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Prevention of residential burglaries: lessons drawn from a comparative approach

Summary

The current study is a follow up to the work undertaken by the International Centre for the Prevention of Crime (ICPC) in 2001. While numerous programmes to prevent residential burglaries have been developed in many countries and cities throughout the world, only a small number have been evaluated to describe both the procedure and the results. Thus, this study includes a limited number of examples of practices from the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand and Quebec (Canada). Policies implemented by other countries such as Belgium, Finland or France have also informed the preparation of this report.

1/ A volume crime with important consequences

Residential burglaries are among the most frequent offences whatever the country: in 2004, the rate of burglaries reported to the police per 100,000 persons varied between 476 in France and 1,533 in Australia. According to the international crime victims' survey, burglaries represent between 8 % (France) and 16 % (Belgium) of all offences committed against residents in the course of one year. Economic costs are one of their many consequences: a study conducted in England estimated the average cost per burglary at 2,326£. Based on the number of residential burglaries reported in England in 2004, the costs were approximately 750 million pounds.

2/ Known risk factors

In all countries examined, the risk of being burglarized is more important for those who have already been victimized. In effect, re-victimization is a factor used in many countries to target preventive measures towards most at-risk households. Inadequate protection devices and easy accessibility (frequent absence of occupants at night, doors and windows slightly visible from the outside, lack of monitoring...) are also major risk factors. Furthermore, a majority of experiences examined reveal a higher risk of residential burglary in **social housing or deprived neighbourhoods** and when the household head is between 16 and 24 years of age and a single parent. Known risk factors associated with delinquents include prior knowledge of the target, the need for money and drug addiction. However, few rigorous studies have been carried out on offenders.

3/ Preventive measures focus on places and potential victims rather than offenders

Risks related to re-victimization and inadequate protection devices have led various countries to formulate **awareness-raising policies** targeting potential victims identified either further to a previous victimization or during patrols specifically aimed at identifying "vulnerable" dwellings. Countries (e.g., Australia, the United Kingdom, Belgium and New Zealand) have initiated general information campaigns (distribution of booklets, media ads, etc.), and **individualized actions** engaging various actors - police officers (Quebec), volunteers (Australia), etc.

Some countries (notably Belgium and the United Kingdom), have formulated **ambitious integrated policies** to improve home safety (locks, more difficult or complicated

accessibility, alarm systems, etc.) by offering counselling and expertise services (advisers on technical prevention in Belgium) and financial assistance to improve protection.

While sometimes recommended, **property marking** appears better suited to prevent the sale of stolen objects rather than burglary itself.

Finally, **more global prevention initiatives** were sometimes implemented, including for example enhanced coordination with the police, supporting community development and knowledge between residents, as well as general social prevention, especially with at-risk youth in deprived neighbourhoods.

4/ Varying degrees of effectiveness

Despite differences among local contexts and a relative lack of clear results, evaluation studies reveal some key trends.

Programs of the neighbourhood watch type are rarely effective or not effective at all to prevent residential burglaries, although none of the interventions examined in this report were evaluated. Although poor neighbourhood surveillance is a feature of many burglaries, it does not lend itself easily to measure.

The effectiveness of protection measures which are often implemented after the first victimization is widely recognized and is one of the easier measures to evaluate (possibility of comparing neighbourhoods which benefit from this measure with other pilot areas). Two of the five projects examined which included this measure had a positive impact, one obtained mitigated results and the remaining two did not include their evaluation.

However, effectiveness varies according to the types of measures:

- The effectiveness of **anti-theft alarms** is not strongly supported by scientific research, and false alarms considerably reduce their impacts.
- **Alley-gating** has not been thoroughly evaluated. Studies tend to indicate that this measure is effective only when its implementation follows a rigorous process.
- Actions related to the **certification of residences** (safety label) seem promising, but they must also be examined according to the design of the dwellings and accompanied by a follow-up.
- **Property marking** was used in two projects but not evaluated. However, a groundbreaking rigorous evaluation undertaken in England has demonstrated its effectiveness when the level of participation is high and when it is accompanied by an intensive publicity campaign and includes the use of stickers in particular.

Information campaigns optimize the effects of other interventions as they may give the impression that activities are undertaken in a larger area and for longer periods of time than they actually are. However, in the United Kingdom, the dissemination of information on residential protection to older persons was often insufficient unless involving some longer term assistance.

Although not evaluated very rigorously, **community-based initiatives** appear to have positive impacts, especially in the context of measures to enhance quality of life and social bonds.

5/ Evaluation issues

As for evaluating crime prevention generally, measuring the effectiveness of programmes remains complex due to various factors including:

- difficulty to isolate the effects of the various factors to evaluate the effectiveness of the relevant prevention measures. Cross-cutting prevention programmes are even more difficult to evaluate. Situational prevention interventions lend themselves better to evaluation since it is less difficult to control the relevant factors;
- requirement to take into account the general crime trends in a specific region;
- difficulty to evaluate the potential diffusion of benefits related to a specific measure in adjacent neighbourhoods.

Conclusion

Despite its fragmented character, this international comparative analysis confirms some of the conclusions obtained in the previous ICPC study on burglaries, in particular the importance of preventing re-victimization and of implementing targeted and cross-cutting measures.

Given the volume and costs of burglaries as well as accumulated evidence on the effectiveness and benefits of well-planned preventive measures, it is entirely desirable that governments' crime prevention policies should include a specific focus on this crime. Governments should also seek to involve actors in the private sector and residential construction in the formulation of strategies and measures.