

Home security in SA

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It's no secret that crime in South Africa is rife, leaving us with little choice but to acknowledge that dealing with crime has become a way of life.

In releasing the police's crime statistics for the 2008/09 financial year recently, Police Minister, Nathi Mthethwa, noted that house robberies had increased by 27 percent, while the 2007 National Victims of Crime Survey found that the number of people who feared being robbed or having someone break into their homes outnumbered those who feared other crimes, including murder and sexual assault.

According to Gareth Newham from the Gauteng Department of Community Safety, Gauteng experiences 51% of South Africa's residential robberies, with Gauteng residents reporting an average of 20 house robberies a day during the 2007/08 financial year.

Newham said that the study also found "every little disincentive, as few perpetrators were being arrested and successfully prosecuted," which was attributed to well planned attacks in order to catch victims by surprise and avoid police operations.

The findings by Dr Rudolf Zinn, a lecturer in forensic and crime investigation at UNISA, from in-depth interviews with 30 inmates convicted for residential robbery, suggest that there are a number of measures South Africans can take to reduce the risk of becoming a target for household robbery.

While some form of household security is recommended, Zinn found that only 25% of robbers deliberately chose a house because it had low security. Targets were chosen because they had information or a suspicion that there was something of value to steal, and some perpetrators stated that excessive security would peak their interest as it indicated there was something valuable to protect. Zinn found that perpetrators preferred neighbourhoods with many entrances and exits and quick access to main roads for a quick getaway.

The majority of housebreak-ins occur between 7pm and midnight when people are home, having disabled their alarms systems while often leaving doors open, and noise from televisions and radios provide a level of cover to make a surprise attack.

Other popular times are early mornings when residents and neighbours are asleep, and between 10am and noon when domestic workers are likely to be there with the alarms off and doors open. Occupants should therefore remain vigilant, keep doors locked and minimise the period that alarms are switched off.

Top of the deterrent list mentioned by the inmates Zinn interviewed is anything that acts as an early warning system - particularly those that warn residents before the burglar has gained access to the house. This includes small dogs inside the house that warn of suspicious activity and electric fences around the perimeter.

Zinn noted that dogs should be taught not to take food from strangers as perpetrators would not hesitate to poison dogs, and that electric fences going off repeatedly could be robbers deliberately short-circuiting the fence to trick people into switching them off.

Other pre-warning alarm systems like security sensors in the garden, along the outside walls, roof and ceiling were also effective deterrents, as were alarm systems in garages and storerooms, because burglars usually break into these first to get the tools they need for the main break-in.

Movement sensitive security lighting and an open view of the house and garden from the street make it harder for burglars to maintain the advantage of surprise, as do CCTV and intercom systems, and layered security as opposed to a single security system.

Zinn found that 77% of perpetrators chose targets on which they had insider information, generally gathered from domestic workers, gardeners or other service providers (even security guards) or their relatives, and suggests keeping a copy of the ID book of all employees, as well as names and contact details of their relatives.

Strong doors and locks are recommended, as well as a safe room within the house where residents can escape to in the event of a forced entry. Strategically placed panic buttons "near doors, in the bathroom, and under the bed" are also suggested. Community crime initiatives, like random community patrols and guards at street corners, made a big difference in reducing the risk of crime.

As much as we might like to hand over responsibility and blame the government, the police, and even the years of apartheid for this sad predicament, the bald truth is that the responsibility for our safety lies first and foremost at our very own door step.