BURGLAR DECISION MAKING

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My regret in completing this work is that I no longer appreciate the ambience or aesthetics of residential architecture, landscaping, and town planning. All I perceive are prospect and refuge areas, natural surveillance attributes, entry points, and other deterrent and attractive break and enter qualities.

Finally, I would like to express the deepest appreciation to my partner Victoria and our children – Anderson, Augustin and Mia.
ABSTRACT

This thesis examines how burglars select a target and carry out a crime. The four research questions addressed by the two studies conducted for this thesis are:

1. What are the processes used by burglars to select a target, break in, steal, and distribute the proceeds?
2. What are the crucial decision making cues used to select a target?
3. What is the impact of various cues, cue alternatives, cue order and combinations selected on target attractiveness in a controlled situation?
4. Does age or experience interact with the effect of any cues?

The results furnish discussion and increase the understanding and prevention of break and enter (B&E). The research for this thesis was conducted in two studies. For Study One interviews were conducted with fifty persons who attend a methadone clinic. Participants were past heroin users who financed their drug use through the commission of break and enter. Semi-structured interviews were conducted that covered their drug use and criminal involvement. From these interviews a list of seventeen cues was developed – cue 1 (dog), cue 2 (lighting), cue 3 (alarm), cue 4 (occupancy - lights/tv/radio), cue 5 (occupancy - car in driveway), cue 6 (affluence), cue 7 (doors/windows), cue 8 (locks), cue 9 (garage), cue 10 (fence), cue 11 (garden), cue 12 (location), cue 13 (people in the street), cue 14 (neighbourhood watch), cue 15 (weather), cue 16 (inside information) and cue 17 (street type). Participants used these seventeen cues to determine the vulnerability of a target.

For Study Two a computer program was developed, in which these seventeen cues were arranged in various combinations, across twenty case studies. The computer program allowed subjects to access as much information about a case study as they needed to make a decision about its attractiveness as a burglary target. A new sample of ninety-six burglars were asked to view the twenty case studies and give
each target a rating from ‘0’ (not a B&E opportunity) to ‘100’ (a definite B&E opportunity).

Over the twenty case studies, the subjects only accessed one third of the available information to make a decision. The lower the final rating for a case study the fewer cues were selected. Subjects were quickly deterred if the first one or two selections revealed deterrent alternatives. In contrast, if the initial selections revealed attractive alternatives the subjects were hard to deter even if subsequent cue selections revealed only deterrent alternatives. Four cues – cue 1 (dog), cue 3 (alarm), cue 13 (people in the street) and cue 16 (inside information) – accounted for 91.77% of all first selections. Six cues – cue 1 (dog), 3 (alarm), cue 4 (occupancy - lights/tv/radio), cue 5 (occupancy - car in driveway), cue 13 (people in the street) and cue 16 (inside information) – accounted for 67.8% of all selections made. Clearly these six cues are very important to offenders and they should be closely examined in any prevention initiative. Results revealed that on 282 occasions subjects viewed only one cue then made their decision based on this one piece of information. The most common single cue was reliable inside information that there was a large amount of cash inside the house or when a good alarm was present.

Decision trees were developed which graphically trace the selections of subjects and the ratings given after each selection. The trees showed that subjects reached different conclusions from the same case study because they could select different cues. The selection of different cues from the same case study led to great variation in subsequent cue selections. The decision trees confirmed the earlier finding that subjects are much harder to deter when the first one or two selections had attractive alternatives even if subsequent selections had deterrent alternatives.

Results of linear regressions revealed that every cue was significant as predictor of final rating at least twice, however three cues – cue 3 (alarm), cue 12 (location) and cue 16 (inside information) – were significant as predictors ten or more times. The 96 subjects were divided into four groups on the basis of age (young and old) and experience (experienced and inexperienced). The young and inexperienced group
used an average of 188.3 cues across the twenty case studies, whereas the older and experienced group used an average of 43.8 cues. Older and experienced subjects were harder to deter, compared to younger and inexperienced subjects. As experience increased fewer cues were needed to reach a decision.

The results showed that the variation in final rating for each case study was explained by a few cues. For example, in case study 16 the Adjusted R Square with all seventeen factors entered was .945. With only six cues as predictors the Adjusted R Square reduced slightly to .939. This shows that although cues are mentioned in the literature and were selected by subjects in this study they were often ineffectual and did not assist in explaining the final rating. The two most effective prevention measures were the deterrent alternatives for cue 3 (alarm) and cue 4 (occupancy - lights/tv/radio). The two most influential attractive alternatives were for cue 12 (location; house is located on a corner block) and cue 16 (inside information; from a reliable source you are told there could be a large amount of cash kept in the house).

Overall, the linear models with interactions showed that the inexperienced subjects’ decision making was more volatile and fluctuated to a greater extent than the experienced subjects’ decision making. When continually attractive information was received the inexperienced subjects’ ratings climbed higher than did the experienced subjects. When deterrent information was received the negative effect on the inexperienced subjects’ ratings was greater than the effect on experienced subjects. Experience increases burglars’ skills and abilities but it also improves their capacity to weigh up information in a more reasoned manner. The results revealed that experienced subjects have probably developed a level of skill to the extent that the deterrent alternatives for many cues have become ineffectual. The experienced subjects have developed strategies to overcome many deterrents. The decision making of the experienced subjects was clearly more sophisticated and considered.

The main theoretical finding of this thesis is that research will only produce incomplete findings if it concentrates on place and situation to the neglect of the offender and the antecedents and attributes they bring to a crime. The influence of
age and experience on decision making is of such consequence that it must be considered to maximise the prevention of crime. Age and experience have individual and combined influences on cue selection and interpretation.
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CHAPTER 1: THE AIMS OF THE STUDY AND AN OVERVIEW OF THE THESIS

INTRODUCTION

Ekblom (1997) proposed that the best way to design a crime prevention initiative was to ‘think thief’. That is, the researcher needs to examine how an offender surveys an area, weighs up information, makes choices and selects a target. The purpose of this thesis is to ‘think burglar’ by examining burglar decision making, the act of break and enter (B&E) and how burglars go about their task. In fulfilling this purpose this thesis specifically explores how a burglar selects a house.

This thesis is an examination of burglar decision making. However, other factors can influence the geographic pattern of burglary. Features of the built environment such as roads, or natural barriers such as rivers or escarpments, can influence the flow of people, including potential burglars. These influences may explain offender patterns at a comprehensive level, but they do not explain why one unoccupied house in a street is burgled and other unoccupied houses are untouched. Some of the literature reviewed for this thesis is focussed on these influences because they have a large-scale explanatory role. However, this thesis is primarily centred on decision making, as this is final and crucial step of the target selection process. Newman (1997) has stated that to fully explain why a particular offender chose a specific target over others one needs to tie together motivation, disposition and the final act of accomplishing the task.

The literature also includes insights into other influences. Drug use is often mentioned as a behaviour that can influence decision making. Heroin use has a strong relationship with B&E so some of this thesis addresses this relationship.
B&E was chosen for this study because it is a common crime by any system of counting, and it can have deleterious effects on victims. B&E is a crime that has universally low detection and prosecution rates using traditional policing and criminal justice methods. More information on how a burglar selects, or rejects, a target will better inform authorities and home owners about how to prevent B&E.

Two theories provide the foundation for this thesis. They are the rational choice perspective and routine activity theory. The rational choice perspective (Clarke and Cornish, 1985; Cook, 1980; Cornish and Clarke, 1986; Wilson and Herrenstein, 1985) assumes that an offender's behaviour is purposive, as they endeavour to advance themselves by criminal pursuits. This involves the making of decisions and choices, however basic in formulation they may be. A decision is constrained by time limits, by an offender's cognitive capabilities, and by the accessibility of appropriate information. In other words, offenders exhibit limited rather than normative rationality. The use of the word rational in rational choice perspective means an optimisation of expected utility, not maximisation, (or minimisation) as in a conventional economic model. Optimisation means that the process is internally defined and unique to each offender.

Routine activity theory (Cohen and Felson, 1979; Felson, 1995; Felson and Cohen, 1980) states that when the three elements of likely offender, suitable target, and place converge there is a greater likelihood that a crime will occur. Three variables – handler, guardian and manager – can exert control on these elements to minimise the chances of a crime occurring. Routine activity theory contends that while changes in the crime rate may be related to changes in the supply of offenders, the controllers that affect the frequency of convergence of three elements may also explain changes. The line of reasoning of this thesis is that the actual physical characteristics of a home are the most important capable guardians and residents are the most effective place managers in terms of B&E. Whether residents are present or not, the home, its surrounds and the streetscape are the best protectors against B&E.
DEFICIENCIES IN PREVIOUS RESEARCH

There are four main deficiencies in much of the previous research on B&E decision making. The first deficiency in many previous studies that have tried to examine how a burglar chooses a target is that they have been methodologically unsophisticated. Studies that have tried to specifically examine burglar decision making have often kept environmental cues isolated from each other. For example, subjects are often asked to rate the likely deterrent or attractive influence of the presence of a cue, such as an alarm. Then subjects may be asked about the likely influence of a vicious dog. Cues are not examined in combinations. For example, the research does not test whether the effect of the presence of a deterrent cue such as an alarm could be overcome by the presence of many other attractive cues.

The second weakness in previous studies is that they often measure one effect of a cue. For example, subjects are asked the likely effect of the presence of an alarm. They are not asked about the effect of no alarm. Many cues can have varied effects due to their presence or absence. There is no incorporation of different alternatives for each cue.

The third deficiency in previous studies is that the subject is not allowed to choose, or not choose, information. For example, subjects are presented with numerous cues in succession, and are asked for each cue's likely effect. The assumption on the part of a researcher is that every subject considers all of this information.

The final deficiency in prior research is the failure to incorporate interactions between offender characteristics and situational variables. For example, the literature reveals that age and level of experience are two important influences on decision making generally, but few studies have considered their impact on burglar decision making.

The research for this thesis addresses these deficiencies and omissions. The design allows the examination of combinations of cues. Different alternatives for each cue