

## **` Tremendous problem' // One in 3 burglary suspects in Florida is under age 18 Series: Breaking In Young**

[CITY Edition]

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Author: CHRISTOPHER SCANLAN

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### **Document Text**

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“Condominium townhouses were my easy prey. I used to climb up on the air conditioner and get on the second story; you could walk along the roofs and check all the windows. Nine out of 10 windows would be unlocked. That's how I'd get into most of them.”

That's a burglar talking. He's 16.

Once every two minutes, someone breaks into a home or business in Florida.

By midnight tonight, 720 burglaries will be reported in the state; by year's end, the count will surpass a quarter of a million. The odds are high - especially if the target is an unoccupied house in daylight hours, police say - that the burglar is a child under 18. And very often, that young burglar is no stranger. Ask an expert.

“Usually it's somebody that knows you,” said a sweet-faced 17-year-old from Tampa who claims to have broken into “almost 200 houses” since he was 16 to support his \$1,000-a-week cocaine habit.

“I hit maybe 20 houses down my street and it was pretty obvious that I did it, but they couldn't prove it because I always had on gloves,” said the youth, who was interviewed at the Tampa Bay facility of the drug treatment program Straight Inc. “I used to get in my mom's address book. Then I got a cross-reference book - I stole it out of a house - and I'd call every single house down the street. I'd call three houses and when three houses weren't home, I'd pick the one in the middle. You wouldn't have to worry about someone seeing you on the sides.”

Police say the average burglary victim loses nearly \$1,000 in property. The hidden costs are harder to tally - the sense of violation, nightmares, lingering fear, the frustrating anger when the culprit eludes capture.

As he most likely will.

Burglaries end in arrest in Florida in only a fraction of cases: 16 percent in 1986, the poorest solution rate of all serious crimes.

Despite the difficulties of solving burglaries, the sheer volume of offenses generates more than 30,000 burglary arrests a year. One out of every three suspects is under 18: nearly 13,000 last year, according to Florida Department of Law Enforcement (FDLE) figures.

That doesn't include the ones who didn't get caught.

“If you follow the logic that juveniles commit one-third of the ones you solve, then probably another third are being committed by juveniles that you can't solve,” said Sgt. Gary Mitchell, a burglary squad supervisor in St. Petersburg.

It may almost be a perverse blessing that police can't catch every juvenile burglar. If they did, the state would be hard-pressed to find a place to put them. Juvenile detention facilities in Pinellas and Hillsborough counties are already badly overcrowded.

The daily population at the 98-bed detention center in Tampa is averaging 129 youngsters. At Clearwater's 77-bed center, the daily average is 100. “We've had as many as 124. That means sleeping on floors (and) doubling up,” in 8- by 8-foot cells, said Bill Gandy, a Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services (HRS) official. “It's a crisis situation.”

### Exhilarating experience

Police statistics tell one story about the increasing involvement of children in a rising crime rate. Crime experts - police, social workers, judges, prosecutors - tell another about society's efforts to deal with the problem. Kids who break the law rarely talk about it, unless it's with a psychologist appointed by the court, a detective they've agreed to cooperate with, or friends they're trying to impress.

When they do, they invariably describe an experience that is frightening and exhilarating. Seen through their eyes, burglary is a quick road to rewards with few risks unless you leave your fingerprints or squealing friends "nark" to the cops. Only then, after they have been caught do they see it differently: as the biggest mistake they've ever made.

That is the picture painted by 30 burglars from around the state interviewed by the Times at the Straight drug treatment program; a halfway house for juvenile offenders in St. Petersburg; San Antonio Boys Village, a home for juvenile offenders in rural Pasco County; the Pinellas County Juvenile Detention Center; and in their own living rooms in the company of an HRS counselor. State officials or the juveniles' parents permitted the interviews under the condition that their identities not be reported.

"The first time, some of my friends were walking behind the mall and they seen this door open so they went inside and ran up to me and said 'Hey, guy, let's go get some stuff,'" recalled "Low Rider," the pseudonym chosen by a 16-year-old from Arcadia who was serving a sentence for burglary and arson at the Charles J. Britt Halfway House in St. Petersburg earlier this year.

"So I walked in, got some stuff and walked out and nothing happened. I got this feeling, if you keep on doing it, if you do it right, you might get more stuff, and I kept doing it 'til I got caught," he said.

Children commit all types of crimes, from murder to prostitution, drunk driving to rape. But burglary is one of their favorites, second only to larceny among the serious crimes committed by juveniles statewide, arrest figures compiled by FDLE show. "It is a tremendous problem," said Wesley Pardue, chief of the juvenile division in the Hillsborough State Attorney's Office. Pardue estimates that up to 20 percent of the delinquency petitions his office files in juvenile court each year charge youngsters with burglary.

James Myles works in St. Petersburg for the Juvenile Alternative Services Program (JASP), the statewide program that handles first-timer offenders diverted out of the courts by judges and prosecutors. After 13 years' working with juvenile delinquents, Myles has a theory why burglary is one of their top crimes of choice:

"They're not sophisticated enough to explore floor plans or watch a security guard change watches, but they are sophisticated enough to notice when folks are home and not home, and who leaves doors open and who does not. These are places they've seen over the years. It's easy for them, almost like, 'Wow, I know they got a coin collection in the house 'cause I've been in there ...'" Myles said.

"It's a crime of convenience," agrees Hillsborough juvenile prosecutor Pardue. "They're not going miles away to break into someone's home. They're doing it in their own neighborhood."

"Climbing over a fence, jumping through a window, fleeing upon being discovered, the type of work that a burglar is required to do makes it more of a younger man's crime," said Detective Michael Puetz, a St. Petersburg burglary investigator. "As you get older you can't run as quick or jump as high."

Juvenile burglary has been rising steadily - up 20 percent between 1984-86 - FDLE arrest figures show. Not only are more kids committing the crime, but they're also doing it at a younger age than ever before, say juvenile justice officials.

"We're seeing more and more 8- and 9-year-old kids that are involved in large numbers of burglaries," said Robert A. Miller, director of psychological services for the Juvenile Division of Circuit Court in Pinellas and Pasco Counties.

But most juvenile burglars are in their mid-teens. Predominantly male, they generally work in twos and threes and, police say, are often responsible for multiple offenses. "If you get a kid in for one or two burglaries, he's probably done a great many more which you can't prove," Puetz said.

Juvenile burglars generally commit daytime burglaries, when they should be in school, breaking into unoccupied houses, which is why police and school officials in St. Petersburg started a program last year to target truants. (Please see story, 17-A.)

Working fast, the young burglars are in and out of houses in minutes, as soon as they find cash or big-ticket items, such as VCRs, that are easy to carry away and sell. "The general picture that emerges from research is much more one of the sneak thief than the vicious thug," criminologist Thomas Repetto observed. "Usually I'd try to get out as quick as I could," a 16-year-old boy said. "I'd want to steal as much as I can, but the longer you stay in the more paranoid you get. Sometimes my knees would start shaking."

Why do they do it?

“There are probably as many reasons kids commit burglary as there are kids out there,” said psychologist Miller. He and other juvenile justice officials caution about the danger of labeling children, but agree that some categories that explain the motivation of juvenile burglars stand out:

**Followers.** “My friends said they wanted to break into this house up for sale. I wanted to say no, but I didn’t. Next thing I know I was crawling in the window,” recalled a 15-year-old girl at Straight. “We wrote on the walls, punched the walls and vandalized it. I guess I did it because my friends were doing it and I didn’t want to have to be alone.”

“These are kids who’d never do it in a million years except they’re with somebody else who is doing it. Sometimes both of them would never do it in a million years, but neither of them will say no to the other,” said Allen Hartman, assistant superintendent at the Charles J. Britt Halfway House.

**Risk takers.** What Hartman calls “danger junkies, kids who do it for the excitement.”

“I was breaking into houses before I was doing drugs,” said a 17-year-old boy at Straight. “I didn’t even take anything. It was in the summer and it was really boring. This was something to get my blood pumping.”

**School failures.** “I stopped in the eighth grade,” said “Low Rider,” the young burglar from Arcadia. “But I flunked out a couple of times before that.”

Learning disabilities are common among the youths Miller interviews at the Juvenile Detention Center in Clearwater. “One of the major things we find with children here is that if they’re in the 10th grade, they’re reading at a third-grade level. How they’re even functioning is beyond me,” he said.

**Apprentice criminals.** “In their environment, crime is perceived as a good job. And it’s true; some of them do make more money than they could ever make on minimum wage,” said Hartman.

“Wayne,” a 16-year-old from Belle Glade, had already been arrested for possession of \$20,000 worth of cocaine - “I wasn’t doing it,” he said. “I sold it to older people” - when police charged him with burglarizing a Palm Beach house with an older friend. “I just felt like I needed money.” He’s in a state training school now.

**Culturally deprived.** “These are kids who because of some circumstance just didn’t get socialized,” said Hartman. They may come from families that have moved frequently, children of migrant workers and those from rural communities, and, Hartman added, “the kid who’s been shuffled from institution to institution because he doesn’t have a family.”

**Drug addicts.** Although many young burglars buy drugs such as marijuana and alcohol with the money they steal, most law enforcement officials consider the addicted juvenile burglar a minority. (An interview with a teen-age burglar who was addicted to crack cocaine appears in today’s Floridian section.) But the addicted juvenile makes up for that in volume.

“I sold probably over 100 VCRs altogether,” said the 17-year-old boy from Tampa now in drug treatment at Straight. “Before I came here I started doing freebase cocaine and I probably spent \$20,000. I sold everything that I ever got. I don’t have anything out of any house that I’ve ever broken into.”

**Abused and neglected.** Whether emotionally or physically abused, these children “just plain have an anger and they act the anger out,” Hartman said.

Added Miller, the child psychologist: “There are some very good parents out there who have some bad kids, but a lot of times it’s just lack of supervision.”

“I didn’t know nothing about it ‘til the police would come knocking on the door asking for him,” said the mother of a St. Petersburg teen-ager on probation for burglary. “I feel like if I would have gave him a little more attention, he wouldn’t have did the things he did.”

“Once in the two years since I’ve been chief of the Juvenile Division,” said Hillsborough prosecutor Pardue, “have I had parents who saw their son come home with a brand new stereo that they knew they couldn’t afford and that he couldn’t afford and they called the police. But that’s pretty rare.”

**Runaways.** “They’re burglarizing to survive and they’re different than the kid that’s either out joyriding and impulsively does it or the kid that sits home and plans it out and decides what they’re going to take and where they’re going to fence it,” said Miller.

**The privileged few.** “We do run into the rich kid who has really everything and is doing it strictly for kicks,” said Sgt. Mitchell of St. Petersburg’s burglary squad.

“They just seem to be totally self-centered,” said Hartman, the halfway house official. “I had one tell me, ‘Like the watch you’re wearing. I see that as my watch. I just haven’t figured out how to get it yet.’”

Whatever their individual motivation, said psychologist Miller, juvenile burglars receive the same clinical diagnosis as

“probably 95 percent of the children who come through the (juvenile justice) system”: conduct disorder.

“These kids aren’t psychotic, aren’t terribly neurotic, but just seem to exhibit behaviors that create problems for society,” he said.

In general, that means the kind of rebelliousness familiar to parents of any teen-ager, “except they are exaggerated.”

“With a lot of these kids when an idea comes into their head, they act on it. They’re not thinking, ‘Gee, if I break into this house, there are these consequences. Therefore I ought not to do it.’ It’s more like, ‘Oh, what a good idea’ and before a few minutes are gone, they’ve done it.”

“That’s why the whole idea of punitive action - ‘Boy, this kid, if he knows he’s going to prison, he’s not going to break in’ - (is) bull turkeys,” Miller said. “He’s not thinking about what’s going to happen. He’s just focused on doing it.”

#### Juvenile burglars and the system

Here’s what happened to the 15,460 juveniles in Florida referred on burglary charges to the Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services (HRS) in 1986, according to the agency’s computer:

#### Cases disposed in court

State’s attorneys office dropped charges:1,571 Charge dismissed by judge:290 Warning by judge:93 Charges reduced:232 Judge approved a parent-supervised plan, usually proposed by a lawyer, to discipline the child at home:200 Disposition pending:242 Parent ordered to undergo counseling:3 Case held open, no further action:68 Court-ordered monetary restitution:10 Court-ordered work restitution:4 Community control (probation):3,149 Committed to HRS program (training school, group home, non-residential):1,248 Custody of licensed child-care agency:4 Child diverted to Juvenile Alternative Services Program:661 Transferred to another county for disposition:119 Transferred to adult court:620 Transferred to adult court, found not guilty, charges dropped by state, dismissed by judge:8 Transferred to adult court, found guilty, pleaded nolo, adjudication withheld:32 Other judicial disposition:67 Disposition unknown:3,890

#### Cases disposed by state attorney’s office and HRS

Case closed without sanctions:254 Parentally applied discipline:29 Work restitution:28 Monetary restitution:32 Community arbitration-mediation:423 Closed after intake:124 JASP:1,443 Child died:9 Unable to locate child:2 Family moved:5 Other:600

Source: Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services

#### [Illustration]

COLOR GRAPH, Trich Redman; COLOR CHART, Trich Redman; BLACK AND WHITE CHART, (2); BLACK AND WHITE GRAPH; Caption: graph shows number of burglaries by juveniles in Florida for years 1982-86; chart lists number of juvenile burglaries in Citrus, Hernando, Hillsborough, Pasco, and Pinellas counties for those years; charts list number of juveniles referred to HRS; Caption: on burglary charges by age for years 1982-86 for Florida and the five-county area; chart shows the final dispositions of the juvenile burglary cases referred to HRS in 1986; chart shows number of daytime residential burglaries in St. Pete; Caption: from January 1986-March 1987

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#### Abstract (Document Summary)

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