

Gardening to deter crime

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Practice note: The role of defensive planting in making properties less attractive for burglars

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In the winter period of 2020/21, having identified that burglars often gained entry by climbing over fences and gates, I promoted defensive planting as part of a prevention campaign, resulting in a significant reduction in offences in the target areas. Our problem-solving team analysts produced data on winter burglary hot spots, which was shared with all 11 boroughs in Surrey. This data was then used to develop preventative plans based on the areas that had seen the greatest volume of offending in the previous two years.

Our approach

We started our plan development with scanning and analysis, adopting a problem-solving approach so that resources could be focused effectively. The recurring hot spots were geographically defined and a neighbourhood support officer (NSO) reviewed all burglaries in prior winter periods. Police community support officers (PCSOs) then visited all properties to conduct a visual audit and to identify the common factors. A checklist was used to note features, which were subsequently populated in a Microsoft Excel document so the data could be interrogated easily. We identified the commonest days and times when burglaries were committed, and identified that the majority of properties were:

- in a cul de sac where they were not overlooked
- often burgled via the rear
- sometimes accessed via a locked side gate
- subject to the theft of jewellery and cash

As a result of this analysis, we provided very specific and targeted information about burglary prevention in the hot spot area. Having identified the type of property most at risk, we were able to conduct joint patrols with the Neighbourhood Watch during the frequent offence commission days and times. This allowed us to deliver targeted crime prevention advice at the same time as

providing a visible deterrence in the areas. The crime prevention advice was either delivered in person or through a letter. I wrote the letter to make it personal and specific to the individual and their property.

Planting

Some properties were vulnerable, due to their side gates not being locked and due to access and egress being through the side or over fences. In these cases, the possible benefits of defensive planting were considered. Defensive planting had the potential to make the properties less attractive for burglars and more difficult as targets. This would involve, for example, planting a trailing rose over a side gate or along a fence line, or placing plants with natural defences – such as thorns, barbs or spines – against fences or around windows.

We produced a video to raise awareness of the mechanism of offending in the area, as well as the preventative benefits of defensive planting. I contacted the Royal Horticultural Society and, with their advice and support, suggested suitable plants for this purpose. The video not only encouraged people to use defensive planting, but also raised more general preventative advice by engaging with an audience on a topic that they were interested in. The video was released on social media and has received thousands of views.

- [Watch defensive planting to deter burglary](#)

Results

Compared to the previous winter period, there was a reduction of 82% in burglaries within the hot spot area. The overall reduction in burglaries for the division was around 40%. However, these figures should be approached with caution, as COVID-19 lockdowns were an identifiable contributor. This approach could be used in other settings to reduce vulnerability to burglary.

This campaign was shared with all boroughs and the approach was taken up in a neighbouring borough for a residence that had been targeted by burglars multiple times. The victim was helped to target harden their property, using Safer Streets funding for a landscape gardener to do some defensive planting. The victim has not been targeted since the work has been completed.

- This article was peer reviewed by Detective Inspector Tanya Shotbolt, Bedfordshire Police.

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