

SPRING INTO SECURITY

By Community Relations Officer Jeremy Winge

With warmer months just around the corner, spring cleaning isn't far away. Whether you want to clear some of the winter clutter or just feel like a change in scenery, spring cleaning can make it happen. Now is the perfect time to clean out the garage, basement and/or attic. It is also the perfect time to evaluate your home's security.

By far, the most common threat to your home is burglary. According to the FBI, a burglary occurs somewhere in the United States every 15.4 seconds. By definition, the crime of burglary is a non-confrontational property crime that occurs when you are not at home. However, becoming a burglary victim can leave a family feeling vulnerable and violated. To avoid becoming a burglary victim, it is important to first gain an understanding of who commits burglary and why.

The majority of home and apartment burglaries occur during the daytime when most people are away at work or school. The summer months of July and August have the most burglaries; February has the fewest. Burglaries are committed most often by young males under 25 years of age looking for items that are small, expensive, and can be easily converted to cash. Favorite items are cash, jewelry, guns, iPods, laptop computers, video game systems, DVD players, CDs and other small electronic devices. Quick cash is needed for living expenses and drugs. Statistics tell us that 70% of burglars use some amount force to enter a dwelling, but their preference is to gain easy access through an open door or window. Ordinary household tools like screwdrivers, channel-lock pliers, small pry bars, and small hammers are most often used by burglars. Burglars continue to flourish because police can only solve about 13% of all reported burglaries and rarely catch the thief in the act.

Although home burglaries may seem random in occurrence, they actually involve a selection process. The burglar's selection process is simple: choose an unoccupied home with the easiest access, the greatest amount of cover, and with the best escape routes. When people think of protecting their homes, they often think of fancy expensive security systems with lots of bells and whistles. That is certainly an option, but there are measures you can take that won't break the bank, too. Also, depending on your home and neighborhood, you may not need the most expensive system.

Home security isn't just about your own home, either. Determining whether you're at a significant risk of being burglarized involves evaluating your neighborhood. Though incidents can happen to anyone, some neighborhoods are certainly more at risk than others. Installing a burglar alarm can certainly help make you less of a target, but the best strategy may be to start a neighborhood watch. Following is a list of suggestions to minimize your risk by making your home unattractive to potential burglars.

Doors and Locks

The first step is to *harden the target*, or make your home more difficult to enter. Remember, the burglar will simply bypass your home if it requires too much effort or requires more skill and tools than s/he possesses. Most burglars enter via the front, back, or garage doors. Experienced burglars know that the garage door is usually the weakest point of entry, followed by the back door. The garage and back doors also provide the most cover. Burglars know to look inside your car for keys and other valuables, so keep your car locked, even when parked inside your garage. Use high-quality, Grade-1 or Grade-2 locks on exterior doors to resist twisting, prying, and lock-picking attempts. A quality deadbolt lock will have a beveled casing to inhibit the use of channel-lock pliers used to shear off lock cylinder pins. A quality door knob-in-lock set will have a 'dead latch' mechanism to prevent slipping the lock with a shim or credit card.

- Use a solid core or metal door for all entrance points
- Use a quality, heavy-duty, deadbolt lock with a one-inch throw bolt
- Use a quality, heavy-duty, knob-in-lock set with a dead-latch mechanism
- Use a heavy-duty, four-screw, strike plate with 3-inch screws to penetrate into a wooden door frame
- Use a wide-angle 160° peephole mounted no higher than 58 inches

These items are available in most quality hardware stores and home improvement centers and are definitely worth the extra expense.

Sliding-Glass Patio Doors

Sliding glass doors are secured by latches, not locks. They are vulnerable to being forced open from the outside because of these inherently defective latch mechanisms. This can be easily prevented by inserting a wooden dowel or stick into the track to prevent or limit movement. Other available blocking devices include metal, fold-down blocking devices called "charley bars" and various track-blockers that can be screwed down. Place highly visible decals on the glass door near the latch mechanism that indicates that an alarm system, a dog, or block watch/operation identification is in place. Burglars dislike alarm systems and definitely big barking dogs.

- Use a secondary blocking device on all sliding glass doors
- Keep the latch mechanism in good condition and properly adjusted
- Keep sliding door rollers in good condition and properly adjusted
- Use anti-lift devices such as through-the-door pins or upper track screws
- Use highly visible alarm decals, beware of dog decals or block watch decals

Windows

Windows are left unlocked and open at a much higher rate than doors. An open window, visible from the street or alley, may be the sole reason for your home to be selected by a burglar. Ground floor windows are more susceptible to break-ins for

obvious reasons. Upper floor windows become attractive if they can be accessed from a stairway, tree, fence, or by climbing on balconies. Windows have latches, not locks, and therefore should have secondary blocking devices to prevent sliding them open from the outside. Inexpensive wooden dowels and sticks work well for horizontal sliding windows and through-the-frame pins work well for vertical sliding windows. For ventilation, block the window open no more than six inches and make sure you can't reach in from the outside and remove the blocking device or reach through and unlock the door.

- Secure all accessible windows with secondary blocking devices
- Block accessible windows open no more than 6 inches for ventilation
- Make sure someone cannot reach through an open window and unlock the door
- Make sure someone cannot reach inside the window and remove the blocking device
- Use anti-lift devices to prevent window from being lifted out
- Use crime prevention or alarm decals on ground accessible windows

Be a Good Neighbor

Good neighbors should look out for each other. Get to know your neighbors on each side of your home and the three directly across the street. Invite them into your home, communicate often, and establish trust. Good neighbors will watch out for your home or apartment when you are away, if you ask them. They can report suspicious activity to the police or to you while you are away. Between them, good neighbors can see to it that normal services continue in your absence by allowing vendors to mow your lawn or remove snow. Good neighbors can pick up your mail, newspapers, handbills, and they can inspect the outside or inside of your home periodically to see that all is well. Good neighbors will occasionally park in your driveway to give the appearance of occupancy while you are on vacation.

Allowing a neighbor to have a key solves the problem of hiding a key outside the door. Experienced burglars know to look for hidden keys in planter boxes, under doormats, and above the ledge. Requiring a service vendor to see your neighbor to retrieve and return your house key will send the message that someone is watching. This neighborhood watch technique sets up what is called *territoriality* which means that your neighbors will take ownership and responsibility for what occurs in your mini-neighborhood. This concept works in both single-family home communities and on apartment properties. This practice helps deter burglaries and other crimes in a big way. Of course, for this to work, you must reciprocate and offer the same services.

- Get to know all your adjacent neighbors
- Invite them into your home and establish trust
- Agree to watch out for each other's homes
- Do small tasks for each other to improve territoriality
- While on vacation, pick up each other's newspapers and flyers
- Offer to occasionally park your car in your neighbor's driveway

- Return the favor and communicate often

Lighting

Interior lighting is necessary to show signs of life and activity inside a residence at night. A darkened home night-after-night sends the message to burglars that you are away on a trip. Light timers are inexpensive and can be found everywhere. They should be used on a daily basis, not just when you're away. In this way, you set up a routine that your neighbors can observe and will allow them to become suspicious when your normally lighted home becomes dark. Typically, you want to use light timers near the front and back windows with the curtains closed. The pattern of lights turning on and off should simulate actual occupancy. It's also comforting not to have to enter a dark residence when you return home. The same light timers can be used to turn on radios or television sets to further enhance the illusion of occupancy.

Exterior lighting is also very important, and it becomes critical if you must park in a common area parking lot or underground garage and need to walk to your front door. The purpose of good lighting is to allow you to see if a threat or suspicious person is lurking in your path. If you can see a potential threat in advance, then you have the choice and chance to avoid it. Exterior lighting needs to be bright enough for you to see 100-feet, and it helps if you can identify colors. Good lighting is definitely a deterrent to criminals because they don't want to be seen or identified.

- Use interior light timers to establish a pattern of occupancy
- Exterior lighting should allow 100 feet of visibility
- Use good lighting along the pathway and at your door
- Use light timers or photo-cells to turn lights on and off
- Use infra-red motion sensor lights on the rear of single family homes

Alarm Systems

Alarm systems definitely have a place in a home security plan, and they are effective if used properly. The reason alarms systems deter burglaries is because they increase the potential and fear of being caught and arrested by the police. The deterrent value comes from the alarm company lawn sign and from the alarm decals on the windows. Home and apartment burglars will usually bypass a property with visible alarm signs and will go to another property without such a sign. Some people with alarm systems feel that these signs and decals are unsightly and will not display them. The risk here is that an uninformed burglar might break a window or door and grab a few quick items before the police can respond. Also, don't write your alarm passcode on or near the alarm keypad.

Home alarms, like car alarms, are generally ignored except for a brief glance. However, if you have established and nurtured your neighborhood watch buddy system, you will experience a genuine concern by your neighbor. It is not unusual to have a neighbor wait for the police. The greatest challenge in getting to this level of

neighborhood participation is taking the first step. You can get help by calling Community Relations Officer Jeremy Winge at the Monona Police Department. Officer Winge can help you initiate a watch program in your neighborhood. Or, just invite your adjacent neighbors to your home for coffee and begin the information exchange. You'll be amazed how the process runs on automatic from there!

- Alarm systems with visible signage are effective deterrents
- Alarm systems should be properly installed, programmed, and maintained
- Alarm systems need to have an audible horn or bell in order to be effective
- Make sure your alarm response call list is up-to-date
- Instruct your neighbor how to respond to an alarm bell

Home Safes

Since the price of good home safes is falling, having a safe in your home is a wise investment. Home safes are designed to keep the “smash-and-grab” burglar, nosy kids, dishonest babysitter or housekeeper from gaining access to important documents and personal property. Home safes need to be anchored into the floor or permanent shelving.

- Use the safe everyday so it becomes routine
- Protect the safe code and change it occasionally
- Install it away from the master bedroom or closet

Operation Identification

This is a program where you engrave your drivers' license, not your social security number, on televisions, stereos, computers, and small electronic appliances. This is suggested so you can be identified and located if your stolen items are recovered. I suggest that you go way beyond this step.

I recommend that you photograph your valuables in their locations around your home and make a list of the makes, models, and serial numbers. This is very important proof when filing insurance claims. You should keep this list in a safety deposit box or with a relative for safe keeping. Keep receipts of the larger items in case you need to prove the value of the items for insurance purposes. Beyond that, I recommend that you photocopy important documents and the contents of your wallet. You will be thankful that you took these steps if your home is ever destroyed by fire or flood, is ransacked, or if your wallet is lost or stolen.

- Identify your valuables by engraving your drivers' license number
- Photograph and record the serial numbers of all valuables
- Photocopy the contents of your wallet and other documents
- Store the copies in a safe deposit box or with a relative