



Typical Burglaries in WA: Decision Making and Processes

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In late 2005 a WA-based, interview-style study was conducted to explore local burglary (Ferrante & Clare, 2006). This research involved voluntary interviews with incarcerated offenders in Perth metropolitan prisons and resulted in 235 completed records. All offenders interviewed had recorded at least one conviction for a burglary offence in the last five years. The demographic details of the offenders who participated in this research are displayed in Table 1. In addition to inquiring about what offenders took during their most recent burglaries and how these goods entered the local stolen goods markets this research also asked about the decision-making involved with committing burglary and the general process offenders adopted to complete this activity. Specifically, this bulletin summarises aspects of the findings from questions regarding the mode of transport offenders used, the involvement of accomplices, and offenders' willingness to enter occupied premises. Some implications for crime reduction resulting from these findings are also discussed.

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The Use of Vehicles

The relative frequencies with which offenders utilised various forms of transport to commit their most recent burglaries are displayed in Table 2. As can be seen, walking (44%) or using a car (46%) were the most common means by which offenders travelled to their most recent burglary. Interestingly, of those offenders who used a car, only one-third admitted to it being a stolen vehicle. This suggests that in two-thirds of burglaries in which a car was used, offenders either used their own vehicle or one that belonged to someone who consented to its use.

There were substantial variations in the mode of transport based on the demographic characteristics of offenders. Cars were the predominant means of transport for adult offenders, for non-Indigenous offenders, and for those who reported high frequency drug use. In contrast, walking was the most common mode of transport for young offenders, Indigenous offenders and those with low drug use. There did not appear to be any substantial difference between high- and low-frequency offenders in their 'choice' of transport. A similar proportion of both groups walked to their most recent burglary. However, slightly more high-frequency offenders used a vehicle.

Disclaimer: The findings and opinions expressed in this report are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the policies or views of the government departments who supported the research.

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Demographic characteristic	Sub-category	N	% N
Age at recent offence	Adult offender (21 yrs +)	141	60.0%
	Young offender	94	40.0%
Indigenous status	Indigenous	122	51.9%
	Non-Indigenous	113	48.1%
Offending frequency	High frequency	132	56.2%
	Low frequency	103	43.8%
Illicit drug-use frequency/ severity	Frequent &/or severe use	139	59.1%
	No frequent &/or severe drug use	96	40.9%

Table 1. Offender Demographic Profile (N = 235).

once during their burglary careers and more than one-third of respondents admitted to knowingly breaking into an occupied premise at some time. These differences highlight the cumulative effect of asking questions such as, "Have you ever..." as distinct from, "What did you do last time...", with lifetime-based questions having the potential to over-estimate the true incidence (and therefore, risk) of offender behaviours.

The Involvement of Accomplices

Table 3 displays the relative frequencies at which offenders committed their most recent burglaries with accomplices. As can be seen, just under half of the offenders interviewed reported operating with accomplices during their most recent burglary. Further analysis across the offender demographic characteristics revealed that: (a) adult offenders were more likely than young offenders to work alone, (b) Indigenous offenders were more likely than non-Indigenous offenders to work alone or in groups of three or more, and (c) high frequency offenders were more likely to work with one accomplice, while low frequency offenders were more likely to offend alone. There is research evidence to suggest that the decision to operate alone may be due to reluctance on behalf of some offenders to share the things they steal (Wright & Decker, 1994).

Entering Occupied Premises

Table 4 displays the relative frequency at which offenders knowingly entered an occupied house: (a) during their most recent burglary, and (b) ever during their burglary careers. As can be seen, one in five respondents admitted to entering occupied premises during their most recently burglary. Of these, almost half admitted to knowing the premises were occupied at the time. Thus, approximately 10% of respondents knowingly entered occupied premises when they committed their most recent burglary.¹ In contrast, over two-thirds of offenders admitted entering an occupied residence at least

For those offenders who did break into an occupied premise during their most recent burglary the following demographic effects were observed: (a) no obvious differences between young and older offenders, (b) Indigenous offenders were more likely to report knowingly entering an occupied residence (however, there were a large proportion of non-Indigenous offenders who declined to respond to this question), and (c) high-frequency and high-drug-use offenders were more likely to have knowingly entered an occupied residence. When the career burglary behaviour was examined it was found that young offenders were

Mode of transport	N	% N	% Stolen
Walked	103	43.8%	
Bike/motor bike	8	3.4%	37.5%
Car	108	46.0%	31.5%
Van/truck	2	0.9%	50.0%
Taxi	3	1.3%	
Bus	3	1.3%	
Train	3	1.3%	
Other - specify	3	1.3%	
Not stated	2	0.9%	
Total	235	100.0%	

Table 2. Frequency of Use of the Various Mode of Transport (with % Stolen Where Applicable) to Access the Most Recent Location the Offender Committed a Burglary.

more likely than older offenders to report knowingly breaking into an occupied house at some stage. The career results for Indigenous offenders, high-frequency offenders, and high drug-use offenders paralleled the findings for the most recently committed burglary.

Implications for Crime Prevention

From the findings about the modes of transport utilised to travel to commit burglary it appears that up to one-third of offenders are using cars that are *not* stolen. Based on this trend traffic-based operations may make an effective contribution to efforts to curtail burglary. Auto-plate technology, which has been trialled and is available in WA, could be used to apprehend burglars while en route to the places they dispose of stolen goods. Such operations could be mounted in areas with high burglary rates, which would maximise the likelihood of detecting such activity. As there is evidence that burglars, fences, and drug-dealers operate within close range of each other, such traffic-based operations could also provide intelligence about local networks. Moreover, it is possible that highly visible operations such as these would inhibit the movement of offenders and their associates in and around target neighbourhoods further reducing levels of burglary (albeit for a short period of time). In other words, traffic-based operations supplement other, more direct efforts to reduce property crime and the illicit drug trade.

With respect to the use of accomplices it is worth noting here the findings from Hodgson and Costello (2006) which suggest that novice offenders who commit their initial burglary offence with equally inexperienced co-offenders do *not* go on to prolonged burglary careers. Novices who either offend alone or are accompanied by experienced burglars are more likely to have longer offending careers. This has important implications to be linked with the variation in re-offending as a result of 'ease of selling' the proceeds of early career burglaries, with inexperienced offenders more likely to cease burglary if they experience difficulty in selling the goods that they steal.

From these findings it is unclear if young, Indigenous, high-frequency, and high drug-use offenders are 'more daring' during burglary by knowingly entering occupied premises, or if the converse true and low-frequency offenders and low-use drug users are actively avoiding occupied premises. Regardless of the decision-making process in operation, however, additional aspects of this research demonstrated that various target hardening measures can be applied that *do* influence offenders' target-selection. Of

Involvement of accomplices	N	% N
None, offender was alone	125	53.2%
1 other person	61	26.0%
2 other people	28	11.9%
More than 2 other people	20	8.5%
Not stated	1	0.4%
Total	235	100.0%

Table 3. Frequency of Use of Accomplices for All Offenders during the Most Recently Committed Burglary.

four target-hardening measures inquired about (alarms, dogs, deadlocks and property ID marking), alarms appeared to have the greatest deterrent effect, with almost half of the respondents claiming they were deterred by this factor. The presence of dogs also deterred burglars, with more than 40% of respondents claiming this would put them off to some degree. Property-marking and deadlocks also offered some resistance to burglars. The cumulative effect of these measures is unknown, but it is reasonable to assume there is a concomitant increase in deterrence as a greater number of target-hardening alternatives are in operation. As such, continued education that emphasises to the public the merit in using the target hardening measures may assist in reducing the incidence of burglary.

Someone was home?	Most recent burglary			All burglaries ('ever')		
	N	% N	% Knew occupied	N	% N	% Knew occupied
Yes	50	21.3%	48.0%	162	68.9%	51.2%
No	99	42.1%	-	72	30.6%	-
Not stated	86	36.3%	-	1	0.4%	-
Total	235	100.0%		235	100.0%	

Table 4. Frequency of Breaking In When Someone Was Home (and If It Was Known Someone Was Home) for All Offenders at their Most Recent Burglary and Across All Burglaries they Committed.

References

- Ferrante, A. & Clare, J. (2006). *Known burglars and the stolen goods market in Western Australia: Research Report*. Crime Research Centre, University of Western Australia.
- Hodgson, B., & Costello, A. (2006). The prognostic significance of burglary in company. *European Journal of Criminology*, 3(1), 115-119.
- Wright, R., & Decker, S.H. (1994). *Burglars on the job: Streetlife and residential breakins*. Boston: Northeastern University Press.
- ¹ As nearly 37% of respondents declined to answer this question caution should be exercised in interpreting these results.

This bulletin highlights aspects of the findings from research conducted by the Crime Research Centre at The University of Western Australia and funded by the WA Office of Crime Prevention (OCP). This research examined stealing, burglary, and stolen goods markets in WA and was designed to assist in the development of appropriate policy and policing responses and to complement the joint OCP/WA Police initiatives, the State Burglary Reduction Taskforce and the development of a State Stolen Goods and Stealing Strategy.

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