The 10-minute home security check

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He chose this house from the pavement, in the time it took to walk past.

Thirty years in policing, twenty-eight of them as a detective, taught me one thing about burglary that most people never hear: the burglar chose your house before he touched it. He chose it from the street, in about the time it takes to walk past. This check shows you what he saw. Ten minutes, no tools, no spending. Do it once in daylight and once after dark.

What he needs: time, and not being seen

Two things decide where a burglar goes to work. He needs time to work out a house's routine and then to get in, and he needs to do it somewhere he is not being watched, or is unlikely to be. The front of a typical house gives him neither. It is overlooked by neighbours, passers-by and drivers, so unless there is a high fence, a wall or a thick hedge he can get behind and hide, the front is a bad place for him to spend more than a few seconds.

The back is a different world. Once he is round there, nobody can see him. He can sit, stand, listen and take as long as he likes. That is why most break-ins are at the rear, and why the side gate, the back door and the rear windows get most of the attention in the next three sections. Everything that makes the back of your house more like the front, a locked gate, a light, a neighbour's window with a view of it, takes away the one thing he cannot do without.

1. Stand at the gate (2 minutes)

Walk to the pavement and look at your house the way a stranger would.

- **Can you see straight through to the back garden?** An open side passage is an invitation to the one place he wants to be: round the back, out of sight, with all the time in the world.

- **Is anything on show through the front window?** A laptop on the table, keys on the hook, a handbag on the stairs. The burglar is not guessing what is inside; you are telling him.
- **Does the house look lived in right now?** Bins out on the wrong day, post on the mat, every light off at 7pm in November. Empty is what he is looking for.
- **Is there an alarm box, and is it real?** A sounder on the wall with a light on it makes him walk on. But look hard at the one you have. A faded dummy box, or a real one from the 1980s, steel gone rusty, the cover yellowed, no light, nothing that has blinked in years, is worse than no box at all. To you it is just the old alarm. To him it is a sign on the front of the house that says: this family does not take security seriously, they have not kept it up to date, and whatever is behind this is probably just as old. He reads that from the pavement, and it moves your house up his list. A working, current sounder does the opposite, and if it has a light that blinks, so much the better: it tells him the system is live before he has set foot on the drive. If yours is an antique, either bring the system up to date or take the box down; leaving it up is advertising.

2. Walk the outside (3 minutes)

Go round the whole house, the way he would, and try everything.

- **Side gate.** Is it locked, or just closed? A bolt on the inside that you can reach over the top is the same as no bolt. This gate is the border between where he can be seen and where he cannot; it is the most important lock on the property.
- **Back door and patio doors.** Push, lift and pull. A sliding door that lifts off its track or a handle that gives takes seconds. Multi-point locks are only working if you actually lift the handle and turn the key.
- **Windows.** Every downstairs window and any upstairs window above a flat roof, porch or bin. If it is on the latch for air, it is open.
- **Ladders, bins, garden furniture.** Anything he can climb goes away or gets chained. Wheelie bins under a window are the classic.
- **Sheds and garages.** The expensive bike and the tools are usually behind the weakest lock on the property. And a shed full of tools is a shed full of things to break into your house with.
- **Lighting.** Where would he stand that you could not see him? That is where the light goes. A light at the back does what the neighbours do at the front: it takes away his cover.

3. Go inside (3 minutes)

- **The hallway.** Keys in a bowl by the door, including the car keys, is the one thing I would change in most houses tonight. Fishing them through the letterbox is a real method, not a film plot. Keys go out of sight and out of reach.
- **The spare key.** Under the pot, in the fake stone, on the ledge. He knows every one of those. Give it to a neighbour instead.
- **Valuables in the obvious places.** The bedside drawer, the wardrobe, the bottom of the bedroom chest. Those are searched first, in that order. Small, valuable things belong somewhere unexpected, or in a safe that is fixed down.
- **Photos of your serial numbers.** Phone, laptop, bike, tools, jewellery. Two minutes with your phone camera now is what gets them back later and settles the insurance claim without an argument.
- **The alarm, if you have one.** When did you last set it? An alarm that is never set is a decoration. If it is too fiddly to set every time you leave, that is a problem we can fix, and it is worth a call.

Hardening the back

If the back is where he wants to be, the back is where the effort goes. Four things first: a working, obvious camera covering the rear; an external sounder he can see from the garden; an alarm sensor on the far wall, visible when he looks in through the patio doors or the kitchen window, so he knows the house is armed before he touches it; and doors that are actually locked, key turned, not just handle up. After those, everything on this list does one of three things: takes away his cover, takes away his time, or stops you equipping him.

Take away his cover

- **Light that is on, not just light that comes on.** A motion floodlight is fine, but it helps him see too. A low-level dusk-to-dawn light at the back, with a motion flood above it, means there is never a dark moment round there, and the sudden flood is what the neighbours notice.
- **Give the back a witness.** Stand on your patio and look up. Which neighbours' upstairs windows can see you? A hedge or fence that blocks their view is his friend. Lower it, or open one line of sight.
- **Move the gate forward.** A side gate at the front end of the passage, flush with the house, keeps the whole passage in public view. A gate at the back end hands him the passage as a hiding place.
- **Gravel.** Down the side and under the rear windows. He cannot move on it quietly, and quiet is the whole point of the back.

Take away his time

- **Trigger before he is in, not after.** A motion sensor fires when he is already in the room. Contacts on the back door and patio doors, and shock or glass-break sensors on the rear windows, fire on the attack itself. Part-setting the alarm at night arms exactly those while you sleep upstairs.
- **Make the glass slow.** Laminated glass or security film on patio doors turns a two-second smash into minutes of noisy work. Anti-lift blocks stop a sliding door being lifted off its track. Key locks on every rear window.
- **Talk to him.** A rear camera with person detection and a two-way speaker lets you challenge him live from your phone, in your own voice, in the first ten seconds. Few things end an attempt faster.

Do not equip him

- **Lock the shed and alarm it.** A wireless contact on the shed door, on the house alarm. Otherwise the shed is his toolbox.
- **Nothing to climb, nothing to prise with.** Bins anchored away from windows, ladders chained, garden furniture chained or inside, no spade left by the back door.
- **Thorns.** Pyracantha, berberis or hawthorn along the back fence and under the windows. Cheaper than a fence, and nobody climbs through it twice.
- **Trellis on top of the fence,** not spikes. It breaks loudly under weight, and it is legal.

This list is also what we work through with you at the back of your house on a survey. Most of it is a Saturday's work and a trip to the DIY shop; the camera, the sounder and the sensors are ours.

4. The habits (2 minutes)

These cost nothing and matter more than any kit.

- **Set the alarm every time you leave, and at night.** Every time. Burglars work in the daytime too, while you are at work.

- **Lock up when you are in.** The back door while you are upstairs or in the front room, key turned and taken out of the lock. The front door while you are in the garden. Walk-in burglaries, through an open door while you are home, are more common than people think.
- **Part-set the alarm at night.** It arms the ground floor and the back while you sleep. "We're in" is not a reason to leave it off; it is the reason to set it.
- **Going away?** Lights and a radio on routines (see below), a neighbour parking on the drive, bins put out and brought in, and nothing about it on social media until you are back.
- **Parcels.** A parcel on the step says nobody is home. Use a safe place, a neighbour, or a locker.
- **Talk to your neighbours.** A street where people notice a stranger is the best security system there is, and it is free.

What a modern system actually does

Most people picture the alarm they grew up with: a box on the wall that makes a noise and a keypad that everyone forgets the code for. The kit on the market now is a different thing, and it is worth knowing what it can do before you decide what your house needs. None of this is exotic; it is what we fit as standard.

- **An alarm that tells you, wherever you are.** It still sounds outside so the neighbours hear it. It also sends an alert to your phone, anywhere in the world, the moment a sensor goes off. You can share those alerts with people you trust, so when you are on holiday your daughter, your neighbour or a keyholder gets them too.
- **It tells you what is real.** Every sensor is named, and each one that triggers sends its own alert. One alert from a sensor in the middle of the house might be a fault, and it is worth a look. But "front door", then "dining room", then thirty seconds later "kitchen", "front room", "landing" is somebody moving through your house. The chance of five sensors failing at the same moment in that order is as near to zero as makes no difference. That is the difference between a bell that cries wolf and a system you can act on.
- **Cameras you can jump to.** A modern camera records in full colour, day and night, and most have a small light on them so anyone in the street can see they are working, which is half their value. You will not watch them all day, and you do not need to. When the alarm alerts you, you open the cameras and see for yourself. If it is the cat or the wind, you disarm from your phone, re-arm, and carry on with your evening. If it is not, you are watching it happen and ringing the police with a description.
- **Lighting that thinks.** Security lights no longer just react to a passing fox. They can be tied to the alarm, so the moment it triggers the outside of the house lights up, or better still to the cameras, so that when a camera sees a person moving, the floodlights come on. For a burglar at the back, in the dark, counting on his time and his cover, that is the end of the evening.
- **A house that looks lived in while you are away.** Modern systems have routines. Smart plugs on lamps and a radio join the same app as the alarm, and you set them to run while you are on holiday: the landing light comes on at dusk, the front-room lamp half an hour later, the radio for an hour after that, then off in a different order the next night. To the man watching from the street, that is a family at home, and he goes to look for one that is not. It beats the old plug-in timer because it is not the same light at the same minute every night, and because you can change it from the beach.

All of this is achievable in an ordinary house, it works together as one system, and you run it from one app. If you have an older system, much of it can be added to what you already have rather than starting again.

What to do with what you found

Most houses fail three or four of these, and most of those are fixed in an evening with a bolt, a timer and a change of habit. If what you found is bigger than that, a door that does not lock properly, a dark side passage, an alarm that

nobody sets or nothing covering the back at all, we are happy to come and look. We survey every property before suggesting anything, we will tell you straight if you do not need something, and there is no charge for the visit and no obligation.

ITD Secure, Bearsted, covering the whole of Kent.

Burglar alarms, CCTV and site security, fitted and serviced by people who have spent their working lives on the other side of a break-in.

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