouraging households to be more vigilant in locking doors and windows, and in checking the identity of callers
- target hardening of doors and windows to make forced entry more difficult.

Method of entry does differ somewhat by type of dwelling. For example, burglars are slightly more likely to access *houses* at the rear than at the front, while for *flats* front access is often the only option. In terms of how entry is gained, the door is the most frequent point of entry for all dwellings, though this is slightly more common for *flats* (see Table 2). Burglaries against *flats* often involve forcing a door lock, while for *houses* doors

left unlocked are as common as the offender forcing the lock. Entry through windows is more common for houses than *flats*.

Effectiveness of household security measures

One of the major contributions of BCS in recent years has been to demonstrate the efficacy of security devices. It is commonplace to claim that good security 'works'. However, it has actually been surprisingly difficult to prove this. The BCS provided such proof by comparing levels of security in homes at the time they were burgled with security in homes that were not burgled. It takes account at the same time of other factors that are associated with risks, such as type of area. The results show that:

- basic security measures, such as deadlocks and window locks, are effective in reducing risk
- burglar alarms, security lights or window grilles, are even more effective.

Nationally, 15% of households without security measures were burgled in 1997, compared with 4% of households with basic measures in place and 3% with higher level security (Budd, 1999).

Security not only deters offenders from attempting a break-in, but it can also turn completions into attempts. Victims of burglary where entry was gained had even less security than victims of attempted burglary.

Although levels of security have increased over the last ten years, there remains great disparity in ownership levels. Younger households, single parent households and economically disadvantaged households – i.e., those most at risk – are least likely to have well-secured homes. These results suggest that encouraging higher levels of home security in general is likely to be beneficial, and concentrating efforts on poorer households is worth consideration. At the very least

Table 2: Method of entry in burglaries with entry (1998 and 2000 BCS)

Percentages	Detached or semi-detached	Terraced	Flats
<i>Door</i>	71	66	76
Forced lock	21	19	29
Broke/cut door panel	13	13	12
Door not locked	20	18	13
False pretences	6	7	4
Had door key	5	6	7
Pushed past person opening door	6	5	5
Other method	5	5	10
<i>Window</i>	37	36	23
Forced window lock/catch	17	16	9
Broke/cut glass	12	12	8
Window open/could be pushed open	8	7	6
Other method	1	2	1

Note:

1. Percentages do not sum to 100 as more than one answer could be given.

work should be done to emphasise to poorer households that even simple security devices can be effective. Going further than this would involve subsidising better security hardware, or convincing local authorities that free upgrades are worthwhile.

Another controversy that has been satisfactorily resolved using BCS data is that of the proneness of cul-de-sacs to burglary. Households in cul-de-sacs are much less victimised by burglary than are those other road types (Budd, 1999).

Practice pointers for local action

The BCS national picture provides a number of potential action points likely to be relevant at a local level. However, since local problems may be distinctive, local data, where available, should be used, to clarify the nature of the burglary problem. The two main pointers for action, in summary, are:

- **Raising public awareness about the efficacy of home security**

BCS data on the efficacy of physical security measures, together with the demonstrable success of applying Secured by Design building standards, should add force to local advocacy of implementing such standards, particularly given the responsibilities imposed by S17 of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998.

- **Targeting potential victims and tackling repeat victimisation**

Local analysis is always helpful. The national patterns detailed in this note could profitably provide the starting point for local work. It is crucially important to recognise that both individual and area characteristics contribute to vulnerability to burglary, and unless both are addressed, some of those at high risk will not be afforded the help they need. In the short term, repeat victimisation flags those households and those areas for which local attention is most urgent. Reliable data on repeats is important to obtain. The prevention of repeat victimisation is thus a tactic which can be applied speedily.

Further guidance on reducing burglary is available from:

- The Domestic Burglary Toolkit – web-based information on partnership approaches, good practice, tackling local problems and funding sources - www.crimereduction.gov.uk/toolkits.htm.
- The Crime Reduction Series Paper – Developing Crime Reduction Plans: Some Examples from the Reducing Burglary Initiative (Curtin et al., 2001).

Box 1 - The British Crime Survey

The British Crime Survey (BCS) measures crime against people living in private households in England and Wales. It has been conducted by the Home Office eight times since 1982 - the most recent sweeps being in 1998 and 2000. Each sweep measures crime in the previous year. The BCS provides a better measure of the extent of domestic burglary than police recorded crime figures because it includes incidents not reported to the police (overall 38% of burglaries were not reported to the police in 1999). The BCS also provides information about the nature of domestic burglary and identifies types of area and household at risk. The BCS does not measure burglaries against commercial or public establishments. Further details about the BCS are available at <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/bcs1.html>.

Box 2 - The Crime Reduction Programme – Reducing Burglary Initiative

The Reducing Burglary Initiative is part of the Government's Crime Reduction Programme. Over three years two million homes will be covered in a sustained and co-ordinated drive to reduce the number of burglaries in high crime areas. Strategic Development Projects will be evaluated to assess cost-effectiveness and results will be disseminated to all Crime and Disorder Partnerships across the country to help them set up their own burglary reduction schemes.

To date about 250 projects designed to tackle domestic burglary in high crime areas have been funded. The schemes cover a range of measures including: focussing on repeat victimisation; targeting groups with high risks of victimisation, targeting known burglars; diversion schemes for burglars; setting up and strengthening Neighbourhood Watch schemes; improving the environment to discourage opportunities for offending and improving the security of vulnerable homes.

Box 3 - ACORN – A Classification of Residential Neighbourhoods

ACORN is an area classification which assigns each Enumeration District (approximately 150 households) in the country to one of 54 ACORN types according to the social and housing characteristics in its immediate area (as measured by the 1991 Census). ACORN measures the type of area in which a household is located, rather than the characteristics of a specific household. Not all households in a particular ACORN area will share the dominant characteristics of the area. So for example, not all households in ACORN areas classified as 'council estates, greatest hardship' will be on council estates or experiencing hardship. The ACORN classification can be purchased from CACI Ltd – CACI House, Kensington Village,

Avonmore Road, London. W14 8TS. Telephone: 020 7602 6000. Fax: 020 7603 5862.

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