



## Police crackdown on a new trend in burglaries

In any country statistically burglaries tend to be one of the highest report crimes and also one of the most difficult to detect.

Provisional figures released by the GNR and PSP show that in 2016 there were 18,301 burglaries of which 5795 were reported to the PSP (who cover the major cities) a reduction of 10% compared to 2015. A total of 12,506 were reported to the GNR who cover 94% of the country, a reduction of 7%. Most reported burglaries occurred in Lisbon 2986; Porto 2813, and Faro District (the Algarve registering 2085. Whereas Porto and Lisbon showed decreased of -1.2% and -2.1% % respectively compared to 2015, the Algarve showed an increase of 21.8%

Although being a victim of a burglary or a residential robbery are both traumatic for the victim, there is a difference between the two. This feature is dealing only with burglaries, which are break-ins to properties normally when the occupant is absent. Robberies, thankfully far less than burglaries, are break-ins when the threat of violence or actual violence is used.

There are many ways in which burglars can enter peoples home. The opportunist will try and spot a vulnerable point such as a window left open, whereas others will be prepared to scale walls, break windows and doors. Most burglaries fall into this category.

Whatever the modus operandi used however, criminals will look for high takings with low risk to themselves. It is not worth trying to circumvent an elaborate alarm system when it is unlikely there will be nothing worthwhile taking inside.

About 6 years ago East European and Brazilian gangs targeted luxury residential residences in remote areas mainly owned by foreigners, extracting their bank pin numbers through use of violence or threats of violence. This is a high risk crime and through the good work of police many were caught, or fled the country. This is now a rarity

2016 however was marked by a very different trend and that was the appearance of a network of assailants known as "cells" from South American, many of whom appear to be Chileans.

Their MO is to arrive in the country, target luxury homes and burgle them when the properties are empty. This requires them to monitor the properties beforehand, noting the security arranges and any vulnerabilities and ascertain the movements of the occupants to ensure it is empty when they break in. They then assess whether the risk is worth the takings they may find inside. Having stolen the items they are quickly despatched overseas before leaving the country themselves.

Clearly their work has been very professional and in one case they manage to steal around €12 million from the house of one of Portugal's richest persons in the north of Portugal.

Police sources have indicated that there be as many as 100 operatives in Portugal divided into various cells. They cover the whole country and most have false identification papers, tourist visas. As such when they are caught they are difficult to identify. It is believed that the first cell was discovered by the PSP operating in Cascais in the summer of 2016. Apart from Chileans, Cubans Argentinians and Columbians are allegedly involved.

### **Examples of South American gangs operating worldwide**

Although Portugal is now feeling the effects of these South American gangs they have operated for some years in many countries.

**Canada** - In 2015 in Toronto police arrested a dozen Chilean nationals who entered with false identification and set up a "break and enter" business across the City. In fact, there were 15 of these people before three fled back to Chile one step ahead of detectives.

**London** - Also in 2015 it was reported that Chilean pickpockets had become the most effective thieves operating in central London. Gangs of up to six members, followed wealthy shoppers in the West End before stealing their cash and belongings.

Organised international gangs of thieves spent a short time operating in London before flying to places such as Madrid, Barcelona and Milan for the same purpose - all as part of moves to avoid detection.

**Spain** - In a bazaar case, also in 2015, Spanish police broke-up an alleged extortion ring run on mobile phones by four prisoners from a jail in the Chilean capital, Santiago.

The prisoners made cold-calls to random numbers in Spain and terrorised people by telling them they had kidnapped their family members. Around 160 complaints were received and around 10% of those called had paid up to see the release of their relatives. Most who had paid up were older people, police said, adding that some had handed over \$12,000 (£8,200).

Earlier this month it was reported by Europol that the Spanish National Police supported by Europol and by the French and Georgian authorities has arrested 61 members of a Georgian organised crime group specialised in burglaries. Overall, 26 house searches have been carried out and EUR 33 000, 8 vehicles, 7 100 tobacco packets and many stolen pieces of jewellery have been seized.

And it is not just thefts. A few days ago a drug bust in Arica, Chile, turned up more than \$12 million worth of cocaine that was bound for Spain (*Reuters*).

Three suspected traffickers were arrested, two of whom are confirmed Spanish nationals. According to officials cited by Reuters, the antinarcotics operation took place in the port city of Arica in northern Chile. The targeted drug gang was reportedly part of an international group of traffickers that was moving drugs from Colombia across South America to a final destination in Europe.

### **In Portugal**

As has been widely reported, the GNR recovered on 9th January "several thousand euros worth" of watches, jewellery and other items that have been stolen in luxury homes, all over the country, by a gang arrested in Loulé, before the items were shipped to Chile and Italy.

The packages were retained at Lisbon Airport and when opened found to contain items including 190 pieces of jewellery, 50 watches, a collection of coins, ten handbags,

In Cascais nine Chileans have been taken into custody suspected to having carried out a number of burglaries in the area

The Judiciary Police (PJ) announced on 21<sup>st</sup> January the arrest of three South Americans named as the "cell" of an international criminal organization responsible for "millionaire thefts" in homes, namely those on 18th January in Porto and Gondomar. In their possession were large amounts of money, precious metal objects, false identification documents and tools "used in the crimes, and the PJ proceeded to" suspend the posting of postal parcels abroad".

In a statement, the Judicial Police said that three men from South American countries aged between 24 and 37 years, had been charged with crimes of criminal association and qualified theft in residence. Following the police intervention, the suspects were apprehended, "The suspects," he said, "will be part of a broader international criminal group that will be dedicated to the commission of other crimes of this nature in various areas of the country."

### **Europol Analysis**

According to Europol Organised property crime is often committed by highly mobile organised crime groups that typically carry out a significant number of offences in a region over a short period before moving on.

As organised property crimes are often investigated in isolation at the local level, an analysis at the national level is often lacking, making these crimes harder to detect and to solve.

Of major concern to EU law enforcement is the increase in domestic burglaries attributable to itinerant crime groups originating mainly from south-eastern and Eastern Europe.

Estimates suggest one burglary is committed every 1.5 minutes in the EU, with some Member States registering 1 000 burglaries every day. In Portugal last year it was **50 per day**.

### **So what can we do?**

Firstly I would suggest is not to boast and display wealth in front of strangers and that goes for Facebook – which criminals monitor! Secondly keep an eye open for strangers who maybe monitoring your home and that of neighbours – report this to police noting car registration numbers. Thirdly make sure your contents insurance is up to date and fourthly follow the household protection crime prevention steps on our website.

**By David Thomas**

**President Safe Communities Portugal**

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