

SAFE COMMUNITY



David Thomas

REDUCING THE RISK OF HOUSEHOLD CRIME

FROM recent meetings both with the GNR and PSP, it is clear that crime patterns vary a great deal between different areas in the Algarve, with some areas being more prone to household crime than others. What intrigues me, therefore, are the reasons why this is so when the demographics of areas are similar and often not too far apart. This feature is based on my contacts with police and through the many people who have contacted *Safe Communities Algarve* as either a victim of crime or requesting crime prevention advice.

Police action

Police face many challenges here in the Algarve, it being an entry point for drugs from other countries, a largely rural population, open borders, limited resources etc. Currently, the main GNR policing priorities are aimed at targeting indoor residential robberies, street robberies (snatching) and trafficking in dangerous drugs.

As readers may be aware, in the last two to three weeks there have been a number of significant police successes in dismantling several gangs that have been active in the Algarve and elsewhere for some time. The most significant of these was the arrest of five Portuguese nationals in February believed responsible for a number of violent robberies throughout the Algarve for as many as four years. Another significant case was the arrest of 24 persons by the PSP in the Lisbon and Sintra areas, believed to be responsible for the trafficking in various drugs.

Clearly the police are working hard to bring to justice those responsible and ensure that the Algarve remains a safe place to live and visit. There are two ways we can all help in reducing property crime and they are by taking simple crime prevention steps and reporting suspicious activities. This month's feature focuses on these two issues.

Basically, the majority of property crime is carried out by opportunists and, to

a lesser extent, by those who actually carry out some preparatory work beforehand.

Opportunist crime

In terms of opportunist property crime, the most frequent means of access is through open windows when the property is unoccupied. There is a simple message here and that is, before leaving your property, spend five minutes checking that windows and doors are closed and locked, lights switched on if at night time, cars locked if kept in a driveway or open car port and, of course, not forgetting to activate your alarm when actually leaving the property.

It is important to create the impression that a property is occupied when in fact it is not. Ways to create this impression are to use timers on lights and even radios, which can be set at variable times over an extended period.

If the house is unoccupied over a longer period, then register it as an empty property through the GNR or PSP websites, or by visiting your local police station

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and completing a simple pro-forma. This is where having a helpful neighbour can be beneficial. A visit to your home just two to three times a week, drawing curtains and moving a car in a driveway are good ways of creating a “lived-in impression” as well as checking everything is okay.

Distraction crime

Distraction crime relating to properties is when someone



approaches your home, for example, asking for water and upon entering the property steals something whilst your back is turned.

This type of crime comes in many different forms but

all with the same aim, which is to distract you whilst the crime is carried out. It is important therefore that you do not let strangers onto your land if you have gates or into your house if you do not.

For those living alone, if a stranger calls, it is better not to answer. At night-time, do not go outside if you hear a noise. I know all this seems obvious but some residents still fall for this, as often the reasons for

the call seem plausible and convincing.

Pre-planned crime

In terms of properties, this type of crime takes mainly two forms: burglaries committed whilst your home is unoccupied or through burglaries or robberies whilst you are present.

The difference between the two is that robberies involve violence or the immediate threat of violence. Thankfully, robberies and burglaries committed whilst a property is occupied are far less in the Algarve than those involving unoccupied properties. The reason for this is that most burglaries are relatively minor in terms of what is stolen and the culprits do not wish to be identified or want confrontation.

Burglaries and robberies whilst the property is occupied take a far more serious form and the action you take can have a considerable bearing on the outcome. This is easier said than done when seconds matter in a stressful situation. Guidelines to help with this type of situation, entitled “Dealing with Intruders” can be found on the *Safe Communities Algarve*

(SCA) website under the ‘Crime Prevention’ page.

Pre-planned burglaries and robberies almost certainly involve one of the following scenarios: a) that you and your property have been watched beforehand; b) you have been followed to where you live; c) resulting from a dispute with neighbours; d) someone who has entered your house (e.g. a contractor) has observed something worth stealing; or e) a contractor has inadvertently or intentionally mentioned to someone in a local bar, for instance, that your property is worth breaking into.

The “contractor scenario” may be one reason why some neighbourhoods are more prone to burglaries than others. The risk of such crime can be reduced by minimising the number of contractors that you employ to those who are well known and can be trusted.

If a contractor is only doing external work, advice is not to let them into your house again unless well trusted. Once a burglary has taken place, the risk to neighbouring properties also increases.

Concerning disputes with neighbours, readers would be surprised by the number of

people who contact me when they have fallen out with their neighbour and fear retribution. Advice is obviously to try and avoid this in the first place but, if not, try and reach an amicable solution. As the last resort, contact the police if you really feel that you are under threat.

If you feel that you are being followed, do not confront the person but instead note their description and report to police. Lastly and most importantly, look out for suspicious activities, persons and unknown vehicles in the vicinity of your home who may be carrying out surveillance before coming back later.

Details of what to look out for are under “My GNR” on the SCA website – use “Eyes and Ears” to report this or contact the police directly either through the Safe Residence Programme or to the nearest police station.

ll features@algarveresident.com
David Thomas is a former Assistant Commissioner of the Hong Kong Police, consultant to INTERPOL and the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. In October 2011 he formed Safe Communities Algarve an on-line platform here in the Algarve to help the authorities and the community prevent crime. 913 045 093
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