RESIDENTIAL BURGLARY IN PORTLAND, OREGON

PSU-PPB CRIME ANALYSIS TEAM

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OBJECTIVES

This research project sought to characterize Portland’s residential burglaries over the past twelve years (1999 to 2010). Residential burglary occurs when a person enters or remains unlawfully in a building with intent to commit a crime therein. Specific goals of the project included the identification of temporal and geographic patterns, examination of suspect characteristics, and other details on the offenses themselves including type of entry, clearance rates, and the costs associated with this crime.

METHODS

The Portland Police Bureau (PPB) provided the team with electronic data from all incident reports involving residential burglary in Portland from 1999 through mid-November 2010. The data included information on the timing of these events (e.g., date/time reported and occurred), the geographic locations (e.g., latitude/longitude, neighborhood, precinct), demographics on the suspects, and details on the items stolen (e.g., type, number, reported value). These data were then analyzed using MS Excel, SPSS, and Arc GIS to create the reports provided below.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

1. Residential burglary in Portland has decreased in the past few years from a recent high in 2004. We also found evidence that our local residential burglary rate, which once exceeded the national average, has now dipped to slightly below average (click here for details). While there are probably a number of factors contributing to this decrease, the restrictions placed on Pseudoephedrine starting in late 2004 probably helped.

2. The clearance rate for residential burglaries, or proportion of incidents that are closed through the arrest of a suspect, has not changed much over the past 12 years: 10% to 13% of cases each year result in the arrest of at least one suspect (click here for details). At the same time, there is little evidence from national data that Portland is an anomaly in this regard: In 2004 12.9% of burglary cases nationally were cleared, in 2007 12.5% were cleared, and just 12.5% were cleared through arrest in 2009 (note: the latter figures combine residential and retail burglary).

3. The distribution of residential burglaries in Portland is very uneven, with some areas experiencing very high levels and other areas having minimal problems with this offense. Moreover, there is a considerable degree of consistency over time in the areas high and low in burglary. The southwest region of the city for example has a very low burglary density and this has remained low pretty much every year over the past 12 years. Burglary “hotspots” show some geographic shifts over time, but areas of the city with very high
density of these crimes usually remain at least above average year after year (click here for details). This suggests that the underlying factors contributing to this crime remain unevenly distributed throughout the city as well.

4. The above patterns in the geographic distribution of this crime mirror the locations in the city where known burglary suspects reside currently or have resided in the past, suggesting the concentration of potential offenders in an area has a lot to do with rates of burglary offending. We also found, like other researchers, that residential burglars as a group travel relatively short distances to offend and that younger offenders have a shorter “journey to crime” in that they burglarize homes closer to their residence (click here for details).

5. In contrast to common media reports and conventional wisdom, we did not find much of a seasonal pattern to this offense. People might assume that rates of burglary would be higher in the summer months due to increased vulnerability through open windows and doors, but we found only a slight increase in the later summer months and fall. If there was a strong and valid seasonal effect we would also expect to see this same pattern every year, but this is not what we found. Sometimes summer months are higher but not always. Sometimes the fall has higher rates, but not in every year. In short, it is difficult to predict a consistent pattern in Portland’s residential burglary by season (click here for details).

6. Also consistent with other researchers, we found residential burglaries were more common during the weekdays and during daytime hours. Basically, most burglars do not want to run into people during their offending so they seek out homes that are unoccupied, which most often happens during these times (click here for details).

7. With regard to the types of items being stolen, we found home electronics (TVs, DVD players, stereos) were the most common category of items taken followed by currency & economic items (money, gift cards), jewelry & precious metals, and computers & accessories (click here for details). Also worth noting was a sizable increase in thefts involving computers and accessories (+352%) and in thefts involving handheld electronics (+96%) like cell phones and PDAs from 1999 to 2010. Basically, the movement towards smaller (and expensive) electronic items has facilitated the theft of such items. The category of drugs (illegal, prescription, and over-the-counter) showed consistent yearly increases in theft from 1999 to 2010, for a total increase of 252% during this time period. One other category of items to consider is the theft of firearms: we estimate that there were 784 reported burglaries from 1999 to 2010 that involved the theft of a firearm, accounting for 1,457 guns. An obvious concern with these weapons is their potential use in subsequent criminal activity.

8. We were also interested in calculating the overall costs associated with residential burglaries in Portland. The challenge here is that many burglaries are not reported to the police. In the 2007 Portland Neighborhood Survey conducted by the city Auditor’s Office, for example, only 69.1% of burglaries were reported to the authorities. Another challenge is that PPB does not have electronic access to the items stolen for some years due to data
entry constraints. Finally, victims sometimes report additional items stolen after the initial report is made and these items may not be reflected in the available data. Thus, with all these caveats offered up front, we estimated that the typical annual property cost in recent years for residential burglaries is between $7.1 - $14.8 million dollars per year and that burglaries that occurred in 2010 resulted in average losses of $2,734 to $3,830 per incident (click here for details).

9. Finally, we were interested residential burglars’ use of pawn shops and second hand stores, possible as a means for converting stolen items into cash. We compared pawn shop use of known burglary suspects with first time criminal suspects involved in non-property offenses. These analyses found that burglars were twice as likely as the comparison suspects to have a record of pawning items at local businesses (31.5% vs. 14.7%; click here for details).

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Cost estimates for residential burglary in Portland indicate that between $7.1 and $14.7 million dollars are lost each year. This cost does not include important factors such as loss of security, time spent addressing the burglary, cost of investigations, etc. The large impact of this crime argues for a strong response on the part of public safety and crime prevention experts in the city.

2. The low clearance rates for residential burglary and the relative stability of these rates over time in Portland highlights the need for prevention and disruption strategies when dealing with this offense (e.g., restrictions on pseudoephedrine, target hardening, increased neighborhood involvement, disrupting methods for converting stolen items into cash, identification and disruption of prolific burglars). Waiting until after the crime has already taken place and then trying to solve the offense by arresting the suspect(s) will more often than not be unsuccessful.

3. The geographic analysis conducted for this study found a consistently high density of burglary in some areas of the city. Further efforts are needed to explore these areas and discover the factors that are contributing to these high crime counts (i.e., repeat victimization, lack of guardianship, proximity to known offenders). Areas with higher concentration of burglaries should also receive additional attention from investigators and crime prevention specialists.

4. Prior research finds that most burglars engage in property offending to obtain cash rather than to keep the items stolen for their own use. Consistent with this, in the present study we found that residential burglars were significantly more likely than other offenders to use local pawn shops and second hand stores. Although not directly examined in this research, it seems likely that burglars are also using online resources to distribute stolen goods. As such, proactive efforts to disrupt the distribution of stolen goods and conversion of such
items into cash may be an effective strategy in combating this crime. Additional resources and a specialized response to this issue will likely be needed.

5. Changes have occurred over time in the nature of the items taken in burglary. For example, increases in the rate at which drugs (both prescription and illegal) or personal electronics are taken in burglary could open up new areas for additional crime prevention efforts. These changes may also argue for an expansion of crime prevention material to specifically address areas of growing concern.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES FOR RESIDENTIAL BURGLARY


- National Neighborhood Watch Program, (n.d.). *Preventing burglaries-how to protect your home*.

PSU/PPB CRIME ANALYSIS TEAM

Recent efforts to incorporate evidence-based decision making in law enforcement, including Problem-Oriented Policing, Intelligence-led Policing, and Hot-Spot Policing to name a few, require detailed analysis of crime problems to generate proactive strategic interventions. The Crime Analysis Team (CAT) entails a partnership between Portland State University’s Criminology & Criminal Justice Division and the Portland Police Bureau (PPB) to provide such research for criminal offenses affecting our local region.

The specific goals of this collaboration include:

- Conduct comprehensive analyses of crime problems in Portland focusing on victim and offender characteristics, common features of the offense (i.e. modus operandi), geographic hotspots, temporal patterns, journey to crime, and additional analyses specific to each offense. A new crime is selected for in-depth analysis each academic quarter.
- Suggest tactical and preventive responses to crime problems based on the results of our analyses.
- Disseminate the results of our research to law enforcement and the public.
- Interest other jurisdictions in joining or collaborating on crime analysis projects.

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