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Bureau of Justice Statistics Bulletin

Household Burglary

January 1985

A substantial proportion of violent crimes that occur in the home are committed during household burglaries. Three-fifths of all rapes in the home, three-fifths of all home robberies, and about a third of home aggravated and simple assaults are committed by burglars. During the 10-year period 1973-82, 2.8 million such violent crimes occurred during the course of burglaries, even though the vast majority of burglaries occur when no household member is present.

Defining burglary

Burglary, like many other crimes, has a precise legal definition that may vary among jurisdictions.

The definitions used in the National Crime Survey (NCS) differ somewhat from the definition used in the Uniform Crime Reporting program (UCR) of the Federal Bureau of Investigation.¹ The UCR bases its classification upon a determination of the offender's intent. Because this concept is often difficult or impossible to establish in a victimization survey, the NCS replaces the test of intent with a test of whether the offender had the right to enter the residence.

The NCS defines burglary as unlawful or forcible entry of a residence, usually, but not necessarily, attended by theft, including attempted forcible entry. The entry may be by force, such as picking a lock, breaking a window, or slashing a screen, or it may be through an unlocked door or an open window. As long as the person had no legal right to enter, a burglary has occurred.

Furthermore, the structure entered need not be the residence itself for a household burglary to have taken

¹The differences and similarities between the NCS and UCR are discussed in the first BJS bulletin, *Measuring Crime* (February 1981, NCJ-75710).

Household burglary ranks among the more serious felony crimes, not only because it involves the illegal entry of one's home, but also because a substantial proportion of the violent crimes that occur in the home take place during a burglary incident. Thus burglary is potentially a far more serious crime than its classification as a property offense indicates; for many victims, including those that avoid the trauma of personal confrontation, the invasion of their home on one or more occasions constitutes a violation that produces permanent emotional scars.

This study of burglary is based on 10 years of data from the

place. Illegal entry into a garage, shed, or any other structure on the premises also constitutes household burglary. In fact, burglary does not necessarily have to occur on the premises. If the breaking and entering occurred in a hotel or a vacation residence, it would still be classified as burglary for the household whose member or members were staying there at the time.

Three types of burglary can be distinguished:

- **Forcible entry**—in which force is used to gain entry (e.g., by breaking a window or slashing a screen).
- **Attempted forcible entry**—in which force is used in an attempt to gain entry.
- **Unlawful entry**—in which someone with no legal right to be on the premises gains entry even though force is not used.

During the 10-year period examined here, 73 million incidents of forcible

National Crime Survey (NCS), the only national source of detailed data on the characteristics of individual felony crimes. During the 10 year period 1973-82, there were about 73 million incidents of household burglary.

Using the information presented in this report, concerned citizens and law enforcement officials will be able to develop a profile of households at risk of being burglarized. The crime prevention potential of such a risk profile is enormous.

Future BJS bulletins will address other felony crimes, better to assist individuals in minimizing their risk of victimization.

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entry, attempted forcible entry, and unlawful entry took place. Unlawful entry accounted for 45% of all burglaries, forcible entry made up 33%, and attempted forcible entry accounted for 22% of all burglaries (table 1). These and other data derived from the Bureau's National Crime Survey (NCS) provide a detailed description of the crime of household burglary.

Table 1. Household burglaries, 1973-1982

Type of burglary	Number	Percent	Average annual rate ^a
Total	73,308,000	100%	94.6
Forcible entry	24,251,000	33	31.3
Unlawful entry	32,956,000	45	42.5
Attempted forcible entry	16,100,000	22	20.8

Note: Detail may not sum to totals because of rounding.

^aRate per 1,000 households.

Findings

Not every household burglary fits the common view of burglary: intrusion by a stranger, by force or stealth, with intent to steal property. In reality, a substantial percentage of household burglaries are committed by persons related to or known by the victims, and in a large number of burglaries the victims report that there was no theft or attempt to steal property.

Information about offenders was available for about 10 percent of all burglaries.² Slightly less than half of these burglaries were known to have been committed by strangers (table 2). Spouses or ex-spouses committed 7%; other relatives, 4%; and acquaintances, 25%. The percent distribution of offenders for completed forcible entry and for unlawful entry were quite similar. Attempted forcible entry had a far higher proportion of strangers and persons of unknown relationship than either of the other two burglary types.

Characteristics of households victimized by burglary

Race of household head. Black households were forcibly entered (including attempts) much more frequently than white households, but they were unlawfully entered at roughly the same rate (table 3). Households of other races (Native Americans, Asians, and Pacific Islanders) had burglary rates comparable to those of white households.³

Family income. Families with incomes under \$7,500 a year had the highest overall burglary rates during the 10-year period. Among other income groups, there was little difference in the rate at which households were forcibly entered. For unlawful entry, however, households with incomes over \$25,000 had a higher rate than any others except those with incomes under \$7,500.

Tenure and number of units in structure. Households in owner-occupied residences had lower rates for each type of burglary than households in rented quarters. Households in single-family houses, whether owned or rented, had lower burglary rates than households in multi-unit dwellings. The households most susceptible to burglary (especially to forcible entry) were in buildings with three to nine dwelling units.

²The National Crime Survey is designed to collect offender information only for incidents during which a household member was present.

³The data are inadequate to examine each of the other races separately.

Table 2. Relationship to offenders in household burglaries, 1973-82

Offender characteristics	Percent of incidents			
	Burglary total	Forcible entry	Unlawful entry	Attempted forcible entry
Total burglaries in which offender characteristics were obtained	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
Spouse/ex-spouse	7.5	7.5	10.0	1.8
Other relatives	3.9	5.6	3.9	2.2
Acquaintances	25.0	25.5	28.9	15.6
Known by sight only	5.6	5.8	5.8	4.9
Strangers	47.8	44.1	45.1	57.6
Offender identity uncertain	10.3	11.5	6.4	17.9
Percent of all burglaries in which offender characteristics were obtained	9.4	6.9	11.0	10.1

Note: Detail may not sum to totals because of rounding.

Table 3. Burglary incident rates, 1973-82 average yearly rates, by household characteristics

Household characteristics	Rate per 1,000 households			
	Burglary total	Forcible entry	Unlawful entry	Attempted forcible entry
All households	94.6	31.3	42.5	20.8
Race of household head				
White	89.6	27.9	42.4	19.2
Black	137.1	59.7	44.0	33.3
Other	96.3	32.0	40.8	23.4
Family income				
Less than \$7,500	111.9	37.2	49.7	25.1
\$7,500-\$14,999	90.1	30.5	38.9	20.7
\$15,000-\$24,999	84.7	26.4	40.0	18.2
\$25,000 or more	90.5	28.6	44.2	17.7
Tenure				
Owned or being bought	76.5	24.9	35.8	15.8
Rented	127.0	42.8	54.5	29.6
Number of units in structure				
1	86.0	28.5	39.8	17.8
2	108.0	37.9	45.1	24.9
3	112.9	42.9	44.5	25.6
4	128.1	42.9	50.0	35.1
5-9	133.3	47.0	51.3	35.0
10 or more	105.6	33.6	45.2	26.8
Mobile homes	82.7	28.4	36.1	18.1
Other than housing units	170.1	22.3	133.6	14.2
Place of residence^a				
Urban	113.5	43.7	41.7	28.1
Suburban	83.3	26.8	37.7	19.9
Rural	66.1	17.7	36.0	12.4

Note: Detail may not sum to totals because of rounding.

^aBased on only nonseries, nonescalating burglaries—see text.

Households in buildings with 10 or more units were forcibly entered at a rate closer to that for households in 2-unit buildings than to that for households in multi-unit buildings of intermediate size. It is possible that the larger number of neighbors and the greater traffic in buildings with 10 or more units, as well as the higher security measures offered in many such buildings, have a deterrent effect on forcible entry.

Persons living in group quarters, such as nontransient hotel rooms and dormitories, had unlawful entry rates that were 2 1/2 to 3 times higher than the rates for households. On the other hand, their forcible entry rates were lower than those for other households.

Place of residence.⁴ Urban, suburban, and rural households differ greatly in

rates of forcible entry (either attempted or completed). Urban households had the highest rates; rural households, the lowest. There was much less difference among urban, suburban, and rural households in the rate at which they were unlawfully entered.

Ninety-five percent of both forcible entries and unlawful entries and 99% of all attempted entries took place at the respondent's residence. The rest occurred at a vacation home, hotel, or motel at which household members were staying at the time of the burglary.

⁴The comparison of burglary rates by place of residence is based on published NCS data rather than on the complete NCS file (including escalated and series burglaries) used for the rest of the report because of missing place-of-residence data on the complete file.

Seasonal fluctuations. Burglary occurred more often in the warmer months than in the colder months, though this pattern was more pronounced for unlawful entry than for completed or attempted forcible entry (figure 1). A possible explanation for the larger seasonal fluctuation in unlawful entry is the greater tendency to leave windows and doors open during the warm months, creating an opportunity for easy entry.

Time of day. A greater proportion of the victims of forcible entry than the victims of unlawful entry or attempted forcible entry could identify the period of day in which the intrusion took place

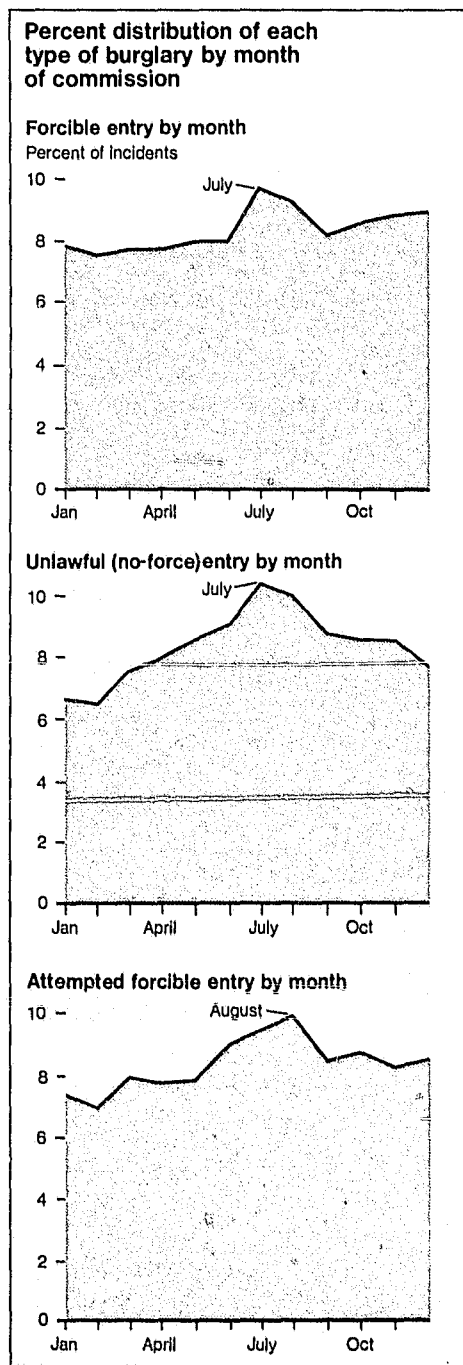


Figure 1

(table 4). The distribution of incidents in which the time of occurrence was known was about evenly divided between day and night for each type of burglary, although victims reported that a greater proportion of attempted forcible entries than of other types occurred between midnight and 6 a.m.

Theft and property damage. The vast majority of all forcible entries and unlawful entries involve actual or attempted theft of household property

(table 5). Such is not the case, however, for attempted forcible entry. An attempted theft was reported in only 14% of all such incidents and a completed theft in only 3%. It is likely that many victims, having only evidence of an attempted entry, such as damaged locks or broken windows, declined to speculate on the intent of the persons who tried to gain entry to their home.

The distribution of burglaries

Table 4. Percent of burglaries by time of occurrence, 1973-82

Time of occurrence	Percent of incidents			
	Burglary total	Forcible entry	Unlawful entry	Attempted forcible entry
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
Daytime				
6 a.m.-6 p.m.	35.5	38.6	37.1	27.6
Nighttime				
6 p.m.-midnight	18.9	22.1	16.1	19.9
Midnight-6 a.m.	12.1	11.7	9.9	17.2
Night but don't know when	7.9	7.9	7.6	8.6
Not known and not available	25.6	19.8	29.3	26.8

Note: Detail may not sum to totals because of rounding.

Table 5. Percent of burglaries involving property theft or property damage, 1973-82

Type of crime	Percent of incidents			
	Burglary total	Forcible entry	Unlawful entry	Attempted forcible entry
Involving theft	62.9%	77.2%	81.9%	2.7%
Involving attempted theft	7.1	6.2	4.2	14.3
Involving property damage	41.7	72.6	7.1	66.0

Note: Percentages do not add to 100 because a single burglary can have elements of both theft and property damage.

Table 6. Percent of burglaries reported to police, 1973-82

Characteristics	Percent of incidents		
	Forcible entry	Unlawful entry	Attempted forcible entry
Total	71.1%	39.6%	34.1%
Value of stolen property			
No monetary value	52.0	27.3	*
Less than \$10	48.4	13.8	39.5
\$10-49	51.0	17.3	31.5
\$50-249	68.0	43.4	51.7
\$250-999	86.6	68.7	75.7
\$1,000 or more	93.2	71.9	62.0
Relationship to offenders			
Spouse/ex-spouse	79.6	63.7	79.5
Other relative	86.6	73.3	94.0
Well known	72.9	55.7	72.0
Casual acquaintance	70.6	59.1	80.8
Known by sight only	76.9	59.4	63.3
Stranger	80.0	63.9	67.1
Offender identity uncertain	78.6	55.4	61.6
Offender identity unknown ^a	71.6	36.9	30.2
Extent of burglary			
Violent ^b	83.6	70.3	82.4
Not violent	71.7	37.9	33.0
Presence of a household member in home during burglary			
At least one present	77.2	59.3	60.1
No one present	71.6	36.5	28.8

* Too few cases in the survey to obtain statistically reliable data.
^a Primarily burglaries in which no household member was present.
^b Burglaries that involved a crime of rape, robbery, or assault.

involving property damage presents no surprises; a majority of both attempted and completed forcible entries involved property damage, while only a small percentage of unlawful entries did.

Reporting to police. The probability that a burglary will be reported to the police is related to various aspects of the burglary: the kind of intrusion, who committed it, whether a household member was present, whether a violent crime was committed during the burglary, whether anything was stolen, and, if stolen, the value of the property.

Forcible entries were reported to the police almost twice as often as unlawful entries, and just over twice as often as attempted forcible entries (table 6).

Burglaries committed by relatives (excluding spouses and ex-spouses) were reported to the police more frequently than burglaries committed by acquaintances, strangers, or unknown offenders. The high reporting rate of burglaries by relatives may be a function of the way home intrusion by relatives is perceived by the victims.

The victimized household would almost always consider an intrusion by a stranger or an unknown offender to be a crime, but it is likely that many cases of home intrusion by a relative are not considered a crime or are thought too private to discuss with anyone, including a survey interviewer. If so, then the home intrusions reported to the survey would primarily be the ones that the victims felt warranted police intervention.

Burglaries in which a household member was also the victim of a violent crime were reported to the police to a greater extent than those in which a household member was present but not violently victimized; these latter, in turn, were reported more frequently than burglaries that took place when no one was home. The increases in reporting by household members present during the incident and household members violently victimized during burglary incidents were greatest for attempted forcible entry and least for completed forcible entry.

The higher reporting rates for burglaries in which a household member was present but not violently victimized than for burglaries with no one present may be because the victims felt there was a greater possibility that the police could do something when the offender had been observed.

For each burglary type, the percentage of incidents reported was

Table 7. Percent distribution of reasons for not reporting burglaries to the police, 1973-82

Reasons for not reporting	Percent of incidents not reported			
	Burglary total	Forcible entry	Unlawful entry	Attempted forcible entry
Nothing could be done	39.3%	36.0%	40.0%	40.2%
Did not think it was important enough	28.3	21.5	27.7	33.5
Police wouldn't want to be bothered	10.8	14.6	9.6	10.8
Didn't want to take the time	2.7	3.7	2.6	2.3
Private matter	8.8	11.2	11.1	3.0
Didn't want to get involved	1.1	1.7	1.0	0.8
Fear of reprisal	1.3	1.8	1.4	0.6
Reported to someone else	7.7	7.3	7.4	8.6
Other reasons	29.9	34.0	27.8	31.2

Note: Because some respondents gave more than one answer, reasons may total more than 100%.

Table 8. Presence of household members and violent crimes during burglaries, 1973-82

Burglaries	Percent of incidents							
	Burglary total		Forcible entry		Unlawful entry		Attempted forcible entry	
	All burglaries	Burglary with household member present	Total	Burglary with household member present	Total	Burglary with household member present	Total	Burglary with household member present
Total	100.0%		100.0%		100.0%		100.0%	
With household member present	12.7	100.0%	8.7	100.0%	13.6	100.0%	16.7	100.0%
Involving violent crime	3.8	30.2	3.0	34.4	5.2	38.6	2.2	13.0

Table 9. Violent crimes committed during household burglaries, 1973-82

Number of violent burglaries	Total violent burglaries	Percent of violent burglaries			
		Total	Forcible entry	Unlawful entry	Attempted forcible entry
Total	2,761,000	100.0%	26.1%	61.3%	12.6%
Rape	281,000	100.0	34.8	62.5	2.7*
Robbery	786,000	100.0	33.8	60.5	5.9
Aggravated assault	623,000	100.0	21.8	56.0	22.2
Simple assault	1,071,000	100.0	20.8	64.5	14.7

*Estimate, based on 10 or fewer sample cases, is statistically unreliable.

directly related to the value of property stolen; few incidents were reported when the value of the loss was low, and reporting increased as the value of the loss increased. When the value of the loss was \$1,000 or more, more than 90% of all forcible entries were reported to the police.

Burglary victims who did not report the crime to the police most often said "nothing could be done" to explain why the incident was not reported (table 7). "Did not think it was important enough" was also a frequent reason for not reporting, although more so for attempted forcible entries than for completed forcible entries or unlawful entries.

Violent crime occurring during burglaries

One of the greatest fears that people have concerning burglary is the

possibility that a burglar may inflict physical harm on a household member who happens to be present during the incident.

NCS data indicate that these fears are well-founded. A household member was present during only 9% of all forcible entries, 14% of all unlawful entries and 17% of all attempted forcible entries (table 8). However, in these cases a violent crime was committed during a third of the forcible entries, during almost two-fifths of the unlawful entries and during one-seventh of the attempted entries.

During the 10-year period studied, the 2.8 million violent crimes that were committed in the course of attempted or completed household burglaries involved about 3% of the completed forcible entries, 5% of the unlawful entries and 2% of the attempted forcible entries each year (table 9).

Trends

Unlawful entry without force was the only type of burglary that showed any discernible trend across the 10-year period, 1973-82 (figure 2). Its rate showed a moderate decrease from 47 incidents per 1,000 households in 1973 to 39 per 1,000 in 1982. Both completed and attempted forcible entry rates remained substantially the same throughout the period, although in 1982 forcible entry showed its lowest rate for the 10-year period.

The somewhat declining trend in unlawful entry may be evidence that people are becoming more careful about locking their doors and windows to prevent these crimes. If people are taking more precautions in keeping their homes secured, one would expect to find the decline in the unlawful entry rate that NCS data show. However, other factors may have contributed to the observed trend.

No evidence could be found in the data that the increasing prevalence of security devices (such as burglar alarms and sophisticated locks, etc.) has had any effect on the amount of forcible entry. The rates for both attempted and completed forcible entry remained extremely stable between 1973 and 1982.

The lack of evidence that burglar alarms have affected the burglary rate should not be interpreted as proof that such devices are not effective. It merely indicates that the survey data shed no light on this subject. There are other possible explanations for the unchanging forcible entry trend. For example, burglars may be avoiding homes with alarms and protective devices located in communities with active crime prevention in favor of less protected buildings and neighborhoods. If so, then the precautions that some people have taken would result in a shift of the location of the offenses—which would not be reflected in the crime statistics—rather than a decrease in the amount of crime—which would appear in the data.

Methodology

The classification procedures used to produce the annual NCS estimates of crime levels and rates published in the series, Criminal Victimization in the United States, classify a crime according to its most serious attribute. Thus a household burglary that also involved rape is counted as a rape. The burglary component of the incident is not included in the estimate of burglaries. This is done so that every

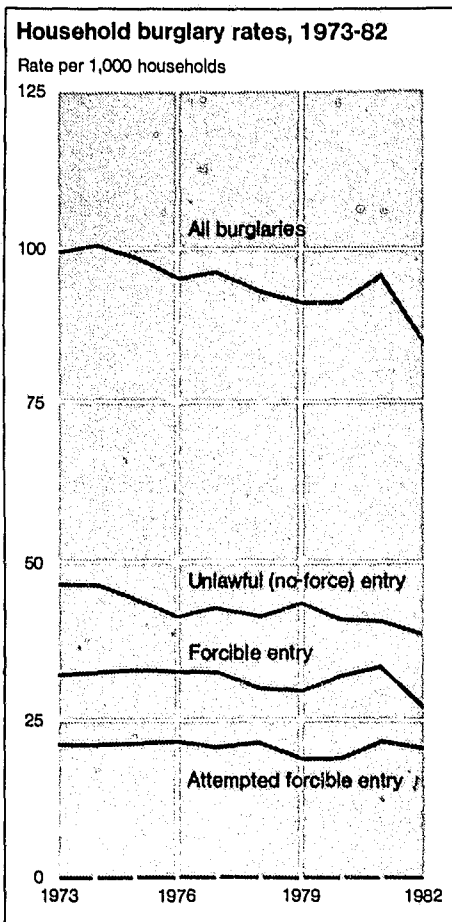


Figure 2

criminal incident is counted only once according to its most serious element, in order to simplify the estimation and analytic process.

This report, because it focuses on burglaries, employs an alternative classification procedure: Any criminal incident that had a burglary component was counted as a burglary. The estimates in this report also include series incidents (with each counted as only one incident) normally excluded from estimates in annual NCS publications.⁵ These make up about 4% of all forcible entries and 5% of all unlawful entries. For these reasons the estimates in this report are higher than those in other NCS publications. Even excluding these violent burglaries and series incident burglaries, the estimates in this report differ only slightly from those in other NCS reports because of the use here of an incident weight rather than a household weight. The incident weight was used because of the inclusion of crimes counted as personal crimes under the usual classification procedure.⁶

⁵A discussion of the measurement of series victimizations is found in the BJS technical report, Criminal Victimization in the U.S.: 1979-80 Changes, 1973-80 Trends (July 1982, NCJ-80838).

⁶Weighting of survey data is discussed in Appendix III of Criminal Victimization in the U.S., 1982, (December 1984, NCJ-92820).

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