

Burglary scourge growing

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A Nicosia police officer investigates a recent break-in

EVERY night almost ten homes in Cyprus are burgled. That's around 70 houses every week or between 250-350 each month in the first four months of this year so far.

And as each year passes, thieves are becoming more organised: In several recent cases burglars have pulled up outside their victims' houses in moving vans, taking furniture, carpets or pretty much anything not nailed down.

Burglars have also become more daring. In the past, burglary warnings were issued only on holidays and long weekend, but recent incidents show burglars will break in irrespective of whether the owners are home or not. Gangs have held people at knife (or gun) point, which begs the question:

How long it will be before someone dies— homeowner or robber?

IT had just gone 3.30 am on a recent night out when I stepped out of the taxi and saw three youths waiting incongruously on the empty street corner.

It was an unusual gathering, considering that there is nothing of interest for night owls in the sleepy residential neighbourhood - and had I been in any country but Cyprus it would have set the alarm bells ringing.

Setting off down the unlit alleyway to my flat, I noticed another strange thing - the back door of the nearby frozen meats shop was ajar and the lights were on inside.

Again, were it not for the famously low crime rates, I might have thought something was amiss.

It was only when two men bolted out of the door - one carrying the store's cash register and vainly trying to stop his loot spilling onto the floor - that the penny dropped.

In a moment the pair had vanished, and with them the three lookouts.

"We see a lot of burglaries like this, and there will be more before our shift ends (at 7am)," a cheerful but unsurprised CID officer told me later, as he took my statement. "We suspect they are (eastern European) gangs."

It was a routine call out for the policeman, who said his team would handle up to ten queries like this in one night shift, but it was a wakeup call for me.

Fortunately, nobody was hurt or traumatised during this robbery, but this cannot be said for many recently reported breakings.

For example, on Wednesday the Cyprus Mail reported a burglary in which three hooded men held a 44-year

woman at knifepoint in her Limassol home, while they stole €800 and two phones.

Another victim from Nicosia, whose house was burgled in early April told the Sunday Mail: “They forced our window while I was asleep upstairs, and took my purse. I think they heard our dog and ran away.”

The victim’s elderly neighbours were not so lucky. “They stole €25,000 of jewellery from my neighbours while they slept,” she said, adding: “The police told us that burglaries are now out of control.”

Official police statistics show a marked increase in burglaries in the past two years, leaping from 2,504 in 2009 to 3,232 in 2010.

What is more, the police have failed to tackle the problem. Between 2008 and 2010 their burglary solving rate plummeted from 42.5 per cent to 34.3 per cent.

To put it another way, while annual reported burglaries increased by 645, the police only solved eight more.

The initial figures for 2011 suggest the problem is getting worse: if the rate recorded between January and April this year continues, the annual total will be nearly 3,360.

So what are they doing to tackle rising crime?

Crime prevention unit officer Petros Patouras said the police are tackling the problem by patrolling high risk locations, like banks and jewellery shops, that the police also had community officers working in eight hour shifts to inform and advise the public about crime, and that they issued regular updates about crime in certain areas.

He said: “The community police officer in your area, is concerned about your safety and wellbeing, is ready to help solve your problems and contributes to crime prevention and detection in your area.”

Patouras also said these officers communicate with residents at difficult times.

However, as another burglary victim, from Engomi said: “I have never seen a community officer - I also think the government has had to cut back on overtime.”

In fairness, it is hard to see what the police can do beyond advising the public to take extra security measures.

Despite two squad cars and a CID team arriving within 10 minutes of my call, it was too late to catch the gang - had I not witnessed the break-in, the burglars could have strolled leisurely away with their loot.

Insurance companies already seem to have picked up on this worrying trend.

General Insurance of Cyprus boss Stelios Christodoulou told the Sunday Mail: “At times of worsening economic conditions the insurance industry faces a higher frequency of claims, mainly for rising burglaries.”

In addition to this Christodoulou also reported an increase in the number of fraudulent and exaggerated claims, a relaxation in cost cutting measures and an increase in low value claims.

Another firm, Commercial General Insurance also reported an upward trend.

Administration manager Nicoletta Gregoriou said: “During the past two years the number of claims relating to incidents of burglaries which took place at holiday homes, left unattended for long periods has shown an upward trend.”

Both companies said their premiums had remained the same - for the time being.

In response to the rising crimes and limited police success, some residents have taken matters into their own hands by forming neighbourhood watch schemes.

The first of these was formally established last October in the Peyia area, including Coral Bay, Sea Caves, and Agios Georgos, and since then have grown to nearly 375 households.

Retired policeman and Peyia neighbourhood watch member Andy Vick said the scheme has had its successes.

In one case a vigilant resident noticed that his neighbour's car had disappeared. Knowing that the neighbour was abroad, he reported it to the police and the thief was caught driving the car in Nicosia shortly afterwards.

On another occasion, a burglar was caught stealing satellite dishes and the pumps off the roofs of houses.

In addition to Peyia, Dali municipality announced this week that they also intend to form their own neighbourhood watch scheme.