Fact sheet: Access control and awareness campaigns to reduce residential burglary

Access control accompanied by awareness campaigns can be effective in reducing both 'break and enter – dwelling' and 'stealing from dwelling' offences.[1] 'Break and enter – dwelling' refers to offences where the offender forcibly gains entry to someone's home. 'Stealing from dwelling' involves property being stolen from someone's home where the offender doesn't break in, but instead gains entry through an open door or window or steals property from the yard. For the purpose of this fact sheet, the term 'burglary' is used for both offences.

What does this strategy involve?

Access control involves helping residents to install improved security in areas identified hot spots for burglary. This can include either financial support (e.g. subsidies) or installing security on behalf of residents. Access control can be targeted at households across a burglary hot spot or at those households at high risk of victimisation. Households that have already been the victim of burglary could be targeted, where repeat victimisation is highly likely.

Common access control strategies include:

- the installation or improvement of security devices (e.g. window and door locks, security screens) in homes, and
- reducing access to residential areas by improving perimeter security (e.g. installing lockable gates in pedestrian alley ways – alley gating or street closures).

The most appropriate type of access control measure will depend on the major security weaknesses and entry points for offenders in your area.

Access control is most effective when it is accompanied by an awareness campaign directed at potential victims of burglary, aimed at improving residents' understanding of the risk of burglary and possible prevention measures. Awareness campaigns may include the distribution of material (information packs, brochures, etc.) to residents in neighbourhoods with high rates of burglary advising them of what action to take to prevent burglary, how to keep their home secure and what to do in the event that their house is broken into or property stolen.

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[1] The development of these strategies has been informed by a combination of the best available evidence, a strong theoretical crime prevention framework and practitioner experience. There is strong evidence underpinning many of the strategies that are described in the fact sheets. However, in some of the fact sheets, the evidence in support of the strategies and the case studies used to illustrate them are not particularly recent, which reflects the lack of recent evaluation activity. The evidence in support of some of the strategies is also not as strong as for others and in these cases, the strategies draw more heavily from theory and practice. There is significant scope to improve the evidence base by increasing the amount of crime prevention activity that is rigorously evaluated.

Where repeat victimisation is highly likely, awareness campaigns can also include targeted security audits directed at households that have recently been a victim of burglary to help residents take steps to prevent repeat victimisation.

How does the strategy work?

Access control measures aim to make boundaries, fences, gates, doors and windows harder to penetrate and to discourage potential offenders by increasing the perceived effort associated with committing a burglary offence. Access control measures also physically prevent potential offenders from accessing locations.

Access control can also help encourage a sense of ownership among residents, particularly in communities with low residential mobility. This can lead to improved surveillance of surrounding properties and an increased risk of offenders being detected.

Awareness campaigns encourage people to consider the implications of their actions and discourage behaviour that creates opportunities for burglary to occur (e.g. leaving their door unlocked). They work best when supporting access control measures. They do not appear particularly effective when delivered on their own.

What does the evidence say?

A large number of studies have shown access control measures to be effective in reducing burglary. In the majority of these studies, access control measures were supported by other interventions, however, in three studies, access control measures were the sole intervention. Significant short-term reductions in burglary and repeat victimisation were achieved in a number of studies. Longer term evaluations were less common and findings from these studies appeared mixed. Projects targeted at victims of burglary appear to be effective in reducing repeat victimisation, but not necessarily overall rates of burglary.

Several other studies that found that access control measures were not effective in reducing burglary highlight an important implementation issue. There needs to be a high take-up rate among residents for strategies to be successful. Strategies where residents were provided with financial assistance to install security devices, or where security devices are installed on their behalf, appear to be more successful. Financial assistance can involve low-cost loan schemes or subsidies to reduce the cost of security hardware and/or installation. Strategies that relied upon residents to improve access control measures with limited direct assistance or financial input appear less effective.

Many of the studies indicate that awareness campaigns can be an important supporting intervention. However, they only appear to be effective when they are delivered in support of other burglary prevention strategies – awareness campaigns do not appear to be effective when delivered on their own.

Where will the strategy work best?

- Areas with evidence of a burglary problem, a high rate of repeat victimisation, or a high rate of property crime more generally, based on local crime statistics and/or on the basis of concerns raised by the community.
- Areas that have experienced a recent sharp increase in the rate of burglary.
- Where there is an identified lack of security at key entry points.
- When there is a high level of support for preventative measures and concern about burglary among residents.

A significant proportion of effective strategies were targeted at high-density residential areas (i.e. flats and apartments), public housing estates and low-income areas. However, access control and awareness campaigns were also effective in other residential neighbourhoods, including those with detached dwellings.

What will you need to implement this strategy?

The accompanying handbook provides more detailed information on how to implement this strategy, but briefly:

A good understanding of your local problem

The studies reviewed for this project showed that effective strategies were targeted at relatively small or well-defined residential areas with high rates of recorded offences. This requires access to information to identify hot spots, as well as information about the characteristics of these offences (such as when offences are most common) to inform a more targeted approach. To determine the type of access control measures that will be put in place, it is necessary to try and identify common access points for offenders. To determine which households should be targeted you will need to understand whether households tend to be victimised irregularly or are repeatedly victimised over time.

Resident involvement and commitment

Resident involvement in, and commitment to, the project is important. It is necessary to establish appropriate consultation mechanisms at the commencement of the project to seek input from residents and landlords (including public housing authorities).

Stakeholder commitment

Stakeholder commitment is also important. Where projects involve multiple interventions requiring input from a range of different stakeholders, a committee with representatives from the various parties should be established early to oversee the development, implementation and ongoing review of the project.

Availability of appropriate security technology and qualified personnel

Access control measures should be hardwearing and make use of appropriate security technology sourced from an appropriate provider and installed by qualified personnel. Security audits should also be undertaken by suitably qualified personnel, such as police.

CASE STUDY 1: Hartlepool – A case study in burglary reduction

Developed in response to high rates of crime, drug use and antisocial behaviour in Hartlepool, this multi-component strategy demonstrated many of the features outlined in this fact sheet, which enabled it to overcome a number of implementation obstacles and achieve long-term success. The project involved the installation of alley gates, target hardening, property marking, a campaign to raise awareness of the project, measures that could be taken by residents to prevent burglary, diversionary activities for young people, supervision and treatment for known offenders, and a community development approach.

The project was managed by community safety officers from both police and local government. There was a strong steering committee comprising representatives of partner agencies responsible for regularly reviewing and monitoring the project's progress. The project had carefully selected and achievable targets to help maintain momentum, and used existing resources where they were available. Anti-burglary coordinators were employed to maintain clear links with residents, there was community ownership of the project through the involvement of a residents association and as a result, community support for the project was ongoing. The project was able to achieve a reduction in burglary of nearly one-third over the four year post-implementation period, despite issues such as legal problems and resistance relating to the alley gates, limited interest and low take-up rates for property marking, and the withdrawal of financial support for the offender program.

CASE STUDY 2: South Australian residential break and enter prevention project

A demonstration project was funded in two sites in metropolitan Adelaide to reduce residential burglary and in particular, reduce the rate of repeat victimisation. The project was delivered by volunteers who were provided with information about burglary victims by the police. Volunteers then contacted the resident to provide informal victim support, security advice tailored for the dwelling and victim, referral to an engraver for property marking, neighbour contact and referral to other agencies. In addition, residents in one site received the provision and installation of locks, to the value of $200.

The evaluation found that a large proportion of households took preventative action in response to the intervention, although lower income households were less likely to take action. Those households in the site provided with financial assistance were more likely to install security devices. While the rate of repeat victimisation remained stable in the target area, there was an increase in the comparison area, suggesting that the project had some impact in preventing repeat victimisation. However, there appeared to be little impact on the rate of residential break and enter overall. The evaluation concluded that this was due, at least in part, to a low referral rate to the program by police, which meant that only a third of burglary victims were provided with an opportunity to participate in the program. The evaluation also highlighted the importance of providing effective training, supervision and support to volunteers.

CASE STUDY 3: Primrose Estate anti-burglary project

This project was targeted at an estate with high rates of burglary, social deprivation, nuisance crimes and vandalism. This estate (which was part of a larger estate) consisted of two and three story terraces of houses and multi-story blocks, with open spaces at the end of the streets and alleyways between the terraces. The scheme targeted a small part of the estate (175 houses in total) with the highest incidence of burglary and ran for a six-month period. The housing department conducted an assessment of each property, with the assistance of a police officer and high security doors and windows (hardwearing and heavy duty) were fitted or replaced and window locks installed as part of the council's routine repair work. The project was heavily promoted (in local press and through permanent signage) to raise awareness of the action that was being taken and a Neighbourhood Watch scheme was established in half of the streets to encourage natural surveillance. Despite some delays in completing the work, the project resulted in a significant reduction in burglary rates when compared with surrounding areas.

CASE STUDY 4: Safer cities programme

Between 1988 and 1995, 20 high-crime cities in England and Wales were identified as having disproportionate rates of residential burglary and repeat victimisation. The Safer Cities Programme provided funding to local teams to develop and implement initiatives to address the problem in their city or borough, guided by a steering committee comprising representatives from local government, police, probation, business and community groups. A review of the schemes showed that target hardening was the most common prevention measure used and involved door, window and fencing improvements, entry systems, alarms and security lighting. Using both household crime surveys and police data, a meta-evaluation of the schemes found that the program had resulted in a significant reduction in burglary. Not only that, but the program also proved to be cost-effective.

CASE STUDY 5: Closing off opportunities for crime

In the City of Liverpool in England, there was a problem with offenders gaining access to terraced properties through back alleyways to commit burglaries. To address this problem, hardwearing lockable gates were installed to restrict access to these alleyways to local residents and reduce opportunities for offenders to gain access to properties. The result was a 37 per cent reduction in burglary relative to the comparison area. There was also a diffusion of benefits to properties in surrounding areas and the scheme was found to be cost beneficial.

Endnotes

Case Study 1: Sturgeon-Adams L, Adamson S & Davidson N 2005. *Hartlepool: A case study in burglary reduction*. Hull, UK: Centre for Criminology and Criminal Justice, University of Hull.

Case Study 2: Henderson M 2002. *Preventing repeat residential burglary: A meta-evaluation of two Australian demonstration projects*. Canberra: Commonwealth Attorney-General's Office.

Case Study 3: Tilley N & Webb J 1994. Burglary reduction: Findings from safer cities schemes. *Crime Detection and Prevention Series* paper 51. London: Home Office, Police Research Group.

Case Study 4: Ekblom P, Law H & Sutton M 1996. *Safer cities and domestic burglary*. London: Home Office.

Case Study 5: Bowers KJ, Johnson SD & Hirschfield AFG 2004. Closing off opportunities for crime: An evaluation of alley-gating. *European Journal on Criminal Policy and Research* 10: 285–308.

Further reading

For further reading in this area, refer to the accompanying handbook and literature review.

Acknowledgements