



850 Bryant Street  
San Francisco  
California 94103

Phone:  
(415) 673-SAFE  
or  
(415) 553-1984

Fax:  
(415) 553-1967

[www.sfsafe.org](http://www.sfsafe.org)

*A Community Crime  
Prevention Organization  
sponsored in cooperation with the  
San Francisco Police Department*

## SECURITY CONCERNS FOR HOUSES

AND OTHER SMALL RESIDENTIAL PROPERTIES OF TRADITIONAL (MOSTLY WOOD) CONSTRUCTION

### Most Homes Can be Secured by Methods that are Cost-Effective, and Aesthetically Acceptable

#### Definition of Burglary (Section 459 in the California Penal Code)

Burglary is simply entering a premise for the purpose of committing a theft or a felony. (The definition does not require forced entry.)

#### The Good News and Bad News

The bad news is that the average home is not difficult to enter without a key. The good news is that preventing intrusion can usually be accomplished with cost-effective measures that do not detract from the appearance of your house.

#### Burglars Often Target the Less Obvious Doors and Windows

Most residents emphasize security on the most obvious doors and windows, especially on the front of their house. So burglars often go to the doors and windows that are more visually obscured, and less easily accessed from the street. Many burglars are willing to climb to access the side or rear of a house.

#### About Half of Residential Burglaries are Unforced Entries

Most burglaries and other serious crimes involve some degree of opportunism. Burglars often watch a group of houses from the street, a park, or some other vantage point. They notice schedules and patterns of the people coming and going. They also notice small valuables (such as laptop computers) being carried in or, or lying on a table that is visible through a window. They are willing to do significant climbing to access an open window. While some people assume that climbing to a window would be blatant, the burglar considers it an opportunity.

#### What about the Other Half of Residential Burglaries ?

Force is used to make entry in about half of residential burglaries. The most common tool for a burglar is a prying tool, usually a simple screw driver. A great deal of force can be applied to a door with such a tool, without making much noise. Some burglars do break glass to gain entry to a house, but usually not large panes of glass. The glass most often broken in residential burglary is a small pane in a window on which the glass is sectioned into small panes. After breaking one pane of glass the burglar reaches through and turns the interior handle on the lock. Lack of visibility to the window from the street or neighboring properties increases this vulnerability. Avoid adding a lock that requires a key for exit, which is against the code because it could prevent your escape in an emergency.

#### Most Residential Burglaries Occur During the Day

Most residential burglaries occur during the day as the burglars usually prefer to enter when the resident(s) are not home. They want to get in and out without being detected. Always check who is at your door when somebody rings or knocks. This does not mean that you should open the door to a stranger, but speak to them through the door, or an intercom, to make your presence known. If at any point the person acts suspiciously, or is in any way aggressive or belligerent, call the police.

Some burglars do enter homes at night while residents are sleeping. Still most of these burglaries do not result in assault as long as the resident does not try to stop the burglar. San Francisco Police refer to burglary of an occupied residential unit as a "hot prowl".

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### **So What About an Alarm System?**

A burglar alarm on a dwelling unit can serve as a good back-up communications tool for security. If despite your reasonable efforts to maintain good physical and procedural security, a burglar still enters your dwelling, the alarm should help limit their time inside if not lead to their arrest. Keep in mind an alarm does not physically prevent anything from happening. Maintain good physical security so that you are not over-reliant on the alarm system. If your dwelling unit is shared by several people coming and going on different schedules, then all members of the household should discuss the responsibilities of using an alarm system before purchasing one. All occupants must in fact be out of the house when the interior motion sensors are armed. (Or at least occupants must not enter zones in the house where motion-sensors are armed.). Arming only perimeter sensors, and not interior motion-sensors, will help in some houses. Alarms are not usually recommended for common areas of multi-unit residences.

### **Visibility and Upkeep, Deterrents or Attractors**

Visibility and general upkeep are very important factors in preventing crime at or near a property. Some people question if increased visibility and attractiveness of a property will actually attract the burglars. The answer is that you want to make the improvements in a manner that is advantageous for prevention: Minimizing obstructions to visibility, using adequate lighting, and general upkeep of properties allows residents, neighbors, and police more opportunity to observe the area and recognize suspicious activity. As many criminals are opportunists, they prefer to target areas where their activity can appear casual and discreet without having to actively hide.

### **Take the Initiative**

Many people forgo making improvements to the security of their homes for the fear of just thinking about it. If they knew exactly what to do, they would do it. Prolonged worrying about crime without addressing one's own vulnerabilities actually contributes to anxiety and dysfunction.

#### **➤ Request a Security Assessment of Your Home**

Schedule an appointment for a SAFE Security Specialist to walk through your home and provide a report with recommendations to strengthen security so the home can better defend itself against burglary. Once you implement the recommendations, you can run your errands, go to work, vacation, or sleep with a justified sense of security and comfort rather than with anxiety or a false sense of security.

#### **➤ Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED)**

What first impression does your property make to others regarding its security? Learn how design aesthetics and security should compliment each other. This involves lighting, landscaping, and other design elements.

#### **➤ Start, or Participate in, a Neighborhood Watch**

It's much more than "knowing your neighbors," and reporting suspicious behaviors. Community cohesion requires active awareness and cohesion. Neighborhood Watch provides a format to and discussing and addressing a variety of issues that affect crime and quality of life in the immediate area.

Contact Oona Gilles-Weil, SAFE's Program Director (415-553-1982, [oonas@sfsafe.org](mailto:oonas@sfsafe.org)) to obtain any of the above services and information.