Commercial burglary: what offenders say

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Introduction

This paper is based on interviews with convicted commercial burglars who were on probation or in prison. It aims to establish why people commit this type of offence, and to identify the sorts of decisions involved in deciding how to carry it out, with particular reference to security systems. In short, this paper sets out to provide an insight into the commercial burglar's perspective on crime.

Previous research on burglary has, with few exceptions (see Walsh, 1986), mainly focused on burglary of domestic dwellings. This is true of Britain (Bennett and Wright, 1984; Maguire, 1982; Walsh, 1980) and America (Reppetto, 1974; Scarr, 1973). One thing which is clear is that in contrast to burglary of dwellings, burglary of commercial premises is predominantly a night-time crime. Homes are attractive to burglars during the day because they are often not inhabited then and it is the same feature that attracts the burglar to commercial premises during the night. However, little research has been carried out into commercial burglary specifically. In part, this is because the victim of the crime is a company rather than a person and the latter aspect has served to attract the attention of criminologists. Nevertheless, if one surveys the available academic and business literature it is possible to draw some useful conclusions.

Most studies have concluded that the main motivation for domestic burglary has been the need for money, although the nature of that need is different (see Reppetto, 1974; Shover, 1973). Scarr (1973) considered the motivation for burglary from the viewpoint of needs, means and opportunities. He was able to establish a 'morphology' or typology of burglars according to their 'experience', so that there were 'professional' and 'amateur' burglars, who were either 'highly skilled' or 'badly skilled' at their chosen 'job'. He concluded that burglary was committed either to finance some addiction

such as drug abuse or alcohol dependency, or that it was a way of satisfying a social need, particularly the desire to gain 'status'.

Reppetto (1974), adopting a different approach, found that 'satisfaction of a perceived need for money' was the primary motivation. He concluded that there are other motives for burglary, and that these include subsidiary satisfactions such as 'excitement', 'revenge', a sense of 'solidarity', and the enjoyment of the 'risks' involved in carrying out the crime. But the dominance of the materialistic motivation is reinforced by Reppetto's finding that 73 per cent of the burglars he interviewed believed that the obtaining of a certain degree of wealth would enable them eventually to stop committing property crimes.

A considerable amount of research has focused on the factors weighed by burglars in deciding whether to commit an offence. In the early 1980s the view that burglars made a rational choice (Cornish and Clarke; 1986) in deciding whether to commit an offence received considerable attention. Rational choice theory, as it became known, posited that if a burglar weighed up the advantages and disadvantages of the offence prior to its commission then there was an opportunity to weight that decision against committing the act by hardening the target. And so situational crime prevention came into vogue. This was based on the idea that if premises were better protected the burglar would decide not to commit the offence. In practice this theory is not comprehensive (see Bennett and Wright, 1984) but some of the ideas are instructive.

This study aims to repeat some of the previous research but with a specific focus on commercial burglars. The findings place some question marks over many conventional security practices. For this reason much of this paper will focus on the burglars' perceptions of security, although comments are included on the issue of motivation. First, however, the methods used to obtain the results need to be explained.

Methodology

This project combined two different lines of research. The primary basis is in-depth interviews with a group of commercial burglars who attended a Probation Centre in the spring of 1993, and with a different sample who were in one of four prisons visited in the summer of the same year.

Attendance at the Probation Centre located in an inner city area opened up another line of approach to the subject. The writer was able to explore the topic of commercial burglary via an 'educational session'. This took the form of role-playing exercises, or 'scenarios', in which fifteen offenders

with experience of commercial burglary were asked to tackle a number of problems associated with the selection of stores for burglary. The list of simple problems aimed to elucidate how, if at all, the offender assessed the risks involved in the commission of the act, how security systems could be overcome and whether security systems were effective deterrents. It was after these exercises that the in-depth interviews took place, although only seven of the fifteen agreed to participate in this stage. In addition, 23 in-depth interviews were carried out in prison.

The purpose was to study a few burglars in depth rather than attempt to obtain a larger representative sample. This needs to be borne in mind when evaluating the findings. Participation in this study was entirely voluntary. All commercial burglars were assured that the exercises and interviews were entirely confidential and no names were recorded at any point. Although random selection of interviewees was used wherever possible it is recognised that the samples may not offer a representative picture of all commercial burglars. Clearly not all burglars are caught, and there is no guarantee that those who are and agree to be interviewed are 'typical'. Nevertheless, useful insights were obtained.

Motivation of offenders

The role-playing session at the Probation Centre recognised that the most common motive for committing a commercial burglary is to obtain money, and this may take the form of selling stolen goods or stealing cash. The existence of such motives as the financing of a habit, for example, drug abuse or alcoholism, only reinforce the point that the desire for money is the primary motive. In fact, the burglars involved in the role-playing indicated that they look for hard cash at the target premises, this is in addition to favoured items such as cigarettes or videos which could then be easily disposed of through a variety of 'receivers' or 'fences'. The money obtained from these transactions would then be used to buy food, electrical goods, clothing, alcohol and drugs.

The interviewing of commercial burglars in prison produced a list of possible motives for committing crimes. Of these possible motives, as Figure 1 shows, the need for money again appeared to be dominant, while unemployment and the influence of drugs or alcohol were also frequently mentioned. The fact that many found burglary exciting is as interesting as it is worrying.

Figure 1. Motives for commercial burglary
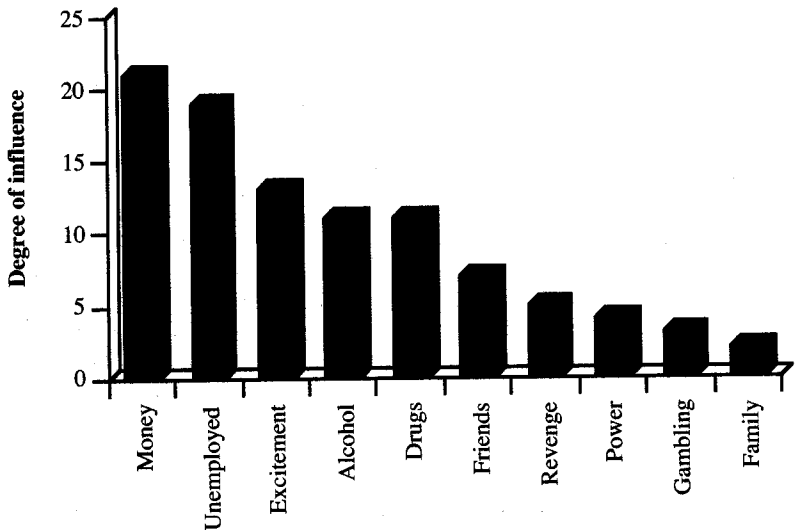
A recurrent theme emerging from the interviews was that the lack of opportunity to accumulate wealth by conventional means necessitated involvement in crime. There is a view that certain sections of the community are marginalised, and that this explains much criminality. This is currently much in vogue in what is called the Left Realist school of thought or Left Realism (Matthews and Young, 1992; Young and Matthews, 1992). What is clear is that the reasons for marginalisation differ. It is essential that crime prevention takes account of these differences. This requires a consideration of how and why burglars choose their target.

Target selection

The choice of target is not always as rational as some would have us believe. As one respondent commented:

I suppose it depends on the people you know ... who's about ... what do they know. I was around a mate's house and he suggested to me a place cos he needed a new partner, cos his last one had gone down for armed robbery. So I said 'let's have a look and if it's sweet we'll do it'. He'd done the factory

before. So we looked around, looked for alarms, sensors and how best to get in. It was sweet so we did it ... and that's why I'm here.

The role-playing at the Probation Centre was based on an imaginary scenario in which individuals were asked to think about how they would burgle an electrical retail store. Initially, volunteers were asked for their views on location. They were asked to select one of three stores, all belonging to a major high-street electrical retailer. These were on a pedestrian high street, in a shopping mall, and the other was a superstore located on the outskirts of the town and on a main road. The burglar's task was to obtain a Panasonic Video 8 camcorder for a 'mate' who would pay him £260 if he was successful. The findings are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Choice of store for the purpose of commercial burglary

	Selections	Per cent
High Street	1	14.3
Shopping Mall	1	14.3
Superstore	5	71.4
Total	7	100.0

Table 1 shows that the superstore was by far the most popular target. It is interesting to note some of the comments:

Superstore on the outskirts of town, because it would be easier. Carry it out 11.00pm to 12.00am because all the pigs (the police) will be in town Friday/Saturday night because that is when most people go out drinking.

Store on the high street, because the superstore could have guards, high security, and the shopping mall would be difficult to enter. So, plan it out in the daytime and then commit the crime in evening.

After having been provided with information about the chosen store, the volunteers were asked to identify the risks they saw in the burglary and to suggest what security devices might have been installed to protect the premises. Mention was made of passive infra-red (PIR) devices (heat detectors), CCTV, loop alarm systems, an alarm to the police station, pressure pads in the floor, and the presence of security guards. These systems are installed to protect goods and deter potential thieves, but most of the role-playing participants (82 per cent) had experience of one or more of these systems and knew how to defeat or avoid them if they encountered them again.

The number of people chosen to carry out the job varied from a single accomplice to act as a look-out, to a team of four burglars with a total of three 'raiders' or 'frontmen' and one driver or 'wheelman'. The equipment required for the job depended on the plan. A number of possible items of equipment were mentioned and the frequency of the most popular responses is noted in Table 2.

Table 2. Equipment interviewees would use in a burglary

	Number
One car	2
Two cars	2
Motorbike	1
Crowbar	3
Sledge hammer	1
Pliers	2
Special clothes	2
Gloves	1
Polaroid camera	1
Total	15

Both the men who suggested the use of two cars said that they would use one car to ram-raid the store, either via the rear of the premises or through the front shutters, and would use the other car as a getaway vehicle. Pliers would be used to cut locks on shutters to gain entry and to snip any wires or chains. The crowbars would be used to gain access to the building through windows or doors at the rear, or to prise open the security cage once inside. The camera would be used to take pictures of the security devices and the security cage, for future reference.

None of the burglars said that he would spend more than 30 minutes in the building. One suggested that the ideal time would be between three and five minutes if the job was easy, but ten to twenty minutes was the most popular time span. The fact that this needs to be as quick as possible was emphasised.

Yet, in the in-depth interviews that followed the role-playing sessions, one volunteer described how he had spent three hours clearing out part of a warehouse with a large team, despite the fact that it was guarded by a major security company. In this case a warehouse partitioned into three stores was burgled by a team of nine people. At the time, the man concerned was

working as a night-shift loader in one section of the warehouse. The company which owned the section next-door, which housed clothing, went bankrupt so that there were no staff in that area. The partition wall was a new addition to the warehouse and did not reach the ceiling. The gap between the ceiling and the top of the wall was large enough for a person to get through. All this respondent's work mates were involved. They 'stripped' the place within a few hours and the goods were then distributed in vehicles provided by their employer!

A security company was charged with protecting the site but the team kept a lookout, and when the guard came to check on the warehouse, the burglars returned to their loading jobs. When the guard had gone, the burglars went back to 'stripping' the warehouse, forming a human chain to pass goods from the clothes warehouse, over the partition wall, and into the trucks. Once finished, they divided the rewards. The total value of the goods stolen was approximately £20,000, but the team only managed a gross income of £5,000 from the operation.

In the above case the offenders happened on an opportunity to commit a burglary and then found a fence, but often this process was reversed. Many interviewees identified 'fag shops' as by far the most favoured target. Once obtained, the merchandise was easily disposable; fences (or others) would readily take such stolen items off the burglars' hands, as one respondent commented:

> Newsagents, tobacconists ... newsagents always good ... fags and things like that ... you can sell them very quickly. Fags, lighters, tobacco, all sorts. There is one place we got 5,000 cigarettes and two of us got rid of them in about four days just selling to people 500 cigarettes and you'd get maybe some gear or cash or a little telly thing with a tape player, that was for a few thousand. So, you can get rid of them dead quick.

One of those who considered 'fag shops' a good target explained that, with a team of four, he would enter the store through the front window (that is after smashing it and removing all the glass). They would then proceed to steal cigarettes from the storerooms. An internal kiosk would be left alone because of alarms on the protective shuttering. Another also admitted to burgling a hypermarket purely to obtain video tapes which he would then sell to his taxi-driver fence. One who had burgled a hypermarket described how he and an accomplice had broken into a premises via a rear window. They stole a large quantity of cigarettes but were arrested a few days later because they kept the goods for personal consumption. The need to sell the stolen goods as quickly as possible was confirmed by one respondent, who reflected:

... you never keep any of the stolen gear yourself. Amateurs do and they get caught. You should always get rid of them within 24 hours. Take those Apple Mac computers I sold them to some graduates who were setting up a business and I sold them a 2FX (computer) for £200. I then had an order for a 2FX and this bloke offered me three grand. I could have killed myself. So I went back to those lads and told them that the computer was stolen and said here's £500 quid. But he said he'd already sold it. A fucking con man ... I never sold him anything again.

The degree of planning for a commercial burglary varied from interviewee to interviewee. For example, one suggested that only twenty minutes was needed to plan a burglary, while another needed to spend a few hours deciding what goods to steal. More in-depth planning was claimed by one respondent who spent three days planning one particular burglary, during this time he visited the store and observed all the security devices and the location of goods he wanted to steal, and also the possible methods of entry. The degree of planning reflects the professionalism of the individual, with the more experienced burglars considering all the risks that might prejudice the successful completion of the crime. For example:

... it's like you've got to weigh up what's there, whether it's going to come on top, getting caught, bells, sensors, it doesn't really matter about the lights just what you can get. Basically, if it's worth it.

In the prison interviews the amount of time which respondents spent planning the crime also varied from merely a few seconds for the 'smash-and-grab' type of offences, to some three weeks of meticulous planning. One burglar stated that it would take that time to organise a team of seven. This would consist of two 'watchers' or lookouts, a 'wheelman' or driver, and the 'frontmen' who enter the building and find and steal the goods, obtain vehicles, gather the necessary equipment and carry out a complete risk assessment of the target.

One of the last questions asked in both the Probation Centre interviews and the prison interviews referred to a number of possible security deterrents. The interviewees were asked whether these security systems and measures deterred them from undertaking a burglary. The 27 responses by probationers and inmates are shown in Table 3.

As can be seen, the presence of security guards would appear to be the most effective deterrent against commercial burglary. The presence of houses/premises overlooking the target, and the installation of external and internal CCTV cameras were also seen as important.

Table 3. Security systems that deter the burglar

	Yes	Per cent	No	Per cent
Security guards	18	67	9	33
Burglar alarm	5	19	22	81
External CCTV	11	41	16	59
Internal CCTV	11	41	16	59
PIR sensors	10	37	17	63
Alarmed windows	5	19	22	81
Bolted doors	1	4	26	96
Alarmed doors	4	15	23	85
Premises overlooked	14	52	13	48
Lights left on	2	7	25	93
Goods in secure cage	4	15	23	85
Goods in display cabinet	3	11	24	89
Goods chained up	7	26	20	74
Goods linked to alarm	7	26	20	74

But other individual measures such as an alarm system or the locking of goods in either a display cabinet or a secure cage seem to do comparatively little to dissuade the burglar from committing a crime.

But, if one takes the difference between the percentages of positive and negative assessments of the deterrent value of the systems listed a markedly different picture is formed. This provides an alternative and perhaps better measure of the effectiveness of various security systems in deterring burglary. By identifying which systems have a positive deterrent value, retailers and other commercial establishments can devote resources to the most effective strategies.

Table 4 shows the percentage difference between the positive and negative perceptions of the deterrent value of a number of security systems. For each system, the figure has been calculated by subtracting the total percentage number of negative responses (n/27 x 100) by the interviewees from the total number of positive responses. Thus for example the presence of security guards has a deterrent value: $(18/27 \times 100) - (9/27 \times 100) = +34$ per cent. Similarly, for burglar alarms: $(5/27 \times 100) - (22/27 \times 100) = -52$ per cent.

Table 4. Percentage difference of perceived deterrence values

System	Difference	System	Difference
Security guards (SG)	34	Door alarm (DA)	-70
Burglar alarm (BA)	-52	Overlooking houses	4
External CCTV	-18	Lights left on	-93
Internal CCTV	-18	Security cage	-92
Passive infra-red (PIR)	-26	Display cabinet	-78
Window alarm (WA)	-52	Chaining items	-48
Door bolts (DB)	-92	Item loop alarmed (LA)	-48

This is shown graphically in Figure 2, where a string of negatively valued security systems can easily be seen.

Figure 2. Percentage difference in perceived deterrent value of security systems
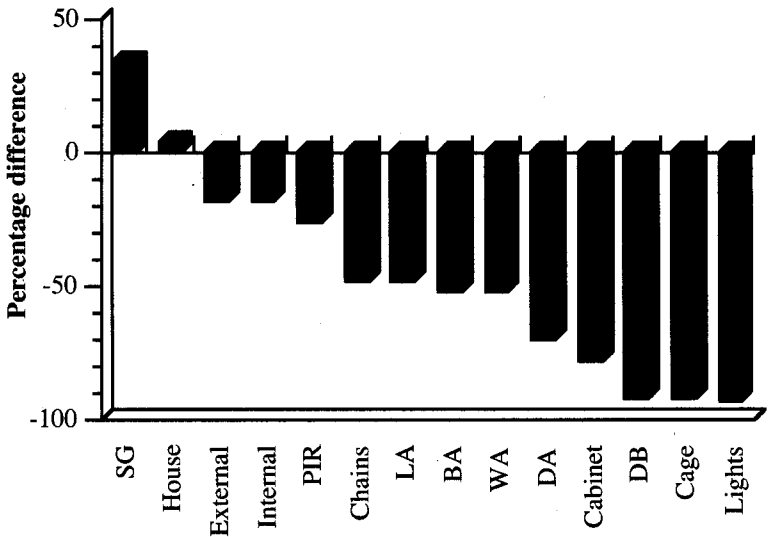
What the graph shows is that only the presence of guards and the existence of overlooking houses/premises had a significant deterrent effect. Systems such as external and internal CCTV do not by this measure appear to have as much deterrent value as was initially suggested. Given the comparatively poor deterrent value of the remaining security systems, it would appear that

companies should be cautious in deciding what systems are worth installing. In one interview, the whole thinking process and the perception of risks, rewards and security systems was summed up:

> If I'm thinking about doing a commercial, you'd think ideally about the consequences ... If it comes on top you know where you're going. So you just hit it and be as prepared as you can. The only thing that matters is when there is a security patrol, but you just clock (watch) them and so the time is yours.

Discussion

Commercial burglary remains a relatively unexplored criminal activity. What little previous research has been done suggests that there is a link between commercial burglary and other property crimes such as robbery (Walsh, 1986). Indeed, the research presented here has revealed other possible links with crimes such as domestic burglary and shoplifting. But the primary purpose of this paper has been to discover what motivates the commercial burglar and, in addition, what security systems are positive deterrents. Rather than examine these two issues from the perspectives of the law enforcing bodies, the judicial system or the private security services, this project has sought only to elicit the opinions of offenders who have committed commercial burglaries. Hence, a role-playing exercise was conducted with former commercial burglars on probation, and a series of structured interviews were carried out with inmates in four prisons and a randomly-selected number of probationers.

With regard to the first issue of criminal motivation, it was found that among a number of possible motivational factors, the need for money is the most important, while other factors such as unemployment, alcohol abuse and drug addiction also contain a monetary element. It is also regrettable to have it confirmed in the interviews that society forces some individuals to re-offend, and does so because it is unwilling to trust those with criminal convictions and discriminates against them when they seek employment.

As regards target selection by commercial burglars, a number of conclusions can be drawn from this project. In the role-playing, commercial burglars appeared to favour superstores as targets. They argued that because these stores are located out of town the chances of apprehension by the police are less; it was noted that the police are usually located some distance from this type of target. The response time by the police may be up to 20 minutes, as in domestic burglary (Cromwell et al, 1991), and this allows time for the burglar to commit the offence and escape. Location and the proximity of law enforcement agencies are clearly relevant for the prevention of this type of offence.

The presence of security guards or security personnel rather than security equipment, appears to be the biggest deterrent to commercial burglary, as does housing or business premises overlooking the target. The biggest risk perceived by an offender is being caught, and this risk is increased by the possibility of being watched. In the list of deterrent factors presented to the interviewees, these two, security guards and being overlooked produced positive deterrence values (+34 per cent and +4 per cent). Both of course involve people rather than physical or electronic systems.

This factor is perhaps also relevant to the deterrent value of CCTV, where the effectiveness of the electronic system is dependent on the human role in monitoring it. In the interviews the value of CCTV was questioned; not only were the pictures perceived to be of a poor quality, but the human element was 'too distant' from the scene of the crime. Hence, there was still time for the burglar to escape. If the offender is able to nullify the system installed to protect the property, whether this system is electronic or physical or involves people, a burglary is likely to be successful. There are ways of defeating security systems such as 'foaming' alarms, cutting telephone wires to prevent an alarm being relayed to the local police station, wearing disguises to prevent CCTV recording recognisable pictures and even attacking guards. The determined burglar fears little and assesses the security risks as part of the job. Thus, for some, commercial burglary is a profitable career.

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