

## CHAPTER 8

# EXPERIENCES OF BURGLARY

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Burglary has a wide range of definitions internationally. It was defined for survey respondents as incidents in which “someone breaks into your home in order to take your property.” This definition is broader than many, and allowed respondents to include cases that better fit the definition of robbery than burglary.

Exactly 10% of the households said they had experienced burglary in the last year in inner Johannesburg, and two additional cases of attempted burglary were also reported. This rate compares favourably with that found in other victim surveys (Figure 4.1). This may be partially attributable to the superior security from break-ins found in blocks of flats: few burglars were able to secure access through windows. Another factor may be the high rate of robbery in the area: acquisitive criminals do not need to adopt stealthy methods when forceful ones will do.

### **Nature of the offence**

Unfortunately, a large portion of these ‘burglaries’ were quite forceful. The crime took place after dark in only 53% of the cases, so cover of night is clearly irrelevant to these offenders. People were at home in an alarming 28% of the incidents. Not surprisingly, violence or threats or both were used in 45% of the cases in which there was anyone at home to threaten. Guns were present in almost a third of these crimes, and injuries resulted in two cases.

Thus, about 13% of these incidents were, in fact, armed robberies in the home. This type of crime combines the threat to personal safety found in a robbery with the sense of invasion of private space of a burglary into a horrific new offence. Similar crimes were found to be common in a victim survey in Cato Manor, as the lack of security of informal structures lends itself to this sort of invasion.<sup>24</sup> The legislature may want to consider the possibility of statutorily defining this crime and singling it out for especially harsh punishment.

As in Cato Manor, about 30% of the burglars in inner Johannesburg simply forced the front door open. This was probably made easier by the poor condition of many of the buildings in the area, but one wonders what the neighbours thought of what must have been a noisy entry down the passage. In 12% of the cases, a doorway that was usually locked was left open by mistake, clearly a fatal error in an area like inner Johannesburg. Most (72%) of the victims increased their security precautions after this incident, a wise decision given the deterrent effect of target hardening, but one limited by the fact that most of the respondents were tenants.

Twenty-two percent of the victims said they felt they knew who burgled their homes. This unusually high level of knowledge is attributable in part to the fact that many of these people were witnesses to the crime. Thirty percent of these knew the criminals by name, just over a quarter relied on community knowledge about their identities, and 22% relied on others who had witnessed the theft.

Based on this information, burglary seems to be a group activity, usually involving two or three people. Most were unsure of the ages of the perpetrators, but those who ventured a guess were as likely as not to place them over the age of 25. Almost twice as many people felt the criminals were part of an organised group as not. In three cases the burglars were identified as Zimbabwean, in four as Mozambican, and in 37 as South Africans.

## Reporting

Despite the fact that only 15% of the households were insured, two thirds reported this crime to the police, almost twice as many as reported robbery. This is in line with burglary reporting rates found in other surveys (Figure 4.3). Burglary reporting may be facilitated by the fact that the police can be expected to respond to the scene of the crime, which, after all, is the victim's home.

More than half of those who did not report said it was not important enough or necessary, but 26% said they did not trust the police. Almost exactly the same share cited distrust as the reason for not reporting robberies, which suggests a 'sceptical quarter' that may exist across crime victim types in inner Johannesburg.

Exactly half of those who did report were happy with the initial police response, and 83% said they received a case number. Comparing this to the

robbery data, this again suggests that a certain amount of under-recording may be built into the police statistics, perhaps as much as 15%.

## Follow-up

Just over half of those reporting the crime said they were contacted by a detective, a figure that, although higher than for robbery, is shamefully low given the nature of the offence, the potential for physical evidence, and the likelihood of witnesses. Despite this, the victims knew of arrests in ten cases (14%), which is nearly identical to the national clearance rate for this crime and might actually be higher given that, in all likelihood, not all victims were notified of arrests. These may be, in part, the result of rapid response to the crime scene.

Six of these ten victims who knew of an arrest were required to attend court, with half appearing four times. At the time of the survey, four had actually testified at trial and two cases had resulted in convictions, both carrying jail terms. The potential for reaching the national 5% conviction rate is still viable.

Property was recovered in just under 10% of the cases. Eighty percent of this was recovered in inner Johannesburg. While once again much of this may have been recovered in hot pursuit of the criminals, this does give some indication that stolen property may be retained in the inner Johannesburg area.

Despite all this, only 19% of victims were happy with the way their case was handled. Among those contacted by detectives, satisfaction was still only 38%. Most (61%) blamed the uniformed police, followed by a third blaming the detectives, and 4% blaming the prosecution. This breakdown is due in part to the fact that only half were contacted by a detective, and only a small number of cases went to trial. Among those contacted by a detective, 30% blamed the detectives, 24% the uniformed police, and 5% the prosecutors. Some of this discontent may be due to the fact that people often have unrealistic expectations of a burglary investigation, particularly with regard to dusting for fingerprints.

## Implications

The results provide some basic suggestions for dealing with burglaries in inner Johannesburg:

- In high-rise areas, ‘visible policing’ will not deter residential burglary, so crime prevention will require enhanced community involvement, target hardening, and market disruption.
- With regard to community involvement, the fact that burglars are entering through the front door by force and that 22% of the victims thought they knew who burgled them suggests that police structured cooperation between neighbours to improve building security could go a long way.
- Target hardening through household security assessments and ‘Operation ID’-type property marking could be helpful.
- Since 13% of respondents knew where to buy stolen property in their area, there is much scope for community cooperation in this regard, and market sites should be made forfeit to the state or administratively closed.
- A high level of dissatisfaction (81%) despite a 10% property recovery rate suggests that the public needs education about the nature of burglary investigation and the realistic chances of recovering property and making arrests.
- As with robbery, there is a need to win the trust of the ‘sceptical quarter’ and to improve detective follow-up rates.
- The alarming crime of household robbery needs to be addressed, possibly by enhanced penalties under statute.