



Juvenile and Family Court **JOURNAL**

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Juvenile Burglars

By Paul Cromwell, Ph.D.

Understanding how criminal careers begin may have important implications for prevention and intervention. While many theories attempt to explain the etiology of "criminality," there is little research into the dynamics of a youth's first forays into delinquent behavior. What factors are associated with a youth's initiation into crime and delinquency? When does this criminal behavior begin? What role do drugs and alcohol play? What is the role of co-offenders? Mentors?

Many adult offenders report having committed one or more burglaries as juveniles (Rengert and Wasilchick, 1985, 1990; Shover, 1971). In 1990, 13% of all persons arrested for burglary were under age 15, and one-third were under 18 years of age (BJS, 1991; Uniform Crime Reports, 1991). Because of the relatively high incidence of youth involved in burglary, research which focuses on the dynamics which lead an adolescent to initiate and persist in the committing burglaries may form the basis for intervention and prevention strategies.

This article discusses research which is part of a larger study of residential burglars and

burglary (Cromwell, Olson, and Avary, 1991). Thirty active burglars in a southwestern metropolitan area of 250,000 population were interviewed extensively over a 16-month period.¹ Although the larger study was primarily oriented toward determining the decision-making processes and situational cues relied on in selecting burglary targets, the subjects also provided information regarding their initiation into crime, drug use, co-offenders, techniques for breaking and entering, and marketing their stolen property. The sample was composed of 27 males and three females, and was evenly distributed between white, black, and Hispanic burglars. The mean age was 25 years. The range was 16-43 years.

Tutelage

The way thieves learn their trade is frequently seen as a tutelage process (Åkerström, 1993; Shover, 1971). The novice burglar frequently learns from older, more experienced burglars. These older burglars are often relatives, frequently older siblings. In the beginning, the novice is usually allowed to go along

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with the older burglars, acting as the "look out" for the older youth, or is "boosted" through an open window and then unlocks the doors from the inside of the house. As novices learn the techniques of burglary, they may become permanent members of the older group of burglars or may take the knowledge gained from the older group back to their own peer group and begin committing burglaries with the younger group without the continued "supervision" from the older burglars.

Findings from the present study generally confirm the past research. As shown in Table 1, the research subjects began their careers early, usually in their early teenage years. The median age for committing the first burglary was 14. Only one subject committed his first burglary after age 18.

Table 2 illustrates that 77% of the subjects reported committing their first burglary under the guidance of an older friend or relative.

Table 1
Age at First Burglary

	N	PERCENT
Under age 10	1	3
11 years	2	7
12 years	3	10
13 years	2	7
14 years	10	33
15 years	3	10
16 years	4	13
17 years	1	3
18 years	3	10
Over age 18	1	3
Total	30	99.0*

* Not equal to 100.0 due to rounding error

Table 2
Tutor/Mentor for First Burglary

	N	PERCENT
Older friend(s)/relative(s)	23	77
Friends/acquaintances same age	5	17
No initial co-offender	2	7
Total	30	101.0 *

* Not equal to 100.0 due to rounding error.

One subject, Pete, a 23-year-old, twice-convicted burglar, reported that he had committed his first burglary at age eight. His "mentor" was an older man about 30 years of age. He explained:

"He got me on sniffing acrylics [paint] and, like I say, I was real high and he wanted me to go into this house and get a stereo for him. So, since I was so small, you know. It was about 12:00 at night and people was there. And I pulled my shoes off and slipped through the window and opened the back door and got the stereo out. That's how I started doing it."

Thereafter he did about four burglaries a month in the company of the older thief. He stated:

"My job was to enter the places and pass the stuff out through the windows. You know, like a lot of places have got these real small windows, you know, and as small as I was, I could get through a lot of places that a grown-up couldn't."

However, most young burglars began in their mid-teens, accompanied by one or more older boys. Gilbert, a 22-year-old heroin addict/burglar reported:

"I was 13 when I started. I was real little. My brothers used to boost me up and put me through bathroom windows. They are usually not locked. One [brother] was 16 and the other was 17 and they were too big to get in bathroom windows."

Jerry, now age 35, reported that he had begun his career as a burglar at age 13 or 14. He recounted:

"Another guy showed me how easy it is. He told me how, if you saw something how to go and get it. If you needed money, how to get it. He didn't show me but a couple of things and I learned the rest myself. It came almost natural."

Another subject, Franco, began his burglary career in the company of two older cousins at the age of 13. The cousins had already broken into a house and needed assistance moving the stolen goods from the house into an

adjacent alley. They approached Franco for assistance and gave him \$50 from the proceeds of the burglary for his help. He stated that after such "easy money," he was "hooked." The older cousins then took him "under their wing" and taught him the basic "tricks of the trade." After a few months, he "started [his] own posse" [burglary gang] comprised of friends near his own age.

Motivations

In a recent book, Jack Katz (1988) describes the allure of "sneaky thrills" as motivation for committing crime, particularly by younger offenders. Katz argues that for many, crime has a seductive appeal. It may provide a demonstration of personal competence, a sense of beating the system, an exciting challenge, a feeling of control, and euphoria. One subject in Katz's study related her feelings when shoplifting:

"Every time I dropped something into my bag, my heart would be pounding and I could feel this tremendous excitement, a sort of 'rush' go through me" (p. 71).

Without exception, the subjects in the present study reported similar experiences while burglarizing houses, particularly when describing offenses committed while juveniles. The word "rush" was used by many to describe the feeling. Most referred to a "rush of adrenaline" or a "shot of adrenaline" in their characterization of the sensation. Reppetto (1974), Bennett and Wright (1984), and Rengert and Wasilchick (1985) have also reported motives associated with excitement and thrills among youthful thieves.

However, excitement or "sneaky thrills" do not appear to be young offenders' primary motives for committing burglary. Most subjects in the study reported the need for money to fulfill their expressive needs as their primary motivation. Most reported buying the latest clothing fads, gasoline for automobiles, drugs and alcohol, and other items associated with activity they loosely labeled as "partying." Keeping up appearances was cited as an important motivation for their crimes. One young

burglar stated:

"You gotta look good! You know, like clothes and some jewelry, and like, new sneaks (sneakers) and some bread in your pocket. You can't, like, party without the cash."

Drugs and Burglary

Drug use often plays a crucial role in a young burglar's career development. The study noted an interdependence between drug abuse and juvenile burglary. This interdependence does not, however, imply that drug use is implicated in the etiology of burglary. In fact, most subjects committed their first burglary before they began regular drug use. As shown in Table 3, only 30% used drugs regularly before committing their first burglary.

	N	PERCENT
YES	9	30
NO	21	70
Total	30	100.0

However, once they began to use drugs regularly, they usually began to rely, at least partially, on criminal activity to maintain the habit.

The case of Juan is typical. He reported that he committed his first burglary at age 14. He and two older cousins entered a neighborhood house through an open back door and stole several small items of jewelry. He stated:

"We traded the jewelry for some marijuana. After that we went around the neighborhood breaking into houses to get stuff to trade for marijuana."

Debbie, a 23 year-old experienced burglar and heroin addict stated:

"I started out [doing burglaries] before I was using drugs. I really didn't think

about drugs until one day when a bunch of us had did [burglarized] a house and was sitting around deciding what to do with the money we got... This guy started talking about dope, so we gave him money and he went and got us some pills... After that we almost always used the money we made doing houses for drugs. Mostly marijuana."

Drugs soon began to play an important and often unrecognized role in the commission of burglary, particularly burglaries committed by youthful offenders. It was not unexpected to find that burglars commit crimes to buy drugs. However, almost all the subjects (n=28) reported that drug use *before* the burglary facilitated the crime by reducing their fear. They reported they used drugs, when possible, before breaking into a residence to "keep up my nerve" or to "steady myself." Thus, drugs became not only the object of the crime, but also a tool for committing the offense.

Developmental Processes of Drug Use and Burglary

The typical, almost invariable pattern of entry into the life style of burglary and drug abuse among the study subjects was as follows:

1. At about age 12-14, adolescents in a generally criminogenic environment are allowed to join a group of older (14-17) adolescents who either shoplift or commit a burglary. This crime is usually committed in the neighborhood in which they all live. The younger members are allowed to share in the proceeds, although almost never receiving an equal share. If the stolen property is cash or is later converted to cash, they buy such items as candy, cigarettes, and video game tokens with their share. More frequently the younger members of the group are allowed to keep small items such as radios, jam boxes, or toys. They use these items or trade them for other items.
2. This activity may occur 3-10 times before the younger apprentices either

do a burglary more or less on their own or become accepted as a more integral part of the older group. If they form their own "gang," the first burglary on their own (usually in groups of two or three) frequently results in a small amount of stolen property that they cannot convert to cash because of lack of contacts to fence the goods. They may keep items or may agree to share their proceeds with an older, more experienced burglar in exchange for marketing the stolen property.

3. At this point, from a month to six months after the first burglary with the older adolescents, they may begin to buy alcohol, pills, or marijuana with some of the proceeds, or to trade the stolen property for drugs and alcohol.
4. As they grow more confident and gain more experience (and criminal associates), they find an outlet -- a local fence or a middleman who can dispose of the stolen property. In this manner they find themselves on the fringe of a delinquent/drug using subculture. Drugs are now readily available, and the youth now have money to purchase them.
5. The adolescents find that drugs and burglary facilitate each other. Smoking marijuana, crack cocaine, or drinking alcohol makes the burglaries easier by reducing fear and inhibitions. Thereafter, they frequently commit burglaries under the influence of drugs and use the proceeds to buy (or barter for) more drugs.
6. The adolescents' focus of activity now changes from a concern with the excitement and thrills and peer approval that came with committing the burglaries, to the use and abuse of drugs and alcohol. Burglary and other property crimes are now only a means of achieving the wherewithal to buy drugs. In a sense, drug use and crime can no longer be separated. They are

two sides to the same coin, having evolved together in the adolescent's immediate past history.

When questioned (as adults) about whether they would commit burglaries if they were not using drugs, virtually all the subjects stated they would not, or that their rate of offending would be much lower.

Marketing Stolen Goods

An important determinant of whether novice burglars persist in a criminal career is whether they can locate and develop a market for the property obtained from burglaries. Older "mentors," who teach novices the techniques of burglary, often conceal the identity of their fences. Until younger burglars can find a regular market for their stolen property, they have to depend on the older burglar, or rely on less lucrative, less efficient, and riskier alternatives such as selling directly to individuals on the street or to pawn shops. One subject reported that his early burglaries often netted jewelry and electronic goods for which he had no outlet. He dared not keep them in his room at home for fear of being caught, so he gave them to friends. Finally, he decided to try to sell some items and he was reported to the police by the first "customer" he approached. Eventually, a teenage uncle began acting as a middleman for his stolen items. Later, he gained independent access to a local fence and consequently became an active, "successful" burglar.

Once the novice burglar establishes a reliable market he or she may become independent of the mentor(s). The fence may play a critical role in the youthful burglar's "career development. Shover's (1971) research revealed that learning how to dispose of stolen property is almost always problematic for young burglars. However, once the initial contact is made, the young burglar is often further schooled in crime by the fence. Shover states:

.But regardless of how the initial contact with a fence is established, it may open the door to a recurrent and mutually profitable relationship. However, as a first step the fence may have to

undertake the job of educating the young burglar" (p. 155).

Such education may involve teaching the young burglar to recognize valuable goods, how to blend in with the neighborhood where the burglaries are to be committed, and how to deal with the police if arrested. The fence may also assist the young burglar in locating reliable co-offenders, and in identifying potential burglary targets (Shover, 1971).

Mary, an experienced and skilled female burglar, stated that she began her "career" acting as look-out for her burglar boyfriend. When that relationship ended, she began working alone. However, she was often unable to sell the items she stole except on street corners, bars, and in supermarket parking lots. She felt that having no regular, reliable market for her goods handicapped her as a burglar. "Finally," she said:

"I met this guy who told me who to see. It was in the Flats [a low-income area of the city]. And I asked around and this dude he said he would buy my stuff, but not if I was shooting dope. He said he didn't do no business with junkies. I was using a little heroin at the time but I told him I didn't shoot no drugs.

. . . That's how I got started."

Summary and Conclusions

The burglars (N=30) in this study were asked to provide a retrospective account of their entry into criminal behavior; specifically, to provide an account of their first burglary and subsequent circumstances that led to their careers as burglars.

Most reported that they had begun their criminal activity in their mid-teens (Median age=14) with one or more older acquaintances. These older youths served as mentors or tutors, teaching the novices basic "tricks of the trade." The apprentice burglars were either used as look-outs, or were boosted through small openings such as bathroom windows, pet doors, or openings for room air-conditioners. The older youth sold the stolen goods and gave a small percentage of the "take" to their younger assis-

tants. The young burglars initially committed the offenses for excitement, fun, or to obtain consumer goods or small sums of money. If the youths persisted in committing burglaries, they "graduated" to either full-membership in the older youths "gang" or went off on their own with a group of friends in their own age cohort. To become independent, it is necessary to locate and develop a business relationship with a fence who provides a safe and reliable market for the goods they steal. This is difficult because fences do not generally like to do business with juveniles; once the relationship has been established, however, the fence may serve as a secondary mentor and source of further knowledge about becoming a successful burglar. This secondary "education" involves not so much the techniques of burglary, as was taught them by the older mentors, but more sophisticated and subtle information such as how to deal with the police if caught, and how to judge "quality" merchandise.

Once the young burglars begin having spendable income from their crimes, they frequently begin to purchase and use drugs and alcohol regularly. While they did not commit their early burglaries to buy drugs -- 70% of the subjects did not use drugs regularly prior to their first burglary -- they now find that drugs and burglary facilitate each other. Drug use makes the burglaries easier by reducing fear and providing a kind of chemical courage. They thereafter commit burglary under the influence of drugs or alcohol, and use the proceeds to buy more drugs. The relationship between drugs and crime becomes inextricably intertwined.

How might this knowledge be used to inform policy and the development of intervention strategies? It demonstrates that juvenile crime is a developmental process which relies heavily on the mentoring of older, more delinquent youth. It also points to the critical role played by drugs in process of becoming delinquent and in the delinquent activities themselves. Intervention strategies must take these factors into account and attempt to deal with the problem of association with older, more criminally-experienced youth, and to control the use of drugs.

The connection between receivers of stolen property and juvenile crime is also suggested. Crime and delinquency control strategies which target the fence may have the unexpected consequence of denying the juvenile burglar both a market for stolen goods and, perhaps more importantly, a mentor in crime.

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Notes

¹For a more detailed discussion regarding the methodology, see Paul Cromwell, James N. Olson and D'Aunn W. Avary, *Breaking and Entering: An Ethnographic Analysis of Burglary*. Sage Publications, 1991.

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