

Property crime

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1. Introduction

Property damage from vandalism and graffiti costs the community a lot through repair and replacement, inconvenience, loss of services and increased insurance costs. Property loss from burglary and robbery and motor vehicle theft also impose major costs—emotional, physical, psychological and financial.

Property crime is one of the most common crimes experienced by Australians. In April 2002, the Australian Bureau of Statistics conducted a crime and safety survey to get a picture of the way crime affects the Australian community. In the 12 months prior to the survey, it was estimated that 354,000 households in Australia had at least one break-in to their home, garage or shed. Nationally, this means that around 4.7 per cent of households were likely to be victims, down slightly from 5.0 per cent in 1998, when the last survey was done. The survey reported that 254,400 households (3.4 per cent of all households) found signs of at least one attempted break-in. The survey estimated that about 134,300 households had at least one motor vehicle stolen.

National figures like these hide considerable differences between states and territories. Northern Territory had the highest proportion of households experiencing a break-in (13.5 per cent of all households) followed by Western Australia (6.2 per cent). The lowest rates were in Victoria (3.4 per cent) and the Australian Capital Territory (4.4 per cent). State or territory figures in turn hide considerable differences between suburbs and between rural and regional areas.

But even in high burglary neighbourhoods, most residences have no burglaries while a few suffer burglaries again and again. For property crimes (and personal crimes) a majority of offences are committed by a minority of offenders and a small number of victims experience a disproportionate number of crimes.¹

Whatever the actual figures, many people think property crime is a problem in their area. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics 2002 Crime and Safety Survey, the most commonly perceived crime or public nuisance problem was housebreaking/burglaries/theft from homes, with 44 per cent of people believing this was a problem. Other commonly named problems were dangerous/noisy driving (39 per cent), vandalism/graffiti/damage to property (27 per cent) and car theft (25 per cent).

This module looks at some of the most common crimes experienced by Australians—residential burglary and motor vehicle theft. It also examines offences such as graffiti and vandalism, which affect communities, not just individuals or households. How serious are these crimes? How do they affect us? What can we do about them?

2. Burglary and break-ins

Home burglaries and break-ins are among the most common crimes in Australia. They account for over one-fifth of all offences recorded by the police. Australia's burglary rate is also relatively high by international standards, reflecting our relative wealth and the fact that many homes contain items

that are valuable and easy to transport and re-sell—jewellery, videos, cameras, stereos and compact discs. These are the items most commonly stolen in residential burglaries. Easy access to garages and outdoor sheds also makes bicycles, tools and garden equipment popular targets.

Most urban Australians, if they have not been the victims of a burglary, would know someone who has. The odds are that most residents in an urban area will become victims of burglary at least once in their lives. Apart from financial loss and inconvenience, burglary can be devastating emotionally if you lose sentimental possessions, like a wedding ring or a retirement gift or the trophy you won in your final year of school.

Men, and young men in particular, commit most property crime—2002/03 figures from the Victorian Police show that men commit 88 per cent of vehicle theft, 89 per cent of break-and-enters and 53 per cent of shop theft in Victoria.² Queensland police data show that a significant proportion of those caught are aged between 15 and 19.

Theft quiz

Take two minutes to go through the questions on your own and then spend five minutes or so talking about your responses with the rest of the group.

At home	Yes	No
Do you leave your car unlocked:		
- in the garage/carport?		
- in the driveway?		
- parked in the front?		
Do you leave your car/house keys on the kitchen or dining table?		
Is your address identified on your:		
- car keys?		
- house keys?		
If you have keyed window locks at home, are they left unlocked when you are out?		
If you have deadlocks on your entry doors at home, do you frequently leave them unlocked when you go out?		
If you have a home alarm, do you often forget to set it before you go out?		
At work	Yes	No
Do you leave your keys on your desk or in your purse on your desk?		
Do you often forget to lock your car while you are at work?		
Shopping	Yes	No
Do you ever leave parcels on the back seat of your car while you go back to buy more items?		
Do you leave your car unlocked while you are in the shops?		
General	Yes	No
If your car has an alarm, do you forget to set it or choose not to set it?		
Do you keep your driver's licence in the glove box?		
Are your car registration papers in the glove box?		
Do you leave your mobile telephone in the car?		
Have you left valuables in your car within view of passers-by?		
Do you leave your car unlocked when:		

- paying for petrol?		
- going quickly into the shops?		

What was the response? Is your group generally careful and security conscious? If most of your answers were yes, you could reduce your risk of being burgled. Have a look at the tips at the end of the module or ask your insurance company for information on simple steps that you could take.

Burglary: What's the risk?

Unlawful entry with intent is the name the police give to the group of offences that includes burglaries, break-and-enter and stealing. It includes situations where property is intentionally stolen and situations where the unlawful entry does not result in the taking of property.

Nationally, the number of victims of unlawful entry with intent has decreased from 2002 to 2003. Western Australia recorded the highest victimisation rate in 2003 with 2,900 victims per 100,000. This rate was more than double that of Victoria, which recorded the lowest rate (1,233 victims per 100,000). All states and territories recorded decreased rates of unlawful entry with intent victimisation from 2002 to 2003.³

Some households have a greater risk of break-in than others:

- one-parent households and single-person households
- households with large amounts of motor vehicle traffic in the street
- households next to laneways and bicycle paths
- households in areas where 10 per cent or more of the population are unemployed
- households in areas where 9 per cent or more of the population are males aged 15–24 years
- households in cities or towns with a population of 8,000 or more.⁴

The rate at which break-ins are solved is quite low. Nationally, in 2003 fewer than one in 10 investigations (8 per cent) were finalised within 30 days of the police knowing about the incident.⁵

The impact: Material loss? Frustration? Or violation?

For most people, burglary is distressing. For some, it means the loss of precious possessions or items with sentimental value that can't be replaced. For others, it means the loss that comes from being uninsured or underinsured. Or the inconvenience and time involved with making a claim and waiting while goods are replaced.

But many victims of burglary say that the biggest impact is the sense of violation—of someone invading their personal, private space. It has nothing to do with material or financial loss, and it's not the same thing as feeling insecure or vulnerable.

The overall cost of burglary continues to rise even in places where the number of burglaries is fairly stable. Insurance organisations pay out millions of dollars on burglary claims and this in turn increases in the cost of every home and contents policy. In 1997–98, the insurance organisation NRMA paid out \$46.3 million on burglary claims; this increases the cost of every home contents policy by more than \$80.

Discussion starters

- Has anyone in the group ever been burgled? If yes, you might share your experience with the group. What was the most difficult thing to deal

with? What have you done since to reduce the risk of burglary in your community?

- While the figures vary in different parts of Australia, overall, burglary has increased in recent years. What do you think might explain this? What steps might help address the factors underlying burglary rates?

Reducing burglary

How big a priority?

All governments and communities face competing demands on their money and time. How might you decide if addressing burglary is a significant priority in your area? You could start by asking the following questions:

- Are our burglary rates higher than in other areas like ours?
- Is burglary in our area increasing faster than other crimes, or faster than in other similar areas?
- Is burglary costing victims a lot, and do they belong to particularly vulnerable groups?
- Is burglary causing significant public anxiety and concern?
- Is there something we can do about it?

Reducing the opportunity for break-ins

For most people, it makes sense to invest in basic home security. But alarm systems can be costly and not everyone needs them or can afford them. Police and insurance companies say that many break-ins could be prevented with a little common sense. Often the most important thing to do is use the security you have. In many burglaries, windows or doors were left unlocked, keys left under a pot plant, or notes left saying when someone will be back.

According to a former burglar, if you have valuable things you really don't want to lose, the best investments are window bars, deadlocks and, if something is really valuable to you, a safe. 'Your average thief isn't carrying safe-cutting tools with him. Most blokes see a safe, throw up their hands and go next door.'⁶

Upgrading security may make some people feel safer, but it can make others feel isolated and increase their sense of fear. Focusing on physical home security won't help you feel part of the neighbourhood or create a sense of cohesion and community in your local area.

These are some of the factors that are important to both reducing crime in an area and reducing fear of crime. Getting to know neighbours will create a more familiar community. A vigilant neighbour is probably the best form of security. This can be difficult in areas where all the adults in a household work outside the home. But in many neighbourhoods you'll find a mix of parents at home caring for children, people who work from home or students and older or unemployed people who spend more time at home.

Case study: Reducing repeat home burglaries

This National Crime Prevention partnership project will be located in hot-spot areas of Queensland and South Australia and focus on preventing repeat victimisation. This strategy has proven successful overseas in reducing the burglary rate, not just moving the crime to other areas. A variety of strategies will be used, such as making properties more difficult to break into, increasing the likelihood of detection and reducing the rewards. Police and community groups are involved, with an emphasis on police delivery in Queensland and

community-based delivery in South Australia.

The focus on repeat victimisation follows the success of similar strategies overseas. One example that is often referred to is the Kirkholt housing estate in the United Kingdom.

The additional resources at the end of the module include a case study on this program. It succeeded in preventing re-victimisation and reducing burglary rates by 75 per cent for the whole estate. There was no evidence that crime simply moved to other areas.

For further information see also: *Lightning strikes twice: Preventing repeat home burglary*. Report prepared for the Australian Government's National Crime Prevention project by the Queensland Criminal Justice Commission, 2001

Communities working together

Getting involved in local activities or organisations can help build long-term solutions to some of the problems of social isolation and alienation that contribute to crime. Programs like Neighbourhood Watch, Safety House, resident action groups and youth-led activities can all help prevent crime and are found in most parts of Australia. If nothing is happening in your area, you can always think about starting a group. There are lots of examples to look at and people to help.

Cooperation between schools, shopping centres, parents, citizens, local service providers and police has proved effective in Australia and overseas in preventing crime and strengthening communities. Some local governments have established area committees, crime prevention or community safety groups that welcome community input. Your local police may also have a community consultative committee or community safety team that you might be able to get involved with. Talking and working with others can also give you information about what problems there are in your community and what could be done to address them.

Neighbourhood Watch

Many people will have come across Neighbourhood Watch. It involves the local community and police working together to build a safer community and prevent crime. Neighbourhood Watch, Rural Watch, Business Watch, Taxi Watch, School Watch and Hospital Watch can be found in every state and territory. In 2001, for example, Neighbourhood Watch represents about 800,000 South Australians and involves about 27,000 volunteers, which is about 8.4 per cent of the state population involved in various programs.⁷

In 1999, Launceston groups ran a pilot project with Tasmania's Crime Prevention and Community Safety Council called 'Project Samaritan' to reduce the incidence of repeat burglary victimisation. Training was provided to Neighbourhood Watch volunteers and police, to help them and to assist victims of property offences. The pilot was successful and the victim support program now runs statewide. Police attending residential burglaries will advise on household security and inform victims if they are at risk of being burgled again. At the request of the victim, an accredited Neighbourhood Watch security officer will visit the victim and provide further security advice and assistance.

The idea behind Neighbourhood Watch is that if you know an area well you are likely to recognise strangers or unusual behaviour. The organisation's objectives are to:

- minimise the incidence of preventable crime

