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Crime

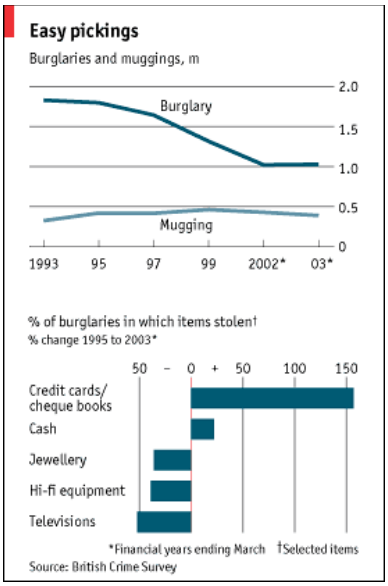
# The decline of the English burglary

May 27th 2004

From *The Economist* print edition

**How a once-fashionable crime has fallen from grace**

WHATEVER happened to burglary? In the late 1980s, it was as ubiquitous as baggy jeans. Everybody who was not being burgled seemed to be burgling, or otherwise supporting the industry by buying cheap videos, no questions asked. But the housebreaking fad is now in danger of becoming retro. Domestic break-ins have fallen by 45% in the past ten years, according to the British Crime Survey. The steepest decline has been in trend-setting London, where burglary is now as rare as it was in the era of lounge suits and Abba.




Burglary still has its adherents, but, like other followers of out-of-date fashions, they are an increasingly sorry-looking bunch. "Burglars are not nearly as well prepared as they used to be. Many don't even bring a bag to the job," says John Kelly, head of crime at the Cleveland police force in north-eastern England.

Why the decline in numbers and skill? Improved security and low unemployment rates have something to do with it, although not as much as boosters claim. Burglar alarms are more widespread than a decade ago, but only a quarter of houses have them—and they tend not to be in the most vulnerable areas. As for growth in the legitimate job market, that does not appear to have drawn the criminal element away from mugging (see chart).

The more likely reasons for the decline of burglary have to do with changes in the criminal marketplace. In the past decade, the housebreaking trade has suffered two shocks—one to demand for its products, the other to its labour supply.

The first problem concerns the kind of loot typically kept in houses. Video recorders, DVD players and hi-fis are now so cheap, in real terms, that they are barely worth nicking. Televisions are a better bet, but the most valuable ones are so large as to present practical difficulties. Last year, just one in ten successful thieves walked off with one—less than half the proportion that did so in 1995.

Favourite targets these days are small items that are readily turned into money. Credit cards, cheque books and mobile phones are all increasingly popular, as is cash itself (taken in 39% of all burglaries). These are, of course, the same things that people tend to carry around in the street, which is not a coincidence. In the past few years, burglary has become less a distinct business with its own specialist workforce and associated occupations (such as fencing), and more a proxy form of mugging favoured by the slow and timid.



That trend has also been pushed forward by changes in the criminal labour force. In the past ten years, police say, skilled burglars (who tend to travel widely and specialise in particular goods) have been largely replaced by casual operators. Stephen House, deputy assistant commissioner of the Metropolitan Police, explains that the specialist fences "professional" crooks rely on have increasingly been rumbled by paid informants. Intelligence-sharing has made their lives more difficult, too. These days, the imminent release from prison of a skilled burglar will be preceded by a flurry of alerts to watch out for a particular modus operandi.

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The Home Office publishes statistics on domestic burglary in England and Wales and the full British Crime Survey. See also the Metropolitan Police and George Orwell's 1946 essay, "The Decline of the English Murder".

The departure of skilled operators has left the burglary trade in the hands of desperate, drug-addicted young men. They rarely specialise in housebreaking, and, when they do, follow a quite different pattern, raiding poorly protected properties within walking distance of their homes. Such men are probably as numerous as a decade ago—according to Mr Kelly, indeed, they are more numerous. But they are committing fewer burglaries, in part because they simply aren't up to it.



Now that the police routinely test offenders for drugs, they are noticing that certain chemicals seem to be associated with certain types of crime. One Home Office study of 3,000 arrestees found that those pulled in for burglary and shoplifting were more likely to test positive for heroin than anyone else. Muggers and purse-snatchers, though, were most likely to be cocaine or crack users.

Given the effects of the drugs, such patterns are not surprising. As Steve Hassall, a detective chief inspector at Greater Manchester Police, puts it, a crack addict in need of a fix will be "climbing the walls" and hardly capable of planning a break-in. This has strong implications for criminal activity. As powder and crack cocaine overtake heroin as drugs of choice, burglary inevitably declines while street crime does not.

Thanks to years of epidemic rates, and the heinousness of the act itself, burglary has retained its status as the premier British folk crime. But the image is increasingly out of touch with reality. If you return home to find the window broken and the television gone, be aware: you are looking at a piece of history.

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