

Defensive Strategies



Household Burglary: What Are Your Chances?

**By Lyn Bates,
Contributing Editor**

There are many, many people out there who carry concealed outside their homes, but there are many, many more people who have a gun only for defense at home. What are they trying to defend against? Let's take a look.

Possible burglary is at the top of many people's lists of reasons to have a gun in the house. How likely is this to occur, and what are the circumstances surrounding such a crime?

One of the best sources of statistics for these crimes is the report, *Victimization During Household Burglary (VDHB)*, produced by the Bureau of Justice Statistics (part of the Office of Justice Programs, which is part of the US Department of Justice). This report was

developed from the latest National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS), which is one of the most reliable indicators of national crime. The NCVS is conducted by interviews with about 40,000 households and about 70,000 individual people nationwide, so it collects information about crimes that were never reported to the police as well as those that were. The NCVS has been going on since 1973, so there is lots of data to investigate changes in crime rates and other aspects of crimes.

The report, *Victimization During Household Burglary (VDHB)*, has some interesting and enlightening information. For example, there are about 3.7 million household burglaries occurring each year. In 28% of those situations, someone was home when the burglary occurred. In 7% of all household burglaries, a household member

experienced some form of violent victimization.

So, in a 10-year period, how likely are you to be the victim of a break-in for burglary? In 10 years, there would be about 37 million burglaries in the 110 million households in the country. To me, that seems like a lot.

How can we do a "sanity check" on those numbers? Have you had a break-in in the last 10 years? Do you know of any friends, neighbors, co-workers, or other acquaintances who have had a break-in? Have you heard any of those people talk about people they knew who had a burglary? Has your local news featured stories of such crimes in the last decade? The answer to some of those questions is undoubtedly yes. That should show you that home burglary is common enough that it is reasonable to protect yourself from it.

Of course, some burglaries occur when nobody is home, but the rate of household burglary when someone was home is about 8.5 per 1,000 households, and has not changed much in many years. For most of this article, we will be concerned only with those situations in which someone is home when the burglary occurs.

Now let's take a closer look at who is victimized, how those crimes happen, whether the burglars have weapons, and whether they use them.

Who is likely to be at home when victimized by this crime? Married couples without children experienced the lowest rate of this type of burglary. Single females with children experienced the highest rate of burglary while someone was present in the home. (Lesson: If you are a single woman with kids, realize that your risk really *is* a lot higher, so it is reasonable to take steps to protect yourself and children. If you have friends who are single moms, they might not realize their increased risk, and you could be doing them a great favor by educating them.)

Higher income households experienced lower rates of burglary, regardless of whether the residence was occupied or not. Single family units and higher density structures of 10 or more units generally experienced lower rates of burglary while someone was home. (Lesson: If you live in a rental structure of between 2 and 9 units, your risk is higher.)

Who is doing these crimes, and how?

Victims said they knew the offender in 65% of violent household burglaries, and in only 28% of such burglaries victims said the offender was a stranger. Residents in all of these homes were equally likely to be victimized by a current or former

intimate partner as they were by a stranger. (Lesson: Friends and lovers can turn on you, and they are the people most likely to know what you have that would be worth stealing. Be wary of people you know, as well as people you don't.)

An open, or unlocked door or window let most burglars in. Damaging or removing a door was also a common type of entry in forcible burglaries. Occasionally someone inside opened the door and the offender pushed their way in, but much more often someone inside the home just let the offender in without any force being used. (Lesson: Lock your accessible windows, reinforce your door, use the locks and chain; look and listen before opening the door. Teach the people you live with, even children, not

to invite people in who are not expected guests.)

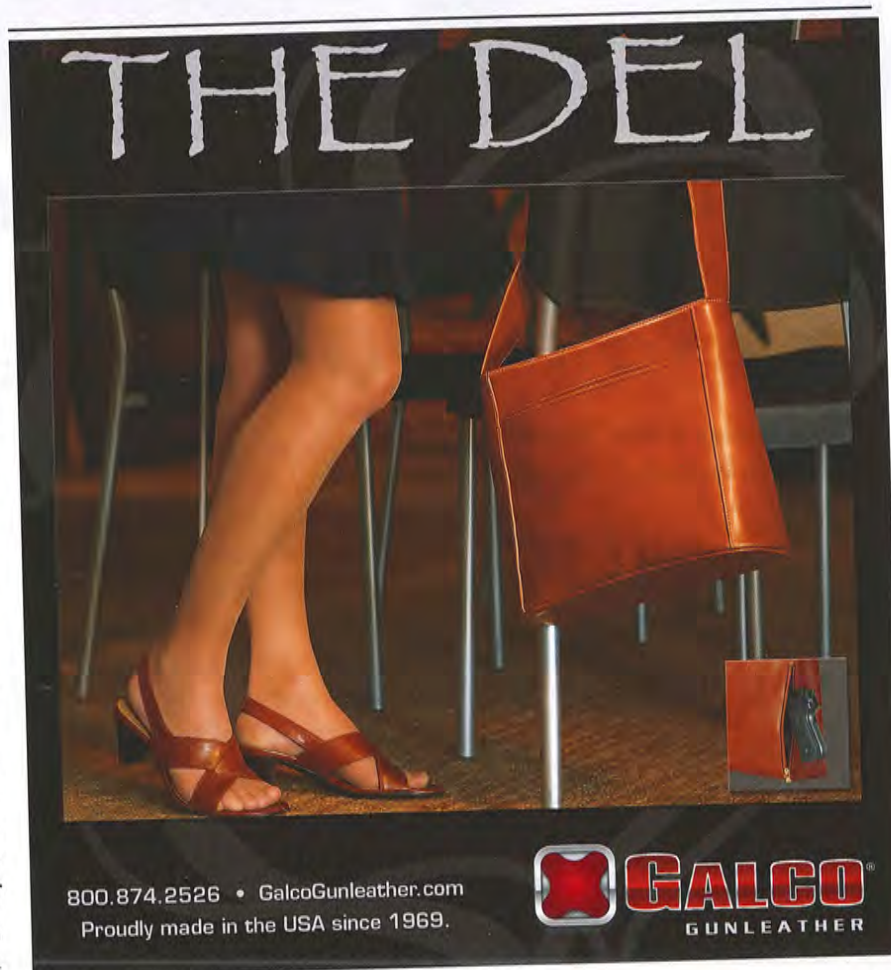
We all think that such a crime would be most likely to occur when we are asleep, but only 38% of victims were sleeping; 44% were awake, possibly elsewhere in the house. Nighttime is the right time for two thirds of the home burglaries, but the remaining one third occurred between 6 AM and 6 PM. (Lesson: Don't assume that your bedroom is the only place you might need a gun.)

Do these burglars have weapons, and do they use them?

The VDHB showed that offenders were unarmed in about 60% of violent household burglaries. That

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means that 40% were armed. Those numbers haven't changed much for five years. In 12% of violent household burglaries, the offender possessed a firearm.

Of all burglaries that occurred when someone was home, 26% experienced some form of a violent victimization during the crime. That violence could be with or without a weapon. Residents present during a burglary were equally likely to be victimized by a friend, relative, or intimate partner (current or former) as they were by a stranger. (Lesson: Beware former friends and lovers who might hold a grudge against you.)

What kind of weapons did burglars have? 40% had no weapon, 23% had guns, 16% had knives or other sharp weapons, 6% had some other kind of weapon. That doesn't add to 100 because many people in the survey did not know whether there was a weapon or not.

Household members faced an offender with a firearm in only about 12% of all households burglarized while someone was home and violence occurred.

Of all burglaries, 56% resulted in no injury to the folks at home. Of the 44% that were injured, 33% were minor, 9% were serious, 2% were rapes, and essentially none were murders. That's very good news: household burglaries ending in homicide were only 0.004% of all burglaries during the last 5 years. (Lesson: Even with a weapon, most burglars are there to steal stuff and get out, not to harm you.)

OK, household burglaries are uncomfortably common, often occur when people are home, often involve armed offenders, but only occasionally result in serious injury for the people who were home at the time of the burglary.

Now it is time to ask yourself, seriously, why you have a gun for protection, and under what circumstances you would use it. It is *never* a good idea, legally, ethically, or morally, to shoot (or threaten with a gun) someone who is only after your property. No matter what the value is of the property they are after, it will be expensive, much more expensive to defend yourself in court against the criminal and/or civil charges that could be brought against you.

If you think every burglar in your

home is there to also rape and murder you, you might well over-react in your defense.

If someone gets into your home to steal stuff while you are there, what should you do? Get into the "safe room" you had previously prepared. That's a room with an internal lock on the door, a phone and your gun inside. Call the police. Yell to the intruder, if he can hear you, that he can take anything and leave, but if he comes into your room, you will shoot him. Stay behind cover, with your gun handy and the police still on the phone.

Only if you or a member of your family is in immediate, personal danger from that guy are you entitled to defend yourself with lethal force. As the VDHB shows, most burglars, even if armed, intend only to steal property and then leave. If you stay away from them and don't give them any reason to hurt you, they probably won't try to hurt you. The gun in your hand will be a tremendous comfort, though, because you will know that, if things change from theft to personal assault, you will prevail. Imagine yourself in that situation without a gun. That vulnerability is pretty awful, isn't it, even if you get out unharmed.

So, have your home defense gun, and get the proper training in not just how to use it, but when and how not to use it. Then take comfort from the fact that you are prepared for the worst, even though most home burglaries are not "the worst."

If you would like to see the whole 13-page report on Victimization During Household Burglaries, go to bjs.ojp.usdoj.gov and search for "household burglary" publications to find publication number NCJ 227379.

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