REPEAT AND NEAR-REPEAT BURGLARY VICTIMIZATION IN ROCHESTER, NY

LITERATURE REVIEW: MOTIVATIONS TO COMMIT BURGLARY AND TARGET SELECTION

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Michelle Comeau
Center for Public Safety Initiatives
Rochester Institute of Technology
mjcgcj@rit.edu

John Klofas, Ph.D.
Director of Center for Public Safety Initiatives
Rochester Institute of Technology
John.Klofas@rit.edu
A burglary occurs when an offender, “...knowingly enters or remains unlawfully in a building with the intent to commit a crime therein”\(^1\). Although it does not require it, one common feature of burglary is theft\(^2\). Burglary was the second most commonly reported Part I crime and accounted for nearly a quarter (23.4\%) of all property offenses committed within the United States in 2012\(^3\). Estimated average dollar loss per burglary was $2,240, with a total loss estimated at $4.7 billion\(^4\). Just shy of 13\% of burglaries (12.7\%) were cleared by arrest or exceptional means in the United States in 2012\(^5\).

The United States National Crime Victimization Survey indicated that same year that an estimated 3.7 million burglaries occurred throughout the country \((n = 3,764,540)\)\(^6\). Of those, 2.1 million were reported to police \((n = 2,103,787)\), which indicates that just over half of all estimated burglaries to occur within the United States are reported (55\%)\(^7\).

The following paper serves as an introduction to burglary research. In this paper we focus on the motivations to commit burglary and why certain targets are selected. This paper is in no way intended as comprehensive; rather it provides a primer on the topic. For additional information please review the reference page.

**Motivations to Commit Burglary**

*Money.* Money routinely is cited as the greatest motivating factor driving offending\(^8\). In a landmark survey of over one hundred active offenders, it was found that over 90\% burglarized when they needed money\(^9\). More often than not, this money goes towards maintaining a lifestyle known as “life as party\(^{10}.\)”

*Life as Party.* Offenders are disproportionately young, male, and chronically poor\(^{11}\). They want a lifestyle that many young men may want, but few can afford: one of hedonistic pleasure\(^{12}\). This lifestyle is typified by an emphasis on entertainment (e.g., drinking, drug use, gambling,
women, and status items) and emphasizes the pursuit of entertainment to the detriment of obligations and commitments external to the party lifestyle\textsuperscript{13}.

Given the emphasis on the non-stop pursuit of pleasure, life as party conflicts with and erodes an individual’s ability to maintain a life within the dominant culture. The heightened importance of self-sufficiency hampers an individual’s adherence to legitimate employment. Legitimate work may seem an abhorrent alternative to burglary in that it is poorly paid, the work structure deprives an individual of autonomy and independence, and the offender would have obligations to meet\textsuperscript{14}.

The behavior promoted by life as party also depletes legitimate economic employment opportunities\textsuperscript{15}. With this depletion, an offender may turn to legitimate social ties for financial support; however, borrowing money from individuals is only a short-term solution that does not allow an offender to maintain the lifestyle he desires\textsuperscript{16}. Further, the unreliable behaviors of a person brought on by non-stop party pursuits make him unreliable to repay these loans, which in turn sever many of the legitimate social ties he once had\textsuperscript{17}.

Individuals in a life as party subculture may turn to crimes like burglary, initially, to continue the party\textsuperscript{18}. The party life is enjoyed in the company of others through group alcohol or drug use and the ostentatious display of wealth\textsuperscript{19}. To offend, then, is to maintain appearances of wealth, prosperity, and status\textsuperscript{20}.

With life as party’s emphasis on group drug and alcohol use, many develop addiction. The substances once used socially for recreation instead become desired primarily to stave of the inevitable withdrawal symptoms\textsuperscript{21}. As addiction takes hold and financial and social capital is depleted, the reasons for burglary shift. An offender cannot turn to legitimate resources to maintain the party lifestyle or withdraw from it, as these resources have largely been depleted, so
instead he turns toward increasingly risky ventures: once a remote possibility, getting caught becomes an inevitability.\textsuperscript{22}

\textit{Sustenance.} While burglars say that they steal for basic sustenance (e.g., food, shelter, bills, and clothing), any perceived nobility in this theft is suspect: once basic needs were met the majority of offenders spend the remaining funds on status items or drugs.\textsuperscript{23}

\textit{The Sneaky Thrill.} Criminologist Jack Katz argues that crime is seductive: that some, especially younger offenders, are motivated to burgle by the intrinsic psychological rewards of crime.\textsuperscript{24} A burglary may perceive the act as a euphoric demonstration of competence, his control over his surroundings and environment, and his ability to play the system and win.\textsuperscript{25} To these persons, the stolen goods matter less than the act itself; it is important to recall, however, that the number of offenders motivated by psychological rewards are dwarfed by the number of offenders motivated for extrinsic reasons.\textsuperscript{26}

\textbf{Target Selection}

A burglary will not occur unless an offender considers a location a suitable target for victimization.\textsuperscript{27} Multiple factors determine the perceived suitability of a target, including:

- **Familiarity** – most offenders do not travel very far to offend.\textsuperscript{28} Although this may increase their risk of being identified, it is advantageous for several reasons. Committing a crime can be stressful, and familiarity with surroundings can reduce stress.\textsuperscript{29} Limited access and transportation can restrict movement out of familiar locations, as too can the fear of appearing out of place (most offending is intra-racial).\textsuperscript{30}

- **Occupancy** – occupancy is routinely cited as the most important factor in considering target selection: burglars prefer unoccupied targets.\textsuperscript{31} Burglaries committed on unoccupied homes (e.g., houses vacant during the day or for long periods of time) are most likely to be
successful. Occupancy proxies (e.g., dogs, alarms, a vehicle in the driveway) can sometimes deter burglars. A small percentage of burglars do not mind occupancy – if residents are asleep – as it means that valuable items are certain to be within the home; yet such burglaries are risky, as residents may successfully thwart the offense.

Visibility or Surveillability – the extent to which an offender can see or is seen from a location is important to consider: visibility increases the chance of witnesses. For this reason many burglars tend to avoid well-kept neighborhoods with elderly residents, or enter dwellings from the rear.

Seclusion – seclusion is a component of visibility. Examples of seclusion include dwellings that are spread far apart, those surrounded by vacant properties, locations on a corner or in a cul de sac, and those with cover (e.g., dwellings located in the woods or with concealing architecture). Offenders also consider light levels. In the day, properties with cover are targeted to reduce visibility. When night descends, the darkness makes cover less important, altering the properties that are targeted.

Accessibility – if a property is accessible it poses little challenge in its entry. Dwellings can be accessed most easily through windows and doors, with or without the use of force.

Vulnerability – Inexpensive and easily broken window and door locks, a lack of security devices, and careless upkeep of security features are all linked with an increase in burglary risk. Conversely, security doors and storm windows, dogs, and alarms have all been cited as deterrents to entry.

Potential Rewards – no matter how suitable a dwelling is otherwise, if it does not appear to contain anything worth stealing it will likely not be targeted. The size and condition of a home, its yard size and maintenance, and the car in the driveway all are indicators of
wealth\textsuperscript{45}. These external cues indicate internal wealth; despite this, many of the most commonly stolen items (e.g., jewelry, money, weapons, and electronics) may be found in homes across all economic strata\textsuperscript{46}.

**Conclusion & Future Papers**

The above pages have served to provide an introduction into literature on the motivation to commit burglary and what offenders look for when selecting targets. In future papers, we will turn towards the topic of repeat and near-repeat victimization – particularly burglary. This will culminate in an examination of repeat and near-repeat burglary within Rochester, NY, across five-years’ of data.
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