

# **Bogus callers**

Burglaries are sometimes committed by doorstep callers, people who call and offer services or skills. These criminals are most commonly known as bogus callers, artifice or distraction burglars.

One of the best ways to tackle crime committed by bogus callers is to make as many people as possible aware of how such criminals work, so you can reduce the chances of yourself, your friends, neighbours or relatives becoming a victim. It is also important you know what to do if you suspect a crime has occurred. For these reasons we have produced this information.

## **What do bogus callers look like?**

Unfortunately there's no simple answer, as a burglar does not have a specific look. They can be very young, middle-aged, male or female, scruffy or neatly dressed. Some bogus callers however may dress in a way to try and confuse you - posing for example as callers from gas, water or electric companies or work contractors.

There are many simple steps you can take to make sure a caller's identity and reason for their visit is genuine. Read the section 'be aware'.

## **Who is at risk and when?**

Every resident should be alert to the possibility of being confronted with a bogus caller, but unfortunately more so if you are elderly or vulnerable.

Bogus callers usually commit crimes on weekdays during the daylight hours. There are a number of reasons for this; there is less chance of neighbours, friends and family being around, and also this is when genuine callers would tend to make visits during business hours - so it helps criminals make their calls appear less suspicious.

In some cases, bogus callers look at the state of the outside of people's homes - unkempt gardens, dirty curtains or scruffy paint work. They see this as an indication that the person who lives there may be vulnerable.

**The increased vigilance of neighbours, friends and family of the elderly or vulnerable is important to prevent such crimes occurring and in helping the police to catch these criminals.**

## **Tricks of their trade**

Bogus callers are constantly inventing new ways of getting into people's homes so they can steal valuables or money. It's extremely useful to be aware of the more common tricks of their trade:

- They dress up in boiler suits and say they are from the water or gas board claiming there has been a reported leak which would need them to enter the house to investigate. They might ask the resident to tell their neighbours that they are making rounds. And as neighbours trust each others' word, more doors are opened for the thieves to steal from people's homes.
- They get into communal flats by ringing any bell and telling whoever answers that they are delivering a parcel to another flat. Once inside they will change their story to gain entry into people's homes. For example they could say they are from the council and have come to measure up for new windows because of draughts.
- Another way bogus callers could try to gain entry is by asking for a glass of water, or needing to make an urgent phone call because their car has broken down. Whilst the householder is distracted by helping them, a second or even third burglar may gain entry.
- One routine is knocking on the front door and telling the occupant that their younger sister or brother has accidentally smashed a window at the back of the house. As the householder goes to investigate, an accomplice can be in and out in a matter of seconds.

Bogus callers can be so convincing that sometimes people don't realise they're being burgled until it's too late. This just illustrates how important your first reactions are when you hear someone at your door. If you don't know them - don't take them at face value - do some simple detective work.

## What can you do?

If you hear someone at your door, regardless of whether you are expecting someone or not, check who it is before you open it. If you cannot get a clear view, consider having a door viewer fitted.

Remember, at this stage if you have any doubts don't open the door; you can always ignore the caller.

But if you open the door, use a door chain. If you do not have one, consider having one fitted. You can get one from a DIY store and they are inexpensive and easy to fit.

Find out what the caller wants and don't feel pressurised. If they're asking for some help, for example to use the telephone or to have a glass of water, think about how you could handle the situation. You could say you do not have a phone, or that it's only incoming calls and direct them to the nearest phone box. If they ask you to get something for them or look at something, keep the door shut leaving them safely outside. Avoid letting them into your home. If in doubt remember you have the control to say 'I'm sorry I can't help you', or 'I can't do that at the moment but I will look at it when my son/friend/neighbour etc comes around,' and close the door.

If you were expecting a caller, for example someone to take a meter reading or to deliver a parcel, you still need to check they are genuine. There are easy ways to do this.

Genuine callers are happy to wait as long as it takes while you check their identity, and their companies encourage this. Bogus callers in the main will not. Instead bogus callers, who are very sure of themselves, will answer questions with questions and try and hurry you in the hope you will become confused. They will stand their ground and not be easily scared off. They also rely on the fact they are rarely challenged.

Genuine callers always have an identity card. But you still need to check if it is credible. A bogus caller will probably also flash an ID card at you and more often than not this turns out to be just a piece of card or a video membership card. They'll be aware that many elderly people are partially sighted. So make sure you have a good look at the card.

Make a check with their company. Don't use the telephone number given on the card - find it in your own local phone book. The number on the card may be a number of an accomplice.

If you were expecting a visit from a company, have your customer reference number to hand (you can find this on company letters or bills) and ask the caller to tell you what it is. A genuine caller will always have this available.

Again, if you are unsure, don't let a caller in, or ask them to come back later. You can then ask for advice from a family member, a friend, or your local police.

If you see someone you are unsure about calling at the door of a neighbour, make them aware that you have seen them and that you are around. Ask them why they are visiting, especially if they are calling at the door of someone you believe to be vulnerable. Don't feel guilty for being nosy.

## Doorstep workman

**Don't let any casual caller do work on your property**, for example roofing, tarmacking driveways or gardening. Every year we receive complaints from out-of-pocket customers who say that workman have vanished leaving jobs half done or badly finished. In most of these instances large quantities of cash have been paid in advance of the work being started and the victim has no way of tracing the workmen or company. In most cases these door-knocking 'workmen' are not based locally and want to be paid in cash.

If someone calls at your door offering to do some work for you, make sure the person is who they say they are - take a contact telephone number and say you will call back later in the day to confirm if you want the work done. Don't accept for the work to be done immediately. You can then speak with friends, family or the police about what the workman was offering.

Ask where they advertise or if they are listed in the phone book and contact details of previous customers - then check this is true.

Don't pay up front - regardless of how demanding they are. Ask for a written quote on headed paper and always pay by cheque - genuine workmen will be happy to work this way.

**If you suspect a crime is in progress or if you see something suspicious - ring 999. If you have been burgled, ring your local police station immediately.**

## **Be aware**

The unique thing about distraction burglaries is there is always a witness - the victim. And any information they can pass on to the police about the person or people and what they did can help the police to build up intelligence to prevent and detect such crimes.

You may be able to tell us information such as:

- You saw dubious people loitering, climbing across gardens or pressing a series of buttons outside a block of flats to gain entry - all of this should be considered suspicious and passed on to the police.
- Registration numbers of suspicious cars in the area or a car being seen to be used by the offenders.
- The caller was wearing distinctive clothing and had unusual facial features, such as a large nose or deep set eyes. This will often help the police identify the culprits.

**Members of Neighbourhood Watch schemes are the eyes and ears of the Constabulary. They work closely with the police to tackle local crime on a local level. Are you involved? To find out more about Neighbourhood Watch contact your crime prevention officer at the police station nearest to you. And if there's not a scheme in your area, we can help you to set up one.**

## **Home security**

We encourage homeowners and landlords to fit approved locks and chains on both front and back doors. Security devices can be inexpensive and easy to install. If you have door chains and viewers - use them. Contact your local police station and ask to speak to your crime prevention officer for further advice on how to make your home more secure. And pick up the leaflet in this series called 'As Safe As Houses' which gives advice on home security.

## **Remove temptations**

Too often people keep their life savings or large sums of money in their homes. It is always best to keep your money in a bank or building society. If you know someone who does this - encourage them to save their money somewhere safer. If they or you must keep cash in the house, try to keep it in an unusual hiding place. Never keep a cheque book and cheque card together.

Consider alternatives to leaving keys under flower pots or door mats and leaving doors ajar. Don't give offenders the opportunity for easier access to your home.

**Some people invite bogus callers into their homes just for the opportunity to speak with someone. There are now many schemes run through local councils and voluntary groups that offer genuine company to the elderly and vulnerable. Do you know anyone who could benefit from such schemes?**