

How burglaries shatter peace of mind

Survey documents sense of violation

BY TIMOTHY APPLEBY

Until last month, 27-year-old television producer Elise Seelig felt at ease in her shared, three-bedroom apartment on the fifth floor of a downtown Toronto high-rise.

Not any more. Now she feels like a statistic.

On Ms. Seelig's front door was a sturdy lock. Access to the building requires punching a code into the console at the main entrance. In the lobby is 24-hour security. Add to that, a constant flow of residents coming and going.

"I always believed that one of the advantages of living in a condo is that sense of community and safety that comes with sharing a multiunit building," Ms. Seelig said in an interview.

But with a powerful kick that smashed in her apartment door, the burglar or burglars who intruded while the tenants were at work and stole a laptop computer and digital camera changed all that. And along with those items, Ms. Seelig's sense of security vanished.

"Even now, when I'm sitting there by myself, I'm thinking that there was someone I don't know in here, touching my things," she said. "That's a really icky feeling."

That sense of being violated is familiar to Lisa Heslop, victim-services co-ordinator for the London Police Service and co-author of a new report assessing the psychological fallout that commonly follows residential break-ins.

"There is this perception that property-crime victims aren't really victims — that there isn't a lot of impact," Ms. Heslop said.

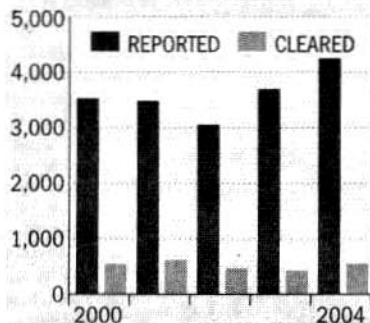
"That isn't true. The impact is

Broken homes

Police statistics show a recent surge in apartment (and condo) burglaries in Toronto. The clearance rate shows the proportion of reported incidents that are considered solved.

Apartments

Break and entry by year



SOURCE: CITY OF TORONTO

pervasive and far-reaching. People take away significant trauma, and so do their children. The kids couldn't sleep in their bedrooms, they were regressive in their behaviour, they were angry and sad."

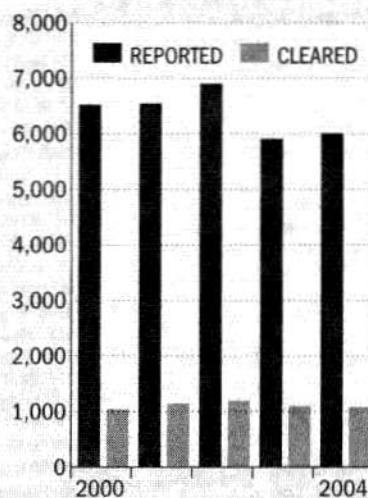
Commissioned by the Ontario Association of Chiefs of Police, the report examined urban and rural break-ins, synthesizing input from the London and Peel Region police forces and from the provincial police. More than 4,000 questionnaires were mailed out to people whose property was burgled in 2003-2004. Almost 700 replied.

Roughly 40 per cent of respondents said they felt severely traumatized, with the highest impact experienced by females and people aged 18 to 34. Many said they feared the intruders would return. Others blamed themselves for lax security precautions.

As for the sense of loss — electronic items remain the primary target of thieves, followed by jewellery and cash — it usually reaches far

Houses

Break and entry by year



beyond the goods themselves.

"The camcorder had the tape of our little girls' first Christmas concert in it," one victim wrote. "I had not felt such a level of anger in me before this happened: This is a Christmas that has been taken away from us."

Also discouraging, less than one in five of those residential break-ins was solved.

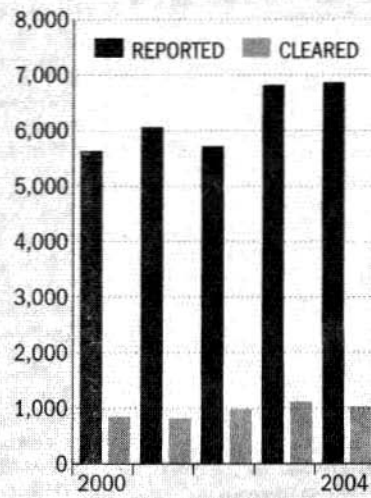
Countrywide, the clearance rate is lower still. In 2004, more than 153,000 burglaries were reported in Canada, costing homeowners and insurance companies tens of millions of dollars. That 153,000 figure dipped slightly compared with the 161,494 and 163,156 in 2003 and 2002, respectively.

Ms. Seelig is still baffled as to why the thieves who struck at her were so selective. Another camera and a VCR were left untouched, as was a small sum of cash in plain view.

The detective who later paid her a visit, (but didn't bother dusting for fingerprints) told her, "It's some-

Businesses

Break and entry by year



RICHARD JOHNSON/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

body you know, who's trying to get at you," she recounted, an explanation she finds absurd.

Her real concern is that a building employee may have had a hand in the break-in.

While breaking and entering carries a maximum penalty of life imprisonment, the most common sentence for a first-time offender who doesn't physically hurt anyone is, at most, a few months behind bars. If the burglar is drug-addicted or young — or both — judges have another rationale for being lenient.

That, too, is part of the frustration voiced by break-in victims tracked in the questionnaires.

One respondent cited "extreme anger at the violation of home. In a free society such as ours, sanctity of the home, and rights of privacy . . . is of paramount importance."

First-time break-in victims seem to suffer more stress than do those who've been robbed before, but for almost everyone, "it's really very troubling," Ms. Heslop said.