

Distraction Burglary: a summary

This research concerns distraction burglary, a crime where deception or distraction is used to gain, or try to gain, access to a dwelling in order to commit burglary (*tricktyveri* in Danish). While distraction burglary is by no means new, the frequency with which it is reported to police has tripled in recent years. The vast majority of cases occur in the Capital Region of Denmark (one of Denmark's five administrative units) and involve elderly victims – especially elderly women.

Distraction burglary has never been studied in Denmark, and only a few studies exist elsewhere in the world. We have therefore decided to shed light on this phenomenon.

The current report has three primary aims:

- To describe the nature of distraction burglary as it occurs in Danish residences
- To describe characteristics of victims and offenders involved in these burglaries
- To describe the consequences of distraction burglary for victims' life quality

The project also examines society's reaction to distraction burglary. The focus here is on investigation, sentencing, prevention and victim support. In this connection, we consider:

- Investigation and sentencing strategies employed by authorities for crime suppression
- Crime prevention techniques and methods to assess their effectiveness
- Victim access to support/psychological assistance and insurance reimbursement

This study is conducted with a primary focus on the Copenhagen Police District. This is done to limit the research undertaking and is justified by the fact that a large proportion of all distraction burglaries occur in this area. The qualitative part of the study, which consists of interviews, is conducted exclusively in the Copenhagen Police District and is restricted to persons over age 65. The quantitative part of the research examines nationwide trends for victims of all ages.

Methods

The quantitative part of the study is based on data extracted from the police case management system (POLSAS) for the period 2007-2010. The data include information on:

- Crimes: Location, time, number of offenders, and a resume of each event
- Victims: Age and gender
- Offenders: Age, gender, nationality, court disposition

Since very few distraction burglaries are cleared by arrest, the study also examines victim and witness descriptions of offenders where available. While both arrest data and victim/witness

reports have their weaknesses, a reasonable description of offenders can be achieved by combining these sources. Descriptions of offenders based on triangulated data are conducted for distraction burglaries occurring in the Copenhagen Police District in 2010.

Information on insurance coverage for distraction burglary has been collected from the national branch organization of the Danish insurance and pension industry (*Forsikring & Pension*) and from four individual insurance companies. Information has also been collected from social services on the availability of free psychological help for victims. Finally, interviews have been conducted with prosecutors and detectives from the Copenhagen Police. The interview with the prosecutor identifies the legal paragraphs most often used to charge distraction burglars while the interviews with detectives concern strategies for crime investigation.

The nature of distraction burglary

A comparison to traditional residential burglary provides a useful means by which to consider the volume and trends in distraction burglary. According to Statistics Denmark, there were 1,448 distraction burglaries compared to 44,788 traditional residential burglaries reported to police in 2010. There were, therefore, 30 times more traditional burglaries than distraction burglaries. However, trends in distraction burglary indicate that it has increased more rapidly than traditional burglary. Thus, in the year 2000, traditional burglary was 50 times more prevalent than distraction burglary.

The number of distraction burglaries increased by 137 percent between 2000 and 2010, i.e., from 611 to 1,448 cases. The majority of the distraction burglaries committed between 2007 and 2010 occurred in the Capital Region of Denmark. In all, 69 percent of the reported cases in 2007-10 occurred in three contiguous police districts: Copenhagen, Copenhagen's Vestegen and North Zealand. In comparison, only 37 percent of all reported crime occurred in these three districts during the same period. Rødovre, Herlev and Frederiksberg were the three municipalities with highest rates of reported distraction burglary per household. The Brønshøj-Husum neighbourhood had the highest rate within the municipality of Copenhagen.

While there are no clear seasonal patterns, both police reports and survey data indicate that distraction burglary varies by time of day and day of week. Most distraction burglaries happen in the afternoon, while very few occur before 10am and after 8pm. There are more reported cases on workdays than weekend days.

Data from POLSAS and POLMAP provide information on the forms of deception that distraction burglars employ. In 438 of the national cases, the form of deception was clearly specified. In 201 cases (46 percent) trick thieves presented themselves as someone on an official errand who the victim was likely to trust (e.g., meter reader, repairman). In the remaining cases, distraction burglars either asked for some form of assistance (34 percent) or offered help or gifts to the victims (20 percent).

80 percent of the cases resulting in loss of property involved theft of money. The amount stolen varies widely, but three-quarter of the cases involved amounts under 5,000 DKK (672 Euro in May 2012) while 1 percent involved an amount over 50,000 DKK. Jewellery is the second most stolen item, though distraction burglars also go after credit cards in wallets and purses.

Victim profile

Most victims of distraction burglary share three characteristics: they are elderly, female, and typically alone at the time of the crime. The average victim is 80 years old and three-quarters are female. This suggests that victims are not chosen at random, but rather targeted demographically. Victims in the Capital Region of Denmark are slightly older on average and more likely to be female than those in the rest of the country.

Three out of four of the survey respondents who were victims of distraction burglary have cleaning/health aides in the home. The majority live on their own, in most cases because they are widowed.

Offender profile

During the period 2007-2010, 262 persons were charged in connection with 199 distraction burglary cases. Just under half of those charged (126) were found guilty.

Amongst those charged, 67 percent were men and 33 percent women. The overrepresentation of men may, however, be a function of the investigation process. When we look at the descriptions of offenders (whether caught or uncaught) given by victims to police in 2010, the gender ratio is even. The same goes for descriptions of offenders given by victims in our interviews. The overrepresentation of men among charged offenders may be due to the police being better geared to identify male as compared to female suspects.

The majority of charged distraction burglars are in their 30s, though there are significant numbers in their 20s and 40s. Only 5 percent are over 50 years old. This age distribution is consistent with what interviewees describe. It is also consistent with victims' estimates of offender age found in police reports from the Copenhagen Police District in 2010.

Among the 262 charged, 161 live in Denmark and are Danish citizens (resident nationals), 39 live in Denmark and are foreign citizens (resident aliens), and 62 live outside of Denmark and are foreign citizens (non-resident alien crime tourists). Most of the 62 non-resident aliens cited for distraction burglary are Romanian citizens.

Men are more likely to commit distraction burglary alone (as solo offenders) than women. Conversely, women are more likely to commit distraction burglary in groups than are men. Gender

differences are also apparent in regard to the specific types of deceptions distraction burglars employ.

We have divided distraction burglars into five categories based on subject descriptions from police reports and the characteristics of suspects charged:

1. Male ethnic Danes tend to be around 30 years of age. They generally operate on their own and often present themselves as workmen (repairmen, meter readers, etc.). This group accounts for approximately 25 percent of all distraction burglars.
2. Female ethnic Danes are mostly in their late twenties. They operate both on their own and in pairs, and often present themselves as home help aides. This group accounts for another circa 25 percent of all distraction burglars.
3. Male/female first-generation immigrants tend to be around 30 years of age. They operate both alone and in groups. They have an Eastern European appearance and are often deemed to be Roma. This groups accounts for approximately 20 percent of all distraction burglars.
4. Male/female second-generation immigrants are generally in their late twenties. They operate alone, in pairs and in groups, and often present themselves as workmen (men) or home help aides (women). This group accounts for approximately 10 percent of all distraction burglars.
5. Crime tourists are frequently over 30 years of age, generally operate in pairs, and are often Romanian citizens. This group accounts for approximately 20 percent of all distraction burglars.

Consequences for victims' life quality

The interviews indicate that some respondents feel vulnerable and/or scared after experiencing a distraction burglary. Furthermore, it appears that a certain proportion blame themselves for having been victimized. In some cases, the increased feelings of vulnerability are not general, but rather specific to situations reminiscent of those in which the distraction burglary occurred. On the other hand, a significant proportion of the interviewees appear rather unaffected by their victimization experience.

Attempts were made to identify correlations between the increased sense of fear/vulnerability and various aspects of the theft experience or other relevant circumstances.

The psychological reactions could, for example, be related to the seriousness of the event. We measure seriousness on the bases of whether the theft was attempted or completed; whether force or threats were used in its execution; and by the number of offenders involved. A victim's psychological reaction might also be affected by prior exposure to distraction burglary and/or other crime, or by having simply heard about others' experiences with distraction burglary in the home.

There is also a possibility that the psychological reaction to distraction burglary is dependent on a victim's personal characteristics.

The interviews we conducted did not reveal any connection between the aforementioned factors and a victim's psychological reaction to distraction burglary. It therefore remains unclear why some victims react with increased feelings of vulnerability and fear while others experience only minor problems and still others seem entirely unaffected by it.

An English study from 2003 suggests a connection between victimization by distraction burglary and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Thornton et al. (2003) emphasize the fact that victims of distraction burglary exhibit a heightened tendency toward the use of avoidance strategies. Victims, for example, refrain from thinking about the event and avoid things that remind them of it. A portion of the interviewees in our study reveal some of these patterns.

Most victims can manage the economic consequences of distraction burglary. Some are eligible for at least partial reimbursement through their insurance plans. In general, the human costs of distraction burglary tend to exceed the financial costs.

Investigation and sentencing

Foreign studies suggest that a large proportion of distraction burglaries go unreported to police. We do not know the extent of this phenomenon in Denmark, but among those interviewed, one-third say they have experienced a distraction burglary that they did not report to authorities.

Only 5 percent of all reported distraction burglaries in 2010 resulted in charges against one or more offenders. This is a very low clearance rate as compared to robbery (37 percent) and violence (76 percent). Distraction burglary involves contact between victims and offenders by definition, which generally provides solid leads for investigation. The low clearance rate therefore suggests that police do not prioritize the investigation of distraction burglaries. It is also fairly clear that the police often fail to visit distraction burglary crime scenes, which rules out the potential to collect solid evidence. There is no doubt that decisions concerning the use of police resources play a major role in this context.

Funen's Police District stands out in terms of the proportion of cases solved. This police district has a clearance rate of over 20 percent. Our research suggests that Funen's Police make special efforts when they have reason to believe that distraction burglars are operating in the area. For example, the emergency services department is alerted and asked to keep their eyes open. In addition, special efforts are made in order to determine whether an individual charged with distraction burglary has a prior history of similar offenses.

Most of the cleared cases are solved within a limited period. Twenty-three percent are cleared the same day, and two-thirds are cleared within a month. Most of the distraction burglaries that are

cleared the same day are solved thanks to attentive citizens who contact police. Distraction burglars are generally charged with theft under penal code section 276. Prosecutors seem to use the same legal paragraph regardless of the seriousness of the theft. During the period 2000-2010, over half of all cases were dropped due to insufficient evidence. Persons found guilty are sentenced to just under six (5.8) months in prison.

Crime prevention techniques

Various organizations provide information on means for avoiding distraction burglary. This information is primarily aimed at older people who comprise the primary risk group.

Recommendations can be grouped under four headings:

1. Don't open the door for strangers. Install door chains and peepholes.
2. Make firm arrangements with expected visitors (family members, home help aides, etc.),
3. Minimize your potential loss by not keeping too much cash in the house
4. Be aware of strangers (potential distraction burglars) in the neighbourhood

It is our opinion that these recommendations are too rigid and do not sufficiently account for the fact that elderly persons are the primary targets of distraction burglars. One of the most often repeated forms of advice is not to open the door for strangers. This is advice that most people have heard and that is generally well followed. We suggest attention to the following guidelines when giving the elderly advice on how to avoid distraction burglary: do not create additional insecurity; pay attention to differences in the target audience; make sure that your recommendations are consistent; and disseminate your message through channels that the target audience knows and trusts.

Access to victim support, psychological help and insurance coverage

Elderly victims of distraction burglary have access to the same kinds of assistance as other crime victims. Specifically, they are eligible for referral to Victim Services, where they can get one free hour of advice. Furthermore, they can contact their own doctor who can decide whether there is need for psychological counselling, which is also free for the patient.

Many crime victims are eligible for a referral to a psychologist. There are, however, certain qualifications that must be met. Under the current system, the state pays 60 percent of the psychologist's costs, while the patient pays the remaining 40 percent. Victims of robbery, rape and other violence are usually eligible for psychological referral. Victims of distraction burglary are generally eligible as well. Pensioners referred to a psychologist by their own doctor can seek to recoup as much as 85 percent of their own expenditures by applying for subsidies from their local social services.

Distraction burglary is generally regarded as simple theft, which means that losses of cash and jewellery are not covered by homeowner's insurance. Three out of the four insurance companies

we have contacted, however, offer a special policy for senior citizens that covers distraction burglary under the same conditions as traditional residential burglary.

Recommendations

Distraction burglary is primarily targeted against the elder segment of the Danish population. This is a phase of life often characterized by loss: One's occupational identity is lost after retirement. And as the years pass, friends, acquaintances and spouses disappear as well. Distraction burglars leave deep scars when they abuse the elderly's confidence in other people by cheating them in their own homes. It is therefore a good idea to alert the elderly to the existence of distraction burglary so that they can keep an eye on their surroundings. However, this warning should – in our opinion – be given in a subdued manner so their new awareness does not lead to increased isolation and feelings of vulnerability. The chance of being exposed to distraction burglary is, after all, quite low.

We think that distraction burglary deserves a higher priority from the police. At minimum, the police should make an appearance at the scene of all reported events. This would not cost so much and would be beneficial on at least two fronts: First, it gives investigators the possibility to collect physical evidence and interview neighbours, as well as allowing for better collection of victim statements and descriptions of offenders than possible by telephone. Second, a visit by a police officer has a symbolic value for the victim, who will feel taken more seriously. Such a visit would also allow the police to judge whether a victim needs help.

We recommend that a more active effort be made to inform elderly citizens about the forms of assistance available to them from their own doctors, from psychologists and from Victim Services. It is also important that they be encouraged to use these services. Finally, we recommend that each municipality designate a specific person to coordinate these information dissemination efforts.