

**This is a transcript of a presentation to the Wandsworth Borough  
Neighbourhood Watch Association AGM by Jim Maddan on a new initiative  
to tackle**

**Distraction Burglary**

Distraction burglary differs considerably from traditional burglary. Whereas a traditional burglar, dressed in his striped jumper and with a bag marked swag, uses stealth and the cover of darkness to commit his crime, the distraction burglar is content to confront his victim face to face. Distraction burglary is very much akin to domestic violence and racial harassment which are not highlighted in the crime statistics, but which have a significantly greater impact on the victim, particularly their health.

Distraction burglars demonstrate relatively sophisticated interpersonal skills expressed through various techniques of subterfuge to take advantage of a person's goodwill, requesting a glass of water or use of the phone, or impersonate officials who might have a legitimate reason to visit a household unannounced. Some offenders work alone, although many work in pairs, a 'distracter' diverts the occupant while an accomplice enters unobserved stealing cash, jewelry, and other portable items. These offence dynamics mean that the offenders have often left the area before the occupier has realized that they have become a victim.

In the year 2002/2003 there were almost 20,000 reported crimes of distraction burglary in England and Wales. According to the well respected British Crime survey it is the most under reported crime. Only one in ten crimes was reported, putting the true figure at around 200,000 crimes.

The reasons for this are two-fold. Firstly it may be due to police inconsistencies in recording offences, some are misclassified and some are recorded as 'No Crime...occupier suffering from delusions' Secondly victims are reluctant to report offences due to the embarrassment of having being deceived, the fear of looking stupid, the lack of awareness of having become a victim, accompanied by a lack of confidence in the police to respond sympathetically and the potential trauma of engaging in the criminal justice system

The average loss in financial terms is £1500, which means that the annual total nationally is around £300 million. However this financial loss is often aggravated by the theft of low value, but highly sentimental items, such as gifts from parents, and partners now deceased.

Nationally the victim of distraction burglary is a white female aged 82 years and living alone. People of this age often keep large sums of money at home. There is a cash based society, in which there is a general distrust of banks and a

reluctance to accept modern technology such as cash dispensers, accompanied by a belief that credit is the work of the devil.

Elderly victims are more likely to have impaired sight and they can become easily confused, making poor witnesses, even if they realize that they have been victimized. Hence, the willingness of offenders to confront their victims. In addition, they come from a generation of trusting individuals and adopt a different doorstep etiquette. They are often lonely and welcome visitors.

### What is the situation in Wandsworth ?

We have closely examined twenty two cases in three different council wards.

90% lived in council owned or leased properties as compared with 30% of the properties in the borough. Many victims had some form of controlled entry system.

Nearly three quarters (72%) were female. Three out of five (60%) were aged between 80 and 90 years of age. But most worrying, almost two thirds (63% ) were repeat victims

Distraction burglars are sophisticated, silver tongued professional criminals with well developed inter-personal skills. They treat it as a job, traveling many hundred miles a week to do a days work. Many drive to London on a Monday, from as far afield as Liverpool, Manchester, Newcastle and Leeds, sleeping in their car, before returning home at the weekend. It is not a crime that is restricted to males. Some of the best con artists are women and young girls. Nor are you ever too young to start, with evidence that boys and girls as young as eight are being trained to act as a decoy, and going on well past the statutory retirement age, whatever that is now, well into their eighties.

### How do they identify their victims.

Observation and intelligence.

Convicted distraction burglars have been interviewed and have provided much useful information about their methods of selection. They will walk along a street and pick houses with the tell-tale signs, unkempt gardens, shoddy paintwork, grubby net curtains, perhaps a wheelchair ramp, handles to assist the disabled, anything which suggests that the occupier is elderly and disabled.

The second method is intelligence gleaned from fellow criminals and on the grapevine. This includes details of areas where the council are carrying out major

works, window replacement etc, which gives them a ready excuse to visit people in their homes. Observation is kept on meals on wheels deliverers, they follow pensioners from the post office on pension day, they keep an eye open for carers visiting their clients and even tail council minibuses taking people to and from day centres.

The loss of a victim's life savings inevitably has devastating effects. The loss of the money is bad enough, however, the evidence from various studies, suggests that although all crime has some effect on the victim, it is far greater where the victim is elderly, and especially where there is a pre-existing condition, such as a previous heart attack, high blood pressure, or dementia.

This has a knock-on effect, with increased demands on the health service, district nurses, doctors etc, and council services such as home care, meals on wheels etc. Victims become introspective, embarrassed to discuss it, afraid to go out, prisoners in their own homes.

As one elderly victim put it ' They didn't just steal my money, they stole my life.'

The various scams used by distraction burglars are many and numerous and often reflect the times in which we live. A current scam being used in this borough concerns the pamphlet issued by the government about what we should all do in case of a terrorist attack. Someone is going round claiming that he is checking up to make sure that everybody is following the government guidance.

Other popular scams in this area involve bogus water board officials, phony council officers, and bogus gas board workers. Putney has witnessed a man claiming to be a police officer checking for counterfeit bank notes, taking the money away and even issuing a receipt. Children feature in scams involving footballs in the garden and asking for glasses of water.

A variation on the distraction burglar theme is the woman in Putney who is claiming to be a relative of a neighbour who has been taken to hospital and she needs money for a taxi to go and see her before she passes away.

There is a clear link between distraction burglars and bogus repairmen and traders. They are the men who persuade their victim that they have a loose tile on the roof and before you know it they have claimed to have fitted a whole new roof. The two groups regularly meet up and exchange information about potential victims.

The bogus repairman latches onto a victim and frequently demands more and more money for non-existent work, and it is not unknown for them to take their victim to the bank to withdraw unusually large sums of money...£20 - £30,000 are regularly taken. One bogus trader admitted fleecing his victim for £75,000.

The relationship between banks and their vulnerable clients is under scrutiny and the National Association of Trading Standards Officers who has responsibility for traders, is tackling this problem head-on.

### What are we doing about it ?

Victims who have a distrust of the entire judicial system and fear of unsympathetic police officers, are being offered the opportunity to make a report through a third party, eg Age Concern

Training is being offered to professionals, police recruits, Victim Support volunteers, health service staff, meals on wheels personnel, Age Concern befrienders, in fact anyone who may come into contact with potential victims

It is important that all those who come into contact with victims and potential victims are aware of the scale of the problem, what can be done to help them and where to get further advice.

We are increasing the number of groups such as neighbourhood watch, residents associations etc, because there is significant evidence that distraction burglars steer well clear of areas where there is a social network of neighbours looking out for each other. Apart from anything else neighbours make good witnesses.

There is a lot of new technology available which can reinforce the message to potential victims, making them safer in their homes. This includes target hardening, eliminating some of the tell tale signs, the untidy garden etc.

But most importantly we are raising the awareness of elderly people in the borough. These are the potential victims and it is vital that we get the message across. We are visiting luncheon clubs, day centres, sheltered housing schemes, pensioner groups, anywhere where the elderly and vulnerable get together. We make no apology that people may hear our message more than once. It is in this way that the message sinks in.

### What are our recommendations ?

NEVER ever open the door to an unexpected caller. Even a door chain will not stop a determined burglar. Remember the Water Board NEVER need to check your taps. They turn off the water in the street in an emergency.

Ask all callers to return by appointment. Genuine callers will not object. Bogus callers will never return. We are considering introducing a 'Nominated

Neighbour' scheme where callers are told to go to a neighbour, who will check that they are who they say they are and return with them later.

Always use a good quality correctly fitted door viewer

Keep utility company account numbers handy...perhaps on a sticker by the door.

If in doubt call the police on 999.

They will not mind coming out if there is a chance that they can catch one of these pariahs. But be aware some of the offenders are so convincing that they can even con police officers.

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