

Teen-Age burglars // In Their Own Words Series: Breaking In Young

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It could have been a yearbook meeting: a group of teen-age boys and girls in jeans and sneakers sitting in a semicircle, bright, attentive, articulate. In fact, it was a conference room at the Tampa Bay facility of Straight Inc., a treatment program where kids with drug problems learn to face the truth about their addiction and the troubles it caused them and their families. Burglary was one of those problems for the 13 teens, ages 15-19, who gathered on a rainy afternoon recently to talk about their experiences. As with all the youths quoted in these articles, anonymity was the only ground rule.

The first time

“I must have been 7 or 8 years old. I broke into my friend's house. I knew he went to church that day and wouldn't be home for two hours and I knew that they left their doors unlocked. I stole a buck knife and a piggy bank. I guess I used the money for candy. I just did it for ... I don't know. I just did it.” - Boy, 16.

“I think the first time was breaking into my own house. I think I was 14 when I first did it. I was thinking about running away. That's how I learned. I never had a key to my house. I learned how to jimmy a lock or go through a window.” - Boy, 16.

“You hear people get shot”

“I've broken into houses that people were sleeping in. Every time I jimmied or picked the lock, and it made a suction noise when I opened the door and my heart would sink. It was a real scary feeling 'cause if they wake up, you don't know, you hear people get shot. You got to watch your step and everything.” - Boy, 16

“When I broke into places, I tried to do it as fast as I could. I was paranoid from the time I thought about doing it and started to go do it until the time I was out of the place, and gone.” - Boy 17

Modus operandi

“Apartment complexes are really the easiest because you knew when the person was home. All you'd have to do is go up to the door and knock or ring the doorbell and if nobody answered, you just look around for open windows, unlocked windows, open doors, anything like that.” - Girl, 15.

“I'd have my Mom take me out to the mall and just walk home. I'd break into maybe 20 houses on the way home. Just knock on their doors. I was real dressed up nice, I had on a bow tie and if they answered I'd just ask them a couple of questions. If nobody answered, I'd go around back and kick the door in, bust the window. I wouldn't search the house. I'd just take one article: A VCR.” - Boy 17

“The first time I broke into a house I wore motorcycle gloves, really thick ones, but after that I'd wear surgical gloves.” - Boy, 17

“I would take my shirt and use it to open up things so I wouldn't leave any fingerprints.” - Girl, 16.

“If I didn't have any gloves, I'd take off my socks and use them.” - Boy, 17

The thrill of it all

“It was definitely a thrill. When I would get done, when I would have something that I didn't have before, it was like a

high. The first time I ever broke into anything, which was a car, I didn't need anything. It was just a good feeling." - Boy, 17

"I'd tell my teacher, I have to go to the nurse and I'd run over to these apartments about ten minutes away and break into a couple and come back to class. I came back with a camera, two jugs full of quarters and my teacher never even said anything to me." - Boy, 17

Second thoughts

"I used to set people up to break in my own house to take my dad's drugs. I guess I never really thought about how he would feel if he knew I was doing that. I'm sure he would be pretty hurt to know that his own stepdaughter that he was trying to learn to trust was doing that." - Girl, 15

"This one girl that I knew, she was kicked out of her house and I knew that her Mom didn't know where she was. Me and this guy, we always broke into houses together, we went to this phone booth about 3:30 in the morning near her house. He got on the phone and said it was the hospital and her daughter had just come in and she'd been in a car accident. We saw her run out of the house and jump in her car. We broke in her house and stole their VCRs. And then we sat there and watched her come back. We watched her turn on all the lights and we sat there and laughed about it. It's not very funny now." - Boy, 17

"When I stole the VCR, I was just picturing what would happen if my mom and dad walked in and saw the VCR was gone. If you were with somebody you really wouldn't talk about it. You'd want them to think you were cool and coldhearted, that you never thought about it. Once you just look at it, it isn't that great. It's pretty embarrassing. I mean I was out there taking guns, and VCRs. It's really selfish. It really lowers you a lot as a person. I may have told stories and had fun but I wouldn't do it again." - Boy, 16

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