

Secure Your House

By Becky Thurmond, Crime & Safety Committee Chair

The Garland Police Department recently held the quarterly crime coordinators meeting and gave us a great presentation on securing our houses.

There are three elements of burglary – desire, ability, and opportunity. Burglars have a wide range of desire or motivation to enter your house and take your property, and you can't control that. However, you can impact their opportunity and, to some extent, their ability. Since many burglars are looking for an easy hit or just don't want to work too hard for their ill-gotten gains, you lessen your chances of being burglarized if you take some basic steps to make your house less attractive to a bad guy.

Of course, the officers mentioned the basic things that we've all heard half a jillion times: close and lock your windows, lock your doors (including the door from the house into the garage), set your security system if you have one, and make sure that your garage door closes. They just shake their heads at how often these basic steps aren't taken, and the residents are shocked when their home is burglarized. But here are some things to consider that I've either not heard before, or I needed a reminder about.

Exterior doors: You might have a sturdy door, but the strike plates and hinges are just screwed into the door frame. It only takes a good kick or two to splinter the frame so replace at least one screw in each hinge and strike plate with a three-inch wood screw. This anchors the door and frame into the studs, making it much harder to kick open. These screws are inexpensive and can be installed whether you own or rent.

You can also add a door reinforcer sleeve under your door knobs. A reinforcer is a metal plate that fits over the door and under the knob, making it more difficult to pop the knob off.

Deadbolts should be on every exterior door. If there is a window within forty inches of the door, experts recommend that a keyed deadbolt be used, instead of a thumb lock bolt. However, a keyed deadbolt is not allowed by the Garland city code. Just sayin'. You also need to keep in mind that you and your family need to be able to easily and quickly escape the house in case of something like a fire, but hanging the deadbolt key on a nail by the door or leaving it in the lock defeats the purpose.

Electronic deadbolts are another possibility, especially if, as one officer mentioned, you have kids at home who are always losing keys. However, you need to be prepared to regularly clean the keypad and/or change the code and not be surprised when your teen gives the code to friends.

If you don't have a locking screen or storm door, you need something like a security chain on the front door. However, a swing bar lock, like what you see in hotel rooms, is far better than a chain lock, and will slow a burglar down some.

Then there's the peephole. Some of the older door viewers let people see in; check yours! There are also peepholes that have a much wider viewing angle than what a builder usually installs so you can see a bad guy trying to hide and catch you by surprise. They're inexpensive and readily available at home improvement stores.

Windows: If you like to open your windows and air out your

house during the two to three weeks of nice weather we have every year, this one is hard, but you need to secure the windows so they can't be opened any more than about an inch or two. You can use twist locks that fit onto the window tracks (two per window). There are metal bars that are set between the window that opens and framing on the other end, or you can put a length of broomstick in the track. Whatever you use needs to be very easy to remove in an emergency, and please remember that the bigger an opening you provide, the easier it is for the bad guy to use leverage to force the window open all the way or remove it.

Fences: Are the horizontal crosspieces on your privacy fence facing out? The cops call that a ladder. But there's an easy fix. Buy (eight or ten foot) 1" x 1" pieces of wood and have them cut diagonally, lengthwise, so you end up with two long, triangular-shaped pieces. Nail a triangle to the top of the middle crosspiece(s) on your fence, eliminating the toe hold someone needs to easily climb over your fence.

And beef up the gate latches. You're more secure if someone can't open the gate from outside, but you also need to be able to easily open the gate from the inside in an emergency. The easiest and cheapest solution is to put a carabiner (a metal loop that can be opened) through the holes of the latch to prevent it from being opened. Just be sure that someone can't get a hand between the gate and post to open it.

Garage doors: The officers estimate that at least 50% of burglaries of a habitation are actually items taken from garages with open doors. The burglars are just snatching things that are essentially out in the open. So, number one, make sure your garage door is closed. And keep the door from the garage into your house locked at all times.

The police don't really see it very often, but it's possible for someone to fish a straightened coat hanger in through the top of the garage door, snag the pull cord, and release the opener. On some of these latches, you can thread a zip tie through the holes of the latch to prevent this. The bad guy is pulling down and toward the door, and a securely tied latch won't release. However, you can snap the tie with a sharp pull straight down so you can still escape in an emergency.

Alarm and camera systems: Alarms and cameras will deter some criminals but not all of them. But a decent alarm company will get police to your house, and good cameras will provide pictures of the culprit.

Ninety percent of police alarm calls are false alarms, and many people just don't bother with turning their alarm on. If you're going to pay for a monitored alarm system, use it! And a good suggestion is to include cell service backup, where you have a battery backup that will wirelessly call the monitoring company if your phone line is cut.

Finally, know what you have. It's recommended that you video everything inside of your house once a year, and save the file. When you purchase electronics or anything else valuable, take pictures of the box, showing the product, model, and serial number. And save these pictures. The police regularly arrest people with all sorts of property that most likely was stolen, and they routinely check pawn shops. If you are burglarized, report it, and provide serial numbers. There's a higher chance that you'll get some of your stuff back.

And please keep your garage doors closed!!