

Distraction burglary during a pandemic

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The problem

Distraction Burglary occurs where a falsehood, trick or distraction is used on an occupant of a dwelling to gain, or try to gain, access to the premises to commit burglary. It includes cases where the offender first enters the premises and subsequently uses distraction methods in order to remain on the premises or gain access to other parts of the premises in order to commit burglary (for example, by posing as a tradesperson).

What we know about distraction burglary and how we know it

An ONS report (2017) notes that each year since March 2004 (when data were first available), less than 5% of domestic burglaries recorded by the police were classified as “distraction burglaries”; this proportion declined for much of the period from 2008-2017. It is currently about 1% of all burglaries.

Distraction burglars, or bogus callers, often operate in pairs targeting the elderly and vulnerable. An early study set in West Yorkshire reported that the average age of distraction burglary victims was 77 and more than half were over 80. For example, between 1 April 2019 and 31 March 2020 there were 1871 residential burglaries reported to North Yorkshire Police. Only 26 were distraction burglaries (1%), but 73% of those involved victims aged 65 or more.

This offence causes a great deal of distress to victims, who often report feeling stupid and humiliated for trusting the callers and allowing them into their home. It can lead to a serious loss of confidence in elderly people and can disproportionately affect their health. Generally, older victims of crime are twice as likely to die or need to enter residential care than non-victimised people of the same age.

Some 56% of elderly victims (aged over 60) let the burglar in with the remainder gaining entry uninvited. The main risk factors when offenders were voluntarily admitted were receiving fewer regular visitors, believing that the caller’s story rang true and fewer doorstep checking behaviours pre-incident. These victims also reported higher levels of initial trauma.

Of those suffering distraction burglary, 68% were aware of it as a possibility before the incident but most of the messages they picked up were general warnings rather than offering specific advice such as not opening doors or fitting a door chain.

What we think might happen in the covid-19 pandemic

There may be an increase in distraction burglaries amongst the elderly, who remain at home often alone, and vulnerable to those who arrive offering support. They may wear masks ostensibly to ‘reduce the risk of infection’, which also provides some disguise. This will begin as soon as widespread self-isolation kicks in and opportunities for breaking and entering reduce because of the increased occupancy of family homes during the day.

Some ideas in response

1. Although currently only 1% of burglaries are classified as distraction, the victims are disproportionately elderly. Careful analysis of police reported data should reveal the extent of this and whether or not there is any concentration, for example in more isolated locations or villages. This analysis would support specific targeting of crime prevention advice.
2. If hot spots are identified then work with local parish councils to provide specific advice on installing door chains, rather than general awareness raising.
3. Alert local newspapers, village magazines and other outlets that might be read by elderly residents, again offering specific advice.
4. Suggest a neighbourhood or cocoon watch paying particular attention to the elderly living alone.
5. Ask families and neighbours to check on the elderly and single occupancy households cautioning against uninvited/unexpected visitors seeking to gain entry.
6. Establish local signage to make clear that doorstep sales or unplanned calls are not acceptable in the area.

Relevant resources:

Lister, S., D. Wall and J Bryan (2004) Evaluation of the Leeds Distraction Burglary Initiative Home Office Online report 44/04 available here
<https://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.524.7720&rep=rep1&type=pdf>

Office of National Statistics *Overview of burglary and other household theft: England and Wales 2017* available here
<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/articles/overviewofburglaryandotherhouseholdtheft/englandandwales#what-are-the-long-term-trends>

Office of National Statistics *Crime in England and Wales: year ending September 2019*
Available here:
<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/bulletins/crimeinenglandandwales/yearendingseptember2019>

Office of National Statistics *Nature of Crime: Burglary* year ending March 2018 available here:
<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/datasets/natureofcrimeburglary>

Thornton, A., C Hatton, C Malone, T. Fryer, D Walker, J. Cunningham and N. Durrani (2003) *Distraction burglary amongst older adults and ethnic Minority Communities* Home Office Research Study 269 available here: <http://library.college.police.uk/docs/hors/hors269.pdf>

This is one of a series of short, speculative papers developed by the UCL Jill Dando Institute during the current pandemic. It is edited by Nick Tilley and Gloria Laycock and published by University College London. The raison d'être of the series is fully described at: <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/jill-dando-institute/research/covid-19-special-papers>