BUILDING SECURITY

Is your facility safe from burglary?

Burglary is a crime of opportunity, and burglars look for places that offer the best opportunity for success. No business is immune to these criminals if not careful.

In choosing a target, a burglar will look for businesses that contain something worth stealing and select those where entry appears uncomplicated. Burglars are strongly influenced by the look and feel of the business they are planning to burglarize. Consequently, if the exterior of a business appears to have strong security measures in place, the burglar likely will look for an easier opportunity.

After identifying targets that show absence of activity inside, the burglar looks for freedom from observation from outside (i.e., buildings with entry points that are not readily observed by neighbors). The burglar also looks for entry points that are easy to pass through, such as an open or unlocked door or window. Failing that, the burglar chooses entry points that offer the least resistance to entry.

Depending on the burglar's level of sophistication, forcing an entry point may involve simply bypassing a locking device. In most cases, however, entry involves the use of physical force, such as smashing a door, using a crowbar to pry open a door or window, or breaking the glass in a window. Some burglars may resort to more physical means, such as breaking through building walls with sledgehammers or tunneling through the floor.

Walls

In most commercial burglaries, the point of attack is usually a door, window, or other accessible opening. However, if these openings are secure, a burglar will try to penetrate exterior walls, especially if high-value items are inside the structure. Wood frame and masonry or concrete are the basic materials used in most commercial wall construction.

Wood frame walls are relatively inexpensive, easy to build, durable, and provide good insulation against noise, weather, and heat loss. However, they do not provide much resistance against burglars. A determined intruder usually can break through an ordinary frame structure in just a few minutes, making a frame wall insufficient protection for high-value property unless coupled with an intrusion detection system. An electronic monitoring central station system is
often the best defense to detect intrusion by signaling a local alarm to stop the attack and notifying law enforcement authorities.

Masonry and concrete walls are more expensive than frame walls and are used in commercial structures because of their durability, resistance to fire, and insulation against weather, noise, and heat loss. They usually consist of either poured concrete or concrete block, and may have a layer of brick face.

Poured concrete walls are relatively difficult to penetrate. Concrete block walls, which have not been filled with concrete or reinforced with steel, can be as vulnerable to attack as wood frame walls. Ultimately, any masonry wall can be penetrated by a determined attack.

Floors

Floors are the least likely points of entry in most buildings. Ordinarily, the floor is either a concrete slab or a wooden surface protected by an enclosed basement or foundation. Weak spots or openings in foundation walls make it possible for an intruder to get under the floor of a building. Pilings and other open foundations, underground sewers, and utility passages also provide the burglar with an opportunity to get under the floor. No matter how strong, a determined intruder with time to use tools in an unobserved fashion can penetrate the floor.

Roofs

Sloping roofs of any style are unattractive to intruders because anyone on a sloping roof is usually visible from ground level. The slope itself poses a risk of falling. However, sloping roofs should be analyzed with respect to ventilating ducts, skylights, or other possible access points.

Flat roofs on commercial buildings, however, can be very attractive to intruders. Because walls on many commercial buildings extend a few feet above the roofline, they can provide excellent concealment for any intruder attempting to get inside through the roof. Large, sophisticated tools can be used for an extended period of time, and a considerable amount of noise can be made if the building is unoccupied. Given such favorable conditions, flat roofs – except those made of reinforced concrete – can be attractive attack points for burglars.

Penetration of the roof itself is seldom required because the typical flat commercial roof offers numerous skylights, ventilation openings, elevator access doors, trap doors, and other maintenance access ways that are more convenient points of entry. These areas should be strengthened to be as resistant to penetration as the roof itself. Rooftop cooling units also are susceptible to theft of copper coils, rendering them inoperable, and they should be grate protected and have locking devices.

Accessible Openings

Doors and windows are the preferred entry points for burglars. As such, all doors, windows, and other accessible openings should be protected.

An accessible opening, as defined by Underwriters Laboratories, Inc., is one that is less than 18 feet from grade or adjacent roofs, less than 14 feet from horizontal openings, or less than 3 feet from openings on the same wall. From the
definition, most doors and windows would be considered accessible. However, if a roof were less than 18 feet from grade or an adjacent roof, then openings such as vents, skylights, and maintenance accessways on a roof also would be considered accessible.

A burglar can either attempt to go through the door or window by breaking out a panel or attempting to pry open the door or window. These types of attacks can be prevented through the use of security devices such as locks and ironwork.

However, some consideration must be given to the construction of the walls that support the doors or windows. Concrete and masonry walls provide rigid support for doorframes when the frames are properly mounted. Wood frame construction is usually flexible enough to allow a burglar to spread the doorframe even when it is solidly fastened to the structure.

Windows are particularly difficult in building security. The primary functions of windows are to provide light, add ventilation if they can be opened and to serve as a barrier to the elements. Windows are not intended to serve as a security barrier, and improving security in this area is normally difficult without impacting the primary function of windows or creating a safety hazard. Methods for improving the security of windows include ironwork and glazing materials and framework.

**Keeping safe**

Taking special note of how a burglar operates can open your eyes to the vulnerabilities your building may have. Use the information above to help keep your business safe and the burglars at bay.