

BASIC TIPS FOR HOMEOWNER SECURITY

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2015/3/10

INTRODUCTION

Home or domestic security has become an ever increasing issue for most residents. Gone are the days when all that was necessary was a fence around one's property and perhaps a dog. Today's criminals are professionals and often are members of a gang, schooled in the art of crime.

The writers have been involved with their local neighbourhood watch for the last seven years, including following up of about a hundred break-ins. Much has been learned from these inspections that we can now pass on to others. In addition, the neighbourhood watch has over 690 crime incidents recorded allowing us to analyse the prevalence of crime, the modus operandi as well as the most likely time of day, and likelihood of a particular property being targeted.

BASICS OF CRIME AND HOUSE BURGLARIES

It's important to realise the basics of crime and house-burglaries in order to secure your home. The old military adage: "Know your enemy" also hold true here. By knowing what one is up against makes it easier to plan one's home security:

The following has been gleaned from the neighbourhood watches' records and from the in loco inspection of the crime scenes, as well as research papers:

- Crime is a process. The crooks scout your area and then your property. This can be up to a week before the actual crime. During this phase the criminals work out how to get through your perimeter fence, the best way to break into your house, then work out what is the best escape route .
- This process is driven by prior crime intelligence (what they can see from the street, and what they hear from their sources).
- Crime is a business, so it's about risk & return. We want to raise the risk to the criminals and reduce the return. Your alarm raises the risk to them. If they can't get in or steal anything, it lowers their return.
- Most criminals that have been arrested are very fit and agile. They are not terminally ill or lazy. Nor are they the unemployed or "bush sleepers"!

We have to realise that criminals do "things" to victims within an environment. Anti-crime tactics are therefore generally focused on these three tactics: Firstly, get rid of the criminals (identify them, confront them and if necessary arrest them), secondly, support the potential victims (with education, information and technology), and thirdly, change the environment to deter crime/criminals (manage open areas & streets, fencing, access control, CCTV monitoring).

THE LAYERED-APPROACH TO HOME SECURITY

There are many passive devices that you can employ to secure your home. Each on its own is not

sufficient to do the job properly as criminals have learned to either overcome some or ignore others. One needs to, unfortunately, employ more than one passive device to secure your home. Remember too, that criminals get onto your property by doing an audit for weak points. This means that even an intruder into your garden is in fact a trespasser who is also just a burglar that hasn't broken into your home yet. Always prosecute trespassers.

For this reason, we advocate that you use the 'Layered Approach to Home Security'.

PERIMETER SECURITY:

The first so-called layer is the outer perimeter of your property. Make this difficult to breach. If you can even jump your own fence, bad-dudes who are fitter and can do it 5 times faster will do so as well, so sort that out.

The perimeter of your property is both the wall/palisade fence around your property as well as the gate. The prime target the criminals normally go for is the clutch on your electric gate, (the device that locks your gate closed). If your gate can be lifted off the rail or over the electric motor gear, you are vulnerable. Make sure that this is not possible.

However, if you connect the opening or movement of your gate to the alarm in your house, it's becomes very effective.

Electric fences do not stop criminals. The shock energy is limited by law. Their value is to set off your alarm. Trees and bushes must therefore be trimmed back religiously (or resulting false alarms will dull the senses).

PROPERTY SECURITY:

If someone is walking about on your property (in the garden, etc.) you would want to make sure you know about it. The best way to do this, without resorting to a dog is to place infra-red (IR) beams/detectors in your garden at strategic "choke points", places through which one must pass if they are looking for open windows to break into.

Full coverage of the property is not viable and most often leads to false alarms and disabled sensors. These sensors must be on "day chime" (or know your dog. Mine used to get up and go greet the "visitors" with every chime).

Getting back to a dog, especially one that sleeps outside, make sure it beds down where the perimeter security is weakest.

If you have a garage, include a day-chime IR beam there as well. Too much day-chime dulls the senses, so be thoughtful. Use narrow-beam passive IR outdoor sensors. Place them so that false alarms are very exceptional. It can take quite some persistence to position the sensors well (but life will be much better thereafter). Make sure the outdoor sensors are not easily visible, as they can be shielded, or just knocked off the wall for a later break-in attempt (armed response often does not note this when inspecting premises).

Outdoor lighting is only useful if its faces away from the house-windows, are out of reach (i.e. cannot be tampered with) and does not activate falsely (i.e. few false alarms).

CCTV cameras do not allow positive identification in most cases. They therefore do not offer big legal

evidence in prosecutions. They are therefore not a real deterrent to criminals. Criminals have been recorded where they walk right past the camera without making any attempt to hide their faces. CCTV is only useful if the homeowner is watching them, or they cause an alarm (detection zones with no moths or bats). CCTV does, however, allow one to confirm something once you are alerted. This probably means some other security measure has been breached already.

DWELLING SECURITY:

The final layer to concern us is the house or dwelling itself. In South Africa it is almost mandatory to have all windows covered with burglar guards that will stop a child. Make sure these burglar guards are robust enough so that a criminal cannot remove them easily using a wrench or crowbar. At the same time you can protect your doors with magnetic reed switches.

It is important to realise that Burglars these days carry tools that are so powerful that they break even the wall around gates and doors to gain access. Indeed, if they have time, they will defeat most physical security. A Trellidoor can be dismantled in an afternoon with simple hand-tools.

To overcome this threat you can protect the volume of the house with passive IR sensors. Place these sensors at strategic placers to cover the best volume of space. You may want to place one in such a way that one sensor will cover two living spaces, or on that looks down a passage thus securing the access to bedrooms.

Programming and use of your alarm: In the "at-home" mode (for sleeping) configure the alarm to allow free access to all the common areas inside the house, while making sure that far parts of the house are armed.

In the "away" mode, close all doors & windows (No pets inside) or the movement of curtains will set off your alarm (and dull the neighbours). Always, always, always arm when you go out. Criminals attempting to enter a house while the residents are out, are often frightened away when an alarm goes off. Needless to say, fix a broken alarm immediately. "I meant to get around to it" is not security.

THE VALUE OF ARMED RESPONSE

It's important to realise that Armed Response Services (ARS) do not solve crime. They make business from sustained crime levels. It's a positive feedback system.

Also, they offer no service guarantee. The staffs have no more legal rights than normal citizens. They are not empowered to stop and search suspects. Armed response companies make very few arrests, and generally do not confront scouts trolling through an area (they're employed to protect nominated clients). ARS are therefore not really preventive, they do little real prevention.

ARS generally do not improve your home security model (as discussed up to now). They do however put burglars under time-pressure, as most response personnel arrive after the crooks have left with your stuff. However, your neighbours can respond within 20 seconds to your alarm, whilst the armed response takes 5 minutes - that's 14 times slower. So make an agreement with your neighbours if you really want protection.

Finally, join your neighbourhood watch organisation. Experience has shown that suburbs with an active neighbourhood watch organisation realise a lower crime rate than those without. However,

the value lies in the fact that the neighbourhood watch normally has a far greater manpower available to respond to your alarm in quicker time than the average ARS. Furthermore, a neighbourhood watch sign on your fence or wall does tend to scare off criminals.

SECURE HOUSEHOLDER HABITS

Householders are often victims of crime because of how they behave. Here are some very basic tips:

- Keep your pavement clean. Apparently innocent objects lying on the pavement could mean something to the criminals, indicating a property on their list.
- Check when your dog barks. However, a dog barking all the time dulls the senses.
- Confront anyone who seems to be scouting. You have a right to talk to anyone. Use it.
- Look after your neighbours and they will return the favour.
- Keep your gates closed, and dogs in the property, this makes it obvious when something bad has happened!
- Don't show off your valuables. Close curtains at night. Close up at night.
- Close doors and windows and set the alarm. The lock up before going out.
- No strangers, deliveries or repairmen should be allowed in without a prior appointment.

Use your alarm properly: When going out, close all windows and lock all outside doors and set the alarm on "fully activated". If your alarm is SMS based (all adults get an SMS) it can be controlled by SMS. Thus, when you are away, it is obvious when there is something up.

Use your neighbours: If your alarm should go off when you are out, call your neighbours to confirm whether all is OK at your place, because it is about 14 times quicker than any armed response while witnesses are a deterrent. Put your surrounding neighbours on fast-dial on your cell phone.

THE ROLE OF A NEIGHBOURHOOD WATCH

Today many suburban areas have a neighbourhood watch, some more elaborate than others. A Neighbourhood watch can be terms as a collective of residents who share crime information and "look after each other".

Neighbourhood watches are very effective when delivering a 3-prong approach to security (i.e. get rid of criminals, toughen up the "victims", fix and control the environment – see earlier).

An effective Neighbourhood Watch is able to move information about criminals faster than they can travel. Arrests are therefore inevitable. Radio systems add a lot of value here.

Our neighbourhood watch spends a lot of time spotting and confronting Scouts. For every 2 scouts confronted, roughly one burglary is prevented.

Watches share information on crimes, criminals and modus operandi. They therefore teach/help each other not to be "soft targets".

Another role of a neighbourhood watch is to control the environment. They ensure public open spaces are maintained with clear sight lines and no bush sleepers/lurkers. They own, dominate and

use their streets and open areas. Escape routes are analysed and managed (via fencing etc), so that a criminal's options to approach and escape are channelled and limited.

Finally if you do not have a neighbourhood watch, organise one.

CONCLUSION

Remember, criminals are what they do, not what they look like. Successful criminals may dress very well, and may speak well. It's only after you speak to them for a while that one realises their story does not add up.

It's not important to have the best security in SA, but it's vitally important to have security that is relatively better than what most of us have today.