Book Review

Residential burglary: How the urban environment and our lifestyles play a contributing role

George Rengert and Elizabeth Groff

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This third edition printing of *Residential Burglary* is a complete examination of the crime, the criminals and the victims of burglary in the greater Philadelphia region. As the title suggests, the emphasis of this work is the further exploration of how environment and lifestyle act as contextual influences on the burglary process. As such, the reader is given the opportunity to discover how situational contexts and environmental peculiarities influence the decisions of different types of burglars. One of the first stated goals is to demonstrate the many differences that exist among burglars with a range of professionalism from the low skill, smash and grab burglar to the highly skilled career burglars. By presenting burglary through the environmental perspective on crime, Rengert and Groff make a very interesting case for the overall utility of environmental criminology and the theories housed within. And while other well known works have given criminologists a fascinating look inside burglary from the burglar's point of view, this title adds to that through a unique exploratory look at how environmental and lifestyle contexts influence a variety of types of residential burglary search, selection and completion decisions.

The first chapter of *Residential Burglary* introduces readers to theories of environmental criminology, notably, opportunity theory, rational choice theory, routine activities theory and crime pattern theory. Each of these theories is referenced at later points in the book and the authors demonstrate the utility of the theories in understanding residential burglary.

In the second chapter *Residential Burglary*, the authors delve into the burglar's thought process. For instance, why does a person choose to commit a burglary? Why do they choose a particular house or neighborhood? And, what is it that they want from the burglary? Rengert and Groff present some interesting results from their interviews of both urban and suburban burglars. Although it is clear that the majority of burglars possess the ability to weigh the costs versus the benefits of their criminal behaviors, most burglars do not see risk as one might expect. For the active burglar, risk is not about the police and arrest, but potential for injury if they have miscalculated whether or not the home would be occupied. In fact, it seems as though the chief point of emphasis among burglars was not being caught by the authorities but by the homeowner or occupant. In part, this appears to be a reflection of the attitude that they simply will not be caught by police, and if they are the odds of going to prison are slim. Given this particular worldview, answers to what is on the burglars mind are diverse and strongly tied to the type of burglar they are. All types of burglars are interested in cash or items that can be converted to cash, and being in and out of the home quickly.

Yet, differences exist in perception and ability of burglars – a point that emerges throughout the interview process, providing insight to the thinking of the residential burglar.

The third and fourth chapters speak to the elements of time and space. From an environmental criminology perspective, time and place/space are a natural fit for the discussion. Readers familiar with *routine activities theory* will appreciate the inclusion of time and space, but also be interested in Rengert and Groff's expanded discussion of these elements and their impacts on both burglar and victim. In an ironic twist apropos to using the environmental lens, and opposing traditional social solutions to crime, the element of time provides an obstacle too large for many burglars in pursuit of legitimate income. Many of the burglars interviewed had in fact given up legitimate jobs because they interfered with their freedom to burgle. After all, time is filled with semi-predictable routines, most of which involve typical work and leisure patterns that leave a home unoccupied. Subsequently, the burglars need to be available for scouting, selection and execution of the burglary at these times. When it came down to making the choice between a legitimate income and burglary, the risk did not outweigh the reward.

Space and place, on the other hand, do not necessarily have a negative impact on one's legitimate income. In fact, the routine pathways between work and home actually seemed to provide a convenient scouting area for future burglaries. This discussion of space leans very heavily toward elements of *crime pattern theory*. Particular attention is called to the awareness space and action space of residential burglars. Throughout the chapter, Rengert and Groff present a model of how awareness space and action spaces are shaped and oriented to and from home, work and leisure areas (nodes). Through an exercise in mapping, the authors were able to present a form of geographic profile for residential burglary that focused heavily on the routine activities of the burglars as well as their action/awareness spaces. What many readers will find interesting here is that despite knowledge of wealthier areas where 'big scores' could be, many burglars were content to stay within their local comfort zone.

The fifth chapter focuses on the selection of a home/target. One point of interest is the discussion of how the same elements that make a home attractive for purchase may make it attractive for burglary. The authors review the search process and discuss further the stopping rules associated with various stopping models suggesting that time spent, among other situational and site specific characteristics, have important roles in the final decision. A supplemental look at burglaries in Greenwich, CT help the authors fine tune the discussion of the selection process and illustrate the importance of both situational and site characteristics. In many respects, the authors liken the burglar's home selection process to the home buyer's process and look for a number of stopping rules. Ultimately, the stopping criteria seem to be more related to the type of burglar and are therefore more dynamic than one might like. The ideal stopping criteria differ slightly but in essence reflect the burglar's perfect home: easy access, easy escape, high reward and little chance of being caught. Finally, a discussion emerges related to repeat victimization that many readers will find interesting. Primarily, this discussion centers on the notion that a successful burglary at a given location will increase the short-term risk of burglary for the surrounding properties to a degree but not nearly as much as the previously victimized location. It would appear that the known qualities of a successful burglary are a powerful influence on the selection process.

Specific techniques of burglary are the aim of the sixth chapter, particularly how different levels of 'professionalism' impact technique. Although it relates to the elements of selection presented in Chapter 5, the authors discuss here the specifics of site characteristics

and how they influence practical get in/get out/get the goods without being caught. Techniques ranged from simply checking for unlocked doors or smashing a window to very elaborate schemes of entry. Those readers looking for a lesson in how to avoid victimization will find that discussion here as well. The authors present information on how burglars are caught – which in many cases was seemed to be a mix of arrogance, bad luck and occasional stupidity. However, there seems to one standout item that makes a house less attractive and that is the *known* presence of an alarm. Those homes that have an alarm system, and make it known that a system is in place, are less attractive than those that do not advertise an alarm system. Not surprisingly, having an alarm system that a burglar is unaware of is not a deterrent. Of further interest and contrary to popular opinion, a dog is not necessarily a deterrent either. In fact, the authors report that many burglars simply find dogs to be a nuisance.

Chapters 7 and 8 present concluding statements and final thoughts regarding housing type and lifestyle differences that exist across the urban and suburban landscapes. These differences produce a different type of burglar and different types of patterns, selection schemes and victimization for each environment. Finally, a discussion of simulation modeling is presented as a means for experimenting with crime prevention strategies at various ecological levels.

Overall, this text will be a useful tool to more than one audience providing a useful addition to course materials for those studying environmental criminology or crime prevention. In addition, scholars looking to pursue research in the area of environmental criminology or crime prevention will find a number of the insights and quotable interviews useful. Finally, it is this reader's opinion that the text makes a valuable contribution to the crime prevention literature. And although there may be some room for criticism regarding the age of the source material, the illuminations provided constitute an important building block in understanding how criminals operate in their target environment.

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