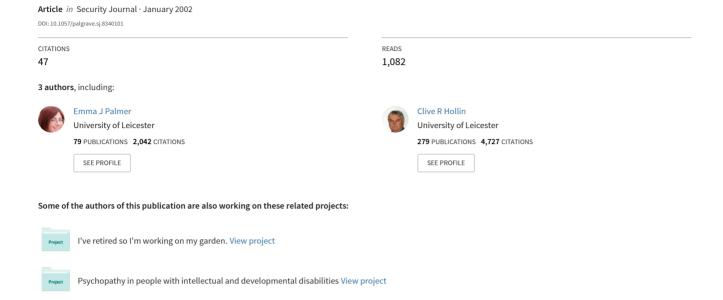
# Investigating Burglars' Decisions: Factors Influencing Target Choice, Method of Entry, Reasons for Offending, Repeat Victimisation of a Property and Victim Awareness



# Investigating Burglars' Decisions: Factors Influencing Target Choice, Method of Entry, Reasons for Offending, Repeat Victimisation of a Property and Victim Awareness

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This paper describes a survey of domestic burglars which investigated their offending behaviour. Information was collected on factors influencing choice of target, preferred method of entry into properties, reasons for committing burglaries, planning of offences, repeat offending at a particular property, and burglars' awareness of victims. The results showed that specific factors within the four categories of occupancy, surveillance, accessibility and security influenced target choice and method of entry, as did previous experience. In line with previous research, it was found that a number of the burglars had targeted the same property more than once. Interestingly, the findings suggest that installation of new security measures did little to deter repeat victimisation. Knowing the occupants of a property had a high deterrence value, which, when linked to responses about awareness of victims, suggests that it may prove to be useful in preventing revictimisation.

Key Words: Burglary; target choice; repeat victimisation; victim awareness

### Introduction

According to official statistics, burglary offences constituted 18 per cent of all crime recorded by the police in the year October 1998 to September 1999, corresponding to 935,423 offences.<sup>2</sup> In comparison to the previous 12 months, this represents a 3.9 per cent decrease (the sixth consecutive annual fall), which can be split into a 4.8 per cent fall in domestic burglaries (down to 464,400 offences) and a 2.9 per cent fall in non-domestic burglaries (down to 471,100 offences).<sup>3</sup> However, these figures do not represent the true number of burglaries, as many go unreported to the police, and even those that do may be recorded or categorised as different offences. A better estimate of the true numbers of burglaries may be obtained from the British Crime Survey of 1999; this revealed 1,284,000 attempted and actual domestic burglaries, of which 760,000 involved entry being gained to the property and 538,000 resulted in a loss of goods.<sup>4</sup> Like the official records, there was a decrease (of 21 per cent) in the number of burglaries over the period 1997 to 1999.

Official local statistics for Leicester for 1999–2000 show that there were 36 domestic burglaries per 1000 households in the city, dropping to 21 in the area covered by the Leicestershire constabulary force. Within the city area, these offences accounted for ten per cent of recorded crime, while non-domestic burglaries accounted for a further six per cent. This represents 4287

domestic burglaries and a further 2789 non-domestic burglaries, and is estimated to cost victims £2 million per annum. However, the recorded crime data for the city for 1999–2000 shows that there was a reduction of nine per cent in domestic burglaries as compared to the preceding year. Nonetheless, on a national scale burglary is still 119 per cent higher than it was in 1989;<sup>5</sup> it remains a problem, and there is a body of burglary research that seeks to inform strategies for reducing its incidence and prevalence. This research examines issues such as burglars' target selection, their means of entry, the identification of high-risk populations, and effective means of deterrence. This is of particular importance in the light of Home Office predictions that the number of burglaries is set to increase again over the next few years.<sup>6</sup> This study aims to examine further a survey of domestic burglars from the Leicester area, with respect to their offending behaviour.

Maguire and Bennett<sup>7</sup> and Bennett and Wright<sup>8</sup> identified a number of situational cues—occupancy, surveillance, accessibility and security—that were used in target selection among burglars in two prison populations. They found that burglars do tend to discriminate between properties at the scene of burglaries, rather than either randomly choosing a house on impulse or pre-planning offences in advance. The burglars' responses also suggested that their choices were not based on an exhaustive analysis of the situation in terms of costs and rewards, but on previous experience of what was successful or not in terms of burglary. A target selection strategy based on previous experience was also reported by Nee and Taylor,<sup>9</sup> following their survey of 50 male residential burglars in Ireland who were serving prison sentences. Furthermore, research that has looked at burglars' responses 'on-site' (that is, taking them to the site of their burglary and asking them to say why they chose that particular house) also reveals choices to be based on experience.<sup>10</sup>

In Nee and Taylor's<sup>11</sup> study, the most important factors in the choice of target were the location/position of the house in terms of access and escape routes, and its size in terms of relative wealth. Also rated as important were cues relating to security measures and occupancy. The most important reasons cited for carrying out burglaries was the need for cash in order to maintain a lifestyle, a finding replicated in later research.<sup>12</sup> Other potential reasons, such as boredom, pressure from peers, or being under the influence of drugs and alcohol, were not rated as important reasons for burglaries. In terms of what was stolen, most offenders took jewellery, money and portable electrical items, a finding that corroborates Maguire and Bennett's<sup>13</sup> burglar research and victim surveys, such as the British Crime Survey.<sup>14</sup>

Similar work by Nee and Taylor,<sup>15</sup> examining situational cues in combination, found that no specific cues emerged as being consistently more important in terms of burglars' decision-making. Instead, it was the interaction of environmental cues for each specific target that were taken into account by burglars. Furthermore, when compared to householders, burglars showed far more systematic strategies for assessing properties, allowing them to make decisions more quickly. In an American study, Wright *et al*<sup>16</sup> also compared burglars' and non-offenders' perceptions of target selection cues. They found that their burglar sample used the same cues as the British and Irish samples in choosing properties to burgle, ie signs of occupancy, access routes and relative wealth, with little deterrent value attached to the presence of locks or property-marking. Like Nee and Taylor,<sup>17</sup> Wright *et al* found a number of differences between the burglars and non-offenders in terms of assessments and decision-making strategies relating to target selection. From these findings, Wright *et al* concluded that for target-hardening strategies to be successful they need to take into account how burglars perceive targets, rather than being based solely on non-offenders' perceptions of what will improve security.

Data from the British Crime Survey in 1997 and 1999 on domestic burglaries also revealed that occupied properties were unlikely to be burgled, suggesting that occupation acts as a deterrent; while the presence of security devices also appears to reduce the likelihood of being burgled, <sup>18</sup>

this would appear to contradict the findings of studies asking burglars about target selection cues. <sup>19</sup> However, it may not be possible directly to compare the results of burglar studies and victim surveys, along with the fact that deterrents are likely to work together, rather than in isolation. Thus, it is possible that burglars are deterred by a combination of factors. <sup>20</sup> Entry to properties was most likely to be through a door (70 per cent), with force used in most cases to break locks or frames, with the rear of properties appearing to be slightly less robust (48 per cent of burglaries). In terms of the time of the offence, burglaries were spread over the evening (32 per cent), night (23 per cent) and afternoon (21 per cent). Finally, for those incidents where information was available, almost one-half of the burglaries were carried out by (from the victim's perspective) a stranger.

Research also shows that once a property has been burgled, there is a higher probability of it being burgled again; this phenomenon is known as repeat victimisation.<sup>21</sup> For example, using data from the British Crime Survey, Ellingworth *et al* <sup>22</sup> found that the two per cent of people who suffer the highest number of property burglaries account for 41 per cent of all such crimes. Furthermore, certain populations are more vulnerable to repeat victimisation than others, specifically single-parent households, young households, Asians, households with low incomes, and people living in inner cities, on council estates and in areas of high physical disorder.<sup>23</sup> Gill<sup>24</sup> and Winkel<sup>25</sup> reported that about one-third of burglars burgle the same house more than once, with other studies finding even higher proportions.<sup>26</sup> Factors influencing decisions to reoffend at the same property include the presence of low risks, high rewards and easy access.<sup>27</sup> Other studies have revealed that personal grudges can be a factor in repeat victimisation of a particular person.<sup>28</sup>

In the light of the high levels of public and professional concern, burglary remains an important issue at both national and local level. Therefore, when the government announced its Crime Reduction Programme (CRP) in 1998 a large proportion of the funds made available were for burglary prevention projects at a local level; this has become known as the Burglary Reduction Initiative.

# The CRASH project (Crime Reduction And Safer Homes): background

As part of the government's Crime Reduction Programme, there have been two rounds of funding (a third is now underway) aimed at creating and delivering programmes to reduce those domestic burglary rates which are twice (or more) the national average (27 homes per 1000—therefore, to qualify, the offending rate was 54).

This approach, of tasking local agencies with setting up inter-organisational programmes, was untested, and had two drawbacks. First, the local authority parties involved were familiar with the competitive process culture this entailed, but police managers were not. Second, it imposed a highly restrictive deadline, of just under two months, in which to analyse an area's unique problems, prove them statistically or otherwise, present an agreed programme for addressing them within one year, demonstrate a causal link between the proposed action and the 'remedy', determine target reductions which the delivery agents felt were achievable but at a level sufficient to be acceptable to the Home Office, and finally secure senior, executive-level agreement to the continued funding of the programme if it proved successful. Home Office consultants paid visits to proposers to assess project viability.

The process attracted some 125 bids across the country, of which 63, in two tranches, were granted £60,000, the first tranche of 30 to start in April/May 1999 and the remainder the following autumn. The Leicester project was one of the first 30. It comprised three strands: target-hardening the homes of recent victims and of those regarded as socially vulnerable (elderly, disabled, single

parents, new arrivals); a rolling programme of visiting homes to deliver 'industrial-level' property-marking; and an offender survey. The responsibility was divided up as follows: the City Council's 'single regeneration budget' (SRB) team delivered target-hardening, in conjunction with the Housing Office; the police delivered property-marking; and the Probation Service oversaw the offender survey.

The target-hardening process was simply adopted from that already taking place in the nearby Belgrave area, and moved relatively smoothly forward into the new area. The only problem encountered was the lack of uptake from those contacted by letter about the free service to target-harden their homes. This problem persisted despite different approaches until the 1999 Christmas/ New Year period, when the pendulum swung in the opposite direction and referrals became self-generating. The property-marking proved to be very difficult to start because the chosen system lent itself to a street-wide approach, rather than being directed at vulnerable households. A great deal of detailed and time-consuming work was needed to relate a home address to the format of the postcoding method, but this did, in turn, facilitate something of a 'cocoon approach'. After some debate about sample type and size, the offender survey made most progress in contacting offenders in late 1999 and early 2000. The link to the other project strands was the undertaking to ask offenders about target-hardening and property-marking, and to assess the likely impact of these measures on offending behaviour.

Both the target-hardening and property-marking strands have progressed well, and are on course to reach respective targets. In early 2000 the local Tenants Association secured a further £33,000 of funding to continue the CRASH project until 2001. After this, longevity is likely to be guaranteed by the SRB6 regeneration programme. When last examined (November 1999) domestic burglary in the project area was down, year-on-year, by 25 per cent—the project target had been 15 per cent.

#### Offender survey

In the current project, offenders under the supervision of Leicestershire and Rutland Probation Service who had either been convicted of burglary or had at least one previous conviction for burglary were invited to complete a questionnaire relating to their offending. Of the 86 respondents, 50 per cent were in custody, with the remainder being subject to a community order. All the respondents were male, with an age range of 17 to 42 years (mean 21.88 years, standard deviation 6.04); the majority were 21 years or under. In terms of ethnic origin, 89 per cent were white. Most of the offenders had at least one previous custodial sentence (mean 2.49, standard deviation 2.30), while the mean number of previous convictions was 13.14 (standard deviation 15.06). As a whole the sample had started offending at an early age, with a mean age at first conviction of 15.24 years (standard deviation 3.34).

After a pilot study with a small sample of offenders, minor modifications were made to the wording of the questionnaire (a copy can be obtained from the first author). This questionnaire was constructed in order to allow for a more detailed knowledge to be obtained of the offenders who had carried out burglaries in one area of Leicester where the rate of burglary was high. By gaining information about their decision-making with respect to target choice, preferred method of entry, reasons for committing burglaries, planning of offences, and repeat offending at the same property, it was hoped to inform future local interventions. Furthermore, a couple of questions were included about burglars' awareness of victims, in order to explore whether using some form of restorative justice would be worth pursuing in future research or practice. The questionnaires were administered by two researchers employed by Leicestershire and Rutland Probation Service

(LRPS). The cases involved offenders currently being supervised by LRPS through community sentences (ie probation orders, combination orders or community service orders), whose current offence was for burglary or who had at least one previous burglary conviction on their record. A number of offenders currently serving custodial sentences in a local Young Offender Institution were also interviewed if they had at least one previous burglary conviction on their record. The identified cases were asked to participate, and were interviewed either within the Young Offender Institution or at probation offices around the city.

#### Results

The majority of burglars rated their last three burglaries as 'easy', with only nine rating their last burglary as 'hard'. No set definition was given for what constituted an 'easy' or 'hard' burglary, so this rating was based solely on the offender's own perception. The skewedness of this finding colours the remainder of the data analysis, as there is clearly little scope for further analysis around the 'easy'—'hard' dimension.

#### Target choice

The questionnaire presented offenders with a number of environmental factors that might influence their target choice, and were asked to rate each factor as to how likely they would be to burgle a house with a particular feature. Table 1 shows those features that received the highest ratings for 'best option' and 'least liked option'.

**Best option** % Least liked option % Thick vegetation around the house 70.9 Knowing the occupants are home 65.1 65.1 Knowing the occupants House CCTV 62.8 Window bars 58.1 Silent alarm to security 55.8 Shutters 45.3 Highly visible house location 45.3 Intruder alarm 34

Table I. Factors influencing target choice (N = 86)

Just over one-third of offenders stated that the layout of the house was also important, with one-third of this group identifying the presence of a concealed approach at the rear of the house as being relevant to their choice of target. About one-third of the offenders also said they had burgled a property because it had a similar layout to another property, mainly because familiarity with the layout made the burglary easier. The importance of occupancy in target selection is further highlighted by the fact that the majority of offenders (81.5 per cent) reported checking whether the house was occupied before entering. This checking for occupancy was typically carried out by the simple expedient of knocking on the door.

#### Preferred method of entry

Offenders were also presented with various means of entry into a property, and asked to rate each one as to how likely they would be to use that means to enter a property. Table 2 shows the methods of entry that received the highest ratings for 'best option' and 'least liked option'.

Table 2. Preferred method of entry to properties (N = 86)

Best option	%	Least liked option	%
Ground floor rear window	53.5	Pretend to be an official	58.1
Back door	43.0	Upstairs window	38.4
		Front door	38.4
		Ground floor front window	29.1

#### Reasons for burglary

Nearly all the offenders said that they carried out burglaries for the specific purpose of gaining money (for three offenders, this was specifically for drugs and/or alcohol). This focus on money was reflected by the responses to the question asking what was typically stolen, with cash, jewellery, stereos, televisions and video recorders being the most popular items. The majority of offenders did not know what they would find in the premises before they broke in, suggesting they took whatever was easy to carry and they knew they could sell on. Very few offenders said that they burgled to relieve boredom, in response to peer pressure, or under the influence of drugs or alcohol. However, 33 burglars (38.4 per cent) said that they had stolen to order.

#### Planning

Thirteen offenders said that they were likely to have an element of planning in their burglaries, of which two-thirds would watch the target beforehand to learn the routine movements around the premises. Furthermore, 50 per cent of the offenders said that they had intended to burgle that day when they left their house in the morning. Just over one-half of the offenders (55.8 per cent) stated that they had a favourite time of the day to carry out burglaries. Of this group, a third expressed a preference for the morning and a third for after dark.

# Area of burglary

In terms of where they intended to burgle, 40.6 per cent of burglars included their home area, although only four (4.8 per cent) stated they would definitely burgle only in their home area. This is supported by the fact that 83.5 per cent of the offenders reported that they were familiar with the area in which they burgled. There were two key factors in the choice of an area in which to carry out a burglary: first, knowing the area, and second the likelihood of a burglary being profitable. These factors also applied to choice of specific target, along with the likelihood of ease of carrying out the offence.

When the offenders were compared by whether or not their target area included their home area, no differences were found between the 'home' and 'away' groups with regard to the type of premises burgled, whether the property was occupied at the time of the burglary, the perceived ease of burglaries, intent to burgle that day, familiarity with the area, or prior planning.

#### Repeat victimisation

Thirty-eight per cent of the offenders had returned to offend at the same place, including both domestic and business premises. They were then asked what would deter them from repeating a burglary in terms of security improvements and other environmental factors (see Table 3). Apart from these and a couple of other security measures, the number of offenders saying they would 'carry on' outweighed those saying they would be deterred by a security measure.

Table 3. Factors that would deter burglars from repeating a burglary at the same premises (N = 33)

Factor	%	
House CCTV	45.5	
Knowing the occupants are at home	42.4	
Knowing the occupants	42.4	
Window bars	36.4	
Silent alarm to security	36.4	
Intruder alarm	36.4	

Note. These percentages relate only to those offenders who had repeated a burglary at the same premises.

A minority of offenders (27.9 per cent) had committed offences other than burglary against a person they had burgled, with nine starting the continued victimisation straight after the burglary. These other offences were mainly verbal and physical abuse, with the victim typically being a stranger.

#### Victim awareness

There was a range of replies to the question on thinking about how their victim felt, although 62.8 per cent of offenders admitted to thinking about it at some point. The majority stated they personally would feel angry if someone burgled their house. There was a mixed response to the suggestion of meeting the victim of one of their burglaries, with 36 per cent saying they would be prepared to meet him/her, 16.3 per cent saying they would consider it, and 46.5 per cent saying they would not. For those prepared to consider meeting their victim, various motivations were cited (see Table 4).

Table 4. Response to suggestion of meeting victims (total N = 67)

Reasons	Number	%
n return for reduced sentence	17	25.4
Opportunity to make amends	19	28.4
atalistic ('c'est la vie')	1	1.5
Vould work to make amends	7	10.4
refer current system/keep apart from victims	5	7.5
ear of victim reaction	3	4.5
o ease own guilt	4	6.0
Autual healing/betterment	3	4.5
Other	8	11.9

#### Discussion and conclusions

The results of this local survey of offenders show a number of interesting findings worthy of discussion. The factors that were revealed to be important in choice of target were very similar to previous research in this area with burglars.<sup>29</sup> The four categories of occupancy, surveillance, accessibility and security identified by Bennett and his colleagues<sup>30</sup> were all represented. Furthermore, the key role played by actual occupancy highlighted by victim surveys<sup>31</sup> is also supported here, with a majority of offenders stating that they would check this by knocking on

the door; this strategy to check for occupancy was also found by Forrester  $et\ al^{32}$  in Rochdale. While previous studies have not specifically identified knowing the layout of a house as a salient factor, it is likely that this is of importance in understanding those aspects of the burglar's decision-making strategies that are based on their previous experience of other burglaries. On a more general level, this reflects Wright and Decker's finding that burglars use cognitive scripts to aid their representation and interpretation of situations and to plan their offences.

Also of note was the high rating given to the presence of thick vegetation around a house as a positive factor in targeting a house, something that has an immediate practical implication in terms of reducing the attractiveness of a property to burglars. Removing thick vegetation immediately raises the visibility of a house, making both access and escape more difficult (a factor which was also noted as important by Nee and Taylor's burglars<sup>34</sup>).

Moving on to the preferred method of entry into properties, the rear of the house was the most popular. This corroborates findings from the British Crime Survey (BCS) that the back of properties appears to be more vulnerable.<sup>35</sup> However, in the BCS 44 per cent of burgled properties were entered at the front, while the burglars in this survey rated entry at the front of the house as a 'least liked option'. What was not clear from these results, however, was whether force was a typical feature of entering a property, or whether burglar's ratings reflect their actual behaviour. For example, a positive rating for a particular method of entry does not necessarily mean that the burglars enter properties that way—they will be constrained by the situational factors unique to each offence.

The reasons given by the offenders for carrying out burglary were exactly the same as those found by previous research,<sup>36</sup> with the need for cash being the only reason rated as important. Similarly, the type of goods stolen from properties matched previous reports, including those from victims,<sup>37</sup> with easily portable goods that could be sold being the most popular. About one-third of the burglars in this study stated that they had stolen to order in the past, which corroborates previous research that not all burglary is due to the offender's own direct needs.<sup>38</sup> Instead, it appears that for some offenders burglary may act as a way of 'earning' money, with them playing the role of 'middle-man' in a criminal network.

One area where the findings of this study were different from previous research is the time of day of the burglary. Of the burglars in this study who had a favourite time of day to commit burglaries, one-third preferred the morning and another one-third after dark. The 1999 BCS<sup>39</sup> found similar findings with respect to after dark being a popular time for burglaries to occur, although the proportion was much greater (53 per cent of all burglaries mentioned by victims). However, only 22 per cent of burglaries reported in the BCS occurred in the morning (of these only half were definitely in the morning, the other half happening in either the morning or afternoon). There are a number of explanations for this difference, including possible local variations due to the nature of the area where burglaries occur, for example where properties are more likely to be empty. It is also possible that the question in this survey tapped offenders' preferences rather than their actual behaviour.

With regard to where burglaries were carried out, familiarity with the area appeared to be an important factor, alongside knowing a burglary in that area would be profitable. Therefore it is not surprising that a number of offenders included their home locality in the area in which they operated. However, the offenders who did not include their home area in their target area did not differ from those offenders who did, in terms of the type of premises burgled, the perceived ease of burglaries, intent to burgle that day, familiarity with the area of their target, or prior planning of the offence. Overall, in terms of the offenders' planning and decision-making, it would appear

that this study supports previous findings that burglars do not indiscriminately target properties, but instead seek out suitable properties.<sup>40</sup>

As in previous research, a number of the offenders had returned more than once to the same property to commit an offence. The proportion of the respondents who had done this in this study was 38 per cent, a figure that corroborates findings by Gill<sup>41</sup> and Winkel, <sup>42</sup> although other studies have found even higher proportions.<sup>43</sup> However, unlike other research on repeat victimisation, this study did not look specifically at whether any particular geographical locations or population groups were targeted. Instead, it concentrated on what would deter offenders from repeating a burglary at the same premises. The findings suggest that extra security measures had little effect on whether offenders would definitely not reoffend at those premises. Only four security measures were rated as being more likely to keep them from trying to break in again: these were: the installation of CCTV, of window bars, of a silent alarm to security, or of an intruder alarm. Other security measures appeared not to deter revictimisation, despite the fact that the offenders had rated them as not being liked in terms of initial target selection. Therefore, it may be that once access has been gained to a property, offenders are confident enough of reaccessing it that added security measures might have a reduced impact. This is in line with research showing that burglars tend to make decision about which property to burgle based on their previous experience.44

Knowing the occupants were at home or personally knowing the occupants was also rated as a deterrent to re-offending, which may have implications for restorative justice. For example, it may be that meetings between offenders and their victims can be incorporated into sentences in order to prevent repeat victimisation. However, the effect of this may be offset by the length of time between the commission of a burglary and apprehension/sentencing. Furthermore, it is not known whether meeting people will have the same effect in terms of 'knowing' them as if these people were already known to the offender in another capacity (eg as friends or acquaintances). A minority of offenders committed other offences against their victims (mainly verbal and physical abuse); this type of repeat victimisation started immediately after the burglary, which is in line with research in Canada by Polvi *et al*<sup>45</sup> showing repeat burglaries are more likely to occur within the first week after the first offence.

Over one-half of the burglars admitted to thinking about their victims at some point after the offence, and the majority stated they would feel angry if their own houses were burgled. However, there was a mixed response to suggestions relating to victim awareness, and whether they would be prepared to meet their victim. This response suggests that at least some of the offenders would feel uncomfortable with putting a face to their victims, and may explain why knowing the occupants of a property acts as a strong deterrent. The power of this personal factor as a deterrent in initial target choice, and to a lesser extent in repeat offending at the same property, suggests that it may prove to be a useful tool in preventing revictimisation. Over one-half of the offenders would be prepared to have part of their punishment aimed at making it up to their victims, with only 20 per cent not prepared to do this at all. Of those prepared to consider the idea of meeting their victim, there appeared to be varying motivations, with one-quarter seeing it purely as a way to reduce their sentence, but 28 per cent perceiving it as an opportunity to make amends to their victim. However, whatever the motivation, the effect of meeting may be positive for both parties.

In conclusion, the current study offers a number of findings that can be used to inform policy with respect to reducing burglary. As mentioned in the introduction to this report, for target-hardening strategies to be effective it is necessary to understand burglary from a burglar's perspective, in order to establish what types of cues are used in target selection and what factors act as deterrents. This study corroborates much of the previous research in terms of identifying

important target selection cues in factors that relate to occupancy, surveillance, security and accessibility. In addition, the burglar's previous experience of a type of property is also a factor in target selection. The findings on method of entry also seems to be similar to those in previous research, with the rear of the house being more vulnerable, which is probably due to its decreased visibility. The findings that knowing a property's occupants acts as a deterrent in both initial and repeat victimisation were interesting in that they offer some direction for reducing revictimisation through restorative justice. This is an under-researched area, and one worth pursuing in the light of the ineffectiveness of added security measures for repeat victimisation. As far as future research is concerned, the most interesting findings from this study in terms of reducing reoffending by burglars are those related to the deterrent effects of knowing the occupants of a property and of knowing the occupants are in, raising the question of how these factors can be linked to restorative justice.

#### **Notes**

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