



Preventing Burglaries

By Captain Binder

The United States is one of the wealthiest countries in the world, home to some very affluent communities. Not surprisingly, some of the wealthiest cities are located in California. Los Altos Hills, along with neighbors Atherton and Hillsborough, are consistently ranked in the top ten for average household income. Although that distinction brings a certain sense of pride, it also means that the area is attractive to thieves, and residents have more to lose if someone breaks in. Los Altos Hills is a very safe Town as noted by very few person crimes that occur, but property crimes are more common. The Sheriff's Office, together with the help of Town residents, is seeking to reduce these property crimes by educating residents about criminal behavior and by providing basic steps that residents can take to make their homes less of an opportune target.

Increase in home burglaries

In 2013, burglaries were on the rise across the Bay Area, and Los Altos Hills was no exception. After averaging 28.3 burglaries per year over the past 10 years, Los Altos Hills experienced 42 burglaries last year. Although per capita, the burglary rate is still well below state and national burglary rates, it's not of much comfort to those who have been victimized, and the Sheriff's Office would like to see a reversal in this burglary trend.

In general, most of these residential burglaries are being committed by a small group of burglars. Last year, the Sheriff's Office was able to make a number of arrests associated with 18 of these cases. These burglary investigations have led the Sheriff's Office to various places, including San Francisco, Oakland, Daily City, and San Jose. However, the evidence is clear that no law enforcement agency can arrest their way out of the occurrence of burglaries, as shown by the nationwide phenomena. It is therefore incumbent that residents take the responsibility to secure their properties to make them less vulnerable to thieves.

To date in 2014, Los Altos Hills has experienced 31 residential burglaries, with 13 of them occurring in the past 5 weeks. The burglaries are not occurring in any single neighborhood, but over a broad area. Since the rise in burglaries over the past five weeks, the Sheriff's Office has

stepped up patrols with both marked and unmarked units, and detectives continue to follow up on all leads. The Sheriff's Office is also using a Crime Analyst in conjunction with other technology to assist in identifying potential burglars targeting the area. But residents must still be vigilant to call in all suspicious behavior in their neighborhoods, and to shore up their homes against burglars.

The Modus Operandi, or "M.O."

The modus operandi of neighborhood burglars is pretty consistent when it comes to residential burglaries. Most burglars drive through neighborhoods looking for homes which appear that no one is home and that have few obstacles to get inside. When a burglar sees a potential target house, many times they will knock on the front door to see if there's an answer. If no one is home, they will then walk the perimeter of the house, checking for unlocked windows or doors as they go. In approximately 1/3 of California burglary cases, burglars enter through an unlocked window or door and do not have to force entry. In Los Altos Hills, the rate is closer to 2/3 of cases. Once the burglar gets into the house, the burglars spend less than ten minutes looking for valuables. Burglars mostly look for small items with high value such as jewelry, laptops, smart phones, cash, etc. Women's designer bags are also popular, and burglars will sometimes take financial items for identity theft, including checkbooks, credit cards, statements, or identification. A second or third person may be waiting in the getaway car down the street or around the corner. Once the burglary item is taken, the person inside will call their partner, who will then pick up the person in front of the house or nearby. The goal of most burglars is to steal property, not to commit a person crime if interrupted by the home owner.

Preventing home burglaries

Despite a number of arrests made by the Sheriff's Office, there's no shortage of burglars to fill the void. Therefore, it is imperative for residents everywhere, including Los Altos Hills, to take steps to protect their homes and property. Gone are the days of leaving the front door unlocked or a bathroom window open for fresh air while no one is home. The Sheriff's Office is asking residents to take basic precautions to reduce the chances of becoming a victim.

Burglars like the path of least resistance and they don't want to get caught, so the goal is to make it difficult for a burglar to break in, and to draw attention to them if they do. In simplest terms, this can be done by locking up your house and setting an alarm. Residents should also take advantage of surveillance technology by posting cameras in key areas around their homes. The Sheriff's Office made three arrests of Los Altos Hills burglars earlier this year with the help of surveillance footage received from residents. See list of burglary prevention tips at the end of this article for further information to help prevent you from becoming a victim.

After a break in

If you arrive home and see that someone has burglarized your house, step back out and call the Sheriff's Office immediately. The Sheriff's Office will respond and check your house to make sure no one is still inside. After making sure the burglars are gone, deputies will inspect the home to try to determine the ingress and egress points of the suspect. Because the Sheriff's Office is a full service police agency, deputies will dust for fingerprints if it appears the suspect didn't use gloves. The deputy will also take a statement from you to determine the time element of the burglary, as well as any items that you immediately recognize as being missing. You will have more time to inventory your house and get back to the deputy at a later time with an itemized list. It is very important to provide the serial numbers to the deputy for any items that have serial numbers. This will require you to have the list of serial numbers filed away beforehand since the items will be gone. The deputy will enter the serial numbers into a California stolen property data base so that there's a higher chance of recovery. The Sheriff's Office also recommends taking pictures of valuable and unique items beforehand. Sheriff's detectives will share these photos with detectives of other local police agencies so that law enforcement can be on the lookout for the stolen property, which sometimes shows up in a criminal's car or house while deputies are conducting other enforcement operations.

Neighborhood Watch programs

One of the oldest and most effective crime prevention tools is establishing a Neighborhood Watch group. The primary purpose of this program is to promote awareness and communication across the community. The program, in tandem with Nextdoor, leverages the familiarity and knowledge neighbors have about their community. When an incident takes place, residents are notified and can be vigilant for further unusual activity. This increased communication can sometimes cause residents to believe there's an epidemic of crime, when in actuality they're merely becoming more aware that crime does occur. The hope is that residents will not panic, but rather become more astute about the activity in their neighborhood so that they can call in any and all suspicious behavior and prevent potential crimes. Residents can call in suspicious behavior by dialing 9-1-1.

Information about setting up a neighborhood watch program can be found at the National Neighborhood Watch Institute's website at www.nnwi.org. The Sheriff's Office also meets with neighborhood watch groups to support the group and to provide safety tips residents can put into practice. Signage can be put in place to put burglars on notice that residents are looking out for suspicious behavior and reporting it to the police.

Crime Prevention Forum

One of the ways that the Sheriff's Office has sought to educate residents is by holding Crime Prevention Forums in conjunction with the Town of Los Altos Hills. The Sheriff's Office has

been pushing out burglary prevention information for years, and our most recent meeting was in April of 2014. Due to the recent rash of burglaries, the Sheriff's Office and Town of Los Altos Hills are planning another informational seminar in September to help residents protect themselves from becoming a victim of burglary. Once the final date is determined, a notification will be posted on Nextdoor.com and a post card will be mailed to Town residents.

Please take a moment to read the burglary prevention tips below since they can greatly reduce your odds of becoming a victim.

BURGLARY PREVENTION TIPS:

1. **Secure Doors and Windows-** Dead bolts will help fortify your front door; also be sure to close and lock ALL windows, even on a second story. If you have a gate on the side of your home or at the front of your driveway, keep that closed and locked as well.
2. **Home Security System-** Besides valuable property inside of your house, there's also personal identifying information including checks, credit card statements, or passports that burglars might take. Consider installing a home security system, to include an audible alarm and surveillance cameras. Alarms do no good if they're not turned on, so get into the practice of setting them when you leave the house. Also, be mindful of false alarms since these require a police response and a 3rd false alarm will trigger a fine from the Town.
3. **Motion Sensor Lights-** Have motion sensor lights on the outside of your home. Also consider putting at least 2 indoor lights on timers for extended absences, which will give the illusion to burglars that someone is home.
4. **Stop deliveries including mail and the newspaper when you're away on vacation.** These are notices to burglars that no one is home. You might also ask a trusted neighbor to collect them in your absence.
5. **Call 9-1-1 regarding all suspicious behavior.** Residents have the best familiarity with what is normal behavior and activity for their neighborhood. Don't hesitate to report any and all suspicious behavior.
6. **Solicitors and unexpected knocks at your door-** Burglars will sometimes knock on the front door to see if anyone's home before breaking in. Always let them know someone is home by answering through the door, but it's not necessary to open the door. Also, the Town and County require a permit for solicitors, so be sure to call the Sheriff's Office so we can make contact with the solicitors to check for a permit. If a solicitor or person at the door is persistent, let them know that you called 9-1-1. If possible, take note of the person's clothing description and any vehicles associated, including license plates.

7. Be mindful of your landscaping and vegetation. Do they provide a place for burglars to hide while approaching your house? Can burglars hide behind them while cars drive by at the street? Make your home a difficult target for burglars to approach without being seen.
8. If you are going on vacation, contact the Sheriff's Office to place a request for "Patrol Checks" while you are gone. You can fill out the Patrol Check request form online at <http://www.sccgov.org/sites/sheriff/Pages/pcr.aspx>.