

# Apartment Security Advice for Families- Self Defense

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## Self Defense Advice for Families in Rental Housing

Your home is your castle...or is it?

Are you really safe once you get apartment and lock your door? In an open society your apartment should be the sanctuary for you and your family. Your apartment is the only environment where you have control over who can get close to you or your family. Protecting your apartment and family from criminal intrusion should be high on your list of priorities. See my web site on Family Security Tips for more information on protecting your family from harm. See Apartment Security Advice for more original articles on Apartment Security.

## Burglary

By far, the most common threat to an apartment unit is burglary. Burglary, by definition, is a non-confrontational crime, but being victimized can leave a family feeling vulnerable and violated. To prevent a burglary, it is important to first gain an understanding of who commits them and why. The majority of apartment burglaries occur during the daytime when most people are away at work or at school. Burglaries also occur at night when there are obvious signs that no one is home. Most apartment burglars are young males looking for things that are small, expensive, and can easily be converted to cash. Items like cash, jewelry, guns, watches, laptop computers, and other small electronic devices are high on the list. Quick cash is needed for living expenses and drugs. Statistics tell us that more than 30% of all apartment burglars gained access through an open door or window. Ordinary household tools like screwdrivers, channel-lock pliers, small pry bars, and small hammers are most often used by burglars. Although apartment burglaries may seem random in occurrence, they actually involve a selection process. The burglar's selection process is simple. Choose an unoccupied apartment with the easiest access, the greatest amount of cover, and with the best escape routes. What follows is a list of suggestions to minimize your risk by making your home unattractive to potential burglars.

## Doors and Locks

The first step is to "harden the target" or make your apartment more difficult to enter. Remember the burglar will simply bypass your apartment if it requires too much effort or requires more skill and tools than they possess. Most burglars enter via the front, back, or garage doors. Experienced burglars know that the garage door is usually the weakest followed by the back door. The garage and back doors also provide the most cover. Burglars also know to look inside your car for keys and other valuables so keep it locked, even inside your garage. Apartment managers should use solid core doors and high quality locks on exterior doors that will resist twisting, prying, and lock-picking attempts. A quality Grade-1 or Grade-2 deadbolt lock will have a beveled casing to inhibit the use of channel-lock pliers used for forced entry. A quality door knob-in-lock set will have a 'dead latch' mechanism to prevent slipping the lock with a shim or credit card. Use a solid core wood or metal door for all entrance points. Doors should fit tightly into the door frame. Use a quality, heavy-duty, deadbolt lock with a one-inch bolt. Use a quality, heavy-duty, door knob-in-lock set with a dead-latch mechanism. Use a heavy-duty four-screw strike plate installed with 3-inch screws to penetrate into a wooden door frame. Use a wide-angle 160° peephole mounted no higher than 58 inches.

## Forced Entry

The most common way used to force entry through a door with a wooden frame is simply to kick it open. The weakest point is almost always the strike plate that holds the latch or lock bolt in place followed by glass panels in doors. The average door strike plate is secured with only 1/2-inch screws set into the soft doorjamb molding. These lightweight moldings are often tacked on to the door frame and can be torn away with a firm kick. Because of this construction flaw, it makes sense to upgrade to a heavy-duty four-screw strike plate. They are available in most quality hardware stores and home improvement centers and are definitely worth the extra expense. Install this strike plate using 3-inch screws to cut deep into the door frame stud. This one step alone will deter or prevent most through-the-door forced entries. You and your family will sleep safer in the future.

## Sliding Glass Doors

Sliding glass doors are usually installed at the rear of an apartment making them good candidates for entry by a burglar. In warm climates, an experienced burglar knows that sliding glass doors are often left standing open for ventilation or for pet access. Since they slide horizontally, it is important to have a secondary blocking device in place to prevent sliding the door fully open from the outside. This can be easily accomplished by inserting a wooden dowel or stick into the track thus preventing or limiting movement. Other blocking devices available are metal fold-down blocking devices called "charley bars" and various track-blockers that can be screwed down. Sliding glass doors are notorious for failing to prevent a forced entry attempt especially in apartment buildings. This is because of the wear and tear and lack of maintenance they receive and due to the inadequate nature of many of the latching mechanisms. Sliding glass doors don't have locks on them, only latches. The latches are made of aluminum and can become worn or out of adjustment. The most common methods used to force entry, aside from breaking the glass, is by prying the door near the latch or lifting the door off the track. The blocking devices described above solve half the equation. To prevent lifting, you need to keep the sliding door rollers in good condition and properly adjusted. You can also install anti-lift devices such as a pin that extends through both the sliding and fixed portion of the door. There are also numerous locking and blocking devices available in any good quality hardware store that will prevent a sliding door from being lifted or forced horizontally. Place highly visible decals on the glass door near the latch mechanism that indicates that an alarm system, a dog, or block watch/operation identification is in place, if applicable. Apartment managers should be careful not to misrepresent that these devices are in place if they are not. Burglars dislike alarm systems and definitely big barking dogs. Use a secondary blocking device on all sliding glass doors Keep the latch mechanism in good condition and properly adjusted Keep sliding door rollers in good condition and properly adjusted Use anti-lift devices such as through-the-door pins Use highly visible alarm decals, beware of dog decals, or block watch decal, if applicable

## Sliding Windows

Windows are left unlocked and open at a much higher rate than doors. An open window, visible from the street or alley, may be the sole reason for an apartment to be selected by a burglar. Ground floor windows are more susceptible to break-ins for obvious reasons. Upper floor windows become attractive if they can be accessed easily from a stairway, tree, fence, or by climbing on balconies. Windows have latches, not locks, and therefore should have secondary blocking devices to prevent sliding them open from the outside. Inexpensive wooden dowels and sticks work well for horizontal sliding windows and through-the-frame pins work well for vertical sliding windows. For ventilation, block the window open no more than six inches and make sure you can't reach in from the outside and remove the blocking device. In sleeping rooms, these window blocking devices should be capable of being removed easily from the inside to comply with fire codes. Like sliding glass doors, anti-lift devices are necessary for ground level and accessible aluminum windows that slide horizontally. The least expensive and easiest method is to install screws half-way into the upper track of the movable glass panel to prevent it from being lifted out in the closed position. Place highly visible decals on the glass door near the latch mechanism that indicates that an alarm system, a dog, or block watch/operation identification system is in place, if applicable. Apartment managers should be careful not to misrepresent that these devices are in place if they are not. Secure all accessible windows with secondary blocking devices Block accessible windows open no more than 6 inches for ventilation Use anti-lift devices to prevent window from being lifted out Use crime prevention or alarm decals on accessible windows, if applicable

## Be a Good Neighbor

Good neighbors should look out for each other. Get to know your neighbors on each side of your apartment and the three directly across from you. Invite them into your apartment, communicate often, and establish trust. Good neighbors will watch out for your apartment and vehicle when you are away, if you ask them. They can report suspicious activity to management, to the police, or to you while you are away. Between them, good neighbors can see to it that normal services continue in your absence by allowing authorized vendors to enter your apartment. Good neighbors can pick up your mail, newspapers, handbills, and can inspect the inside of your apartment periodically to see that all is well. Allowing a neighbor or management to have a key solves the problem of hiding a key outside the door. Experienced burglars know to look for hidden keys in planter boxes, under doormats, and above the ledge. Requiring a service vendor to contact your neighbor to gain access will send the message that someone is watching. This neighborhood watch technique sets up what is called 'territoriality.' This means that your neighbors will take ownership and responsibility for what occurs in your mini-neighborhood. This concept works great in apartment communities. This practice helps deter burglaries and other crimes in a big way. Of course for this to work, you must reciprocate and offer the same services. The biggest difficulty getting to this level of oversight is taking the first step. You can take it by calling your local crime prevention unit at the police department. Most police departments in large cities have neighborhood watch coordinators to help you set this up. You should invite your adjacent neighbors over to your home for coffee and begin the information exchange. You'll be amazed how the process runs on automatic from there. Get to know your adjacent

apartment neighbors Invite them into your home and establish trust Agree to watch out for each other Do small tasks for each other to improve territoriality Return the favor and communicate often

## Lighting

Interior lighting is necessary to show signs of occupancy inside a residence at night. Seeing a dark apartment night-after-night sends a message to burglars that you are away. Light-timers are inexpensive and can be found almost everywhere. They should be used on a daily basis, not just when you're away. In this way you set up a routine that your neighbors can observe and will allow them to become suspicious when your normally lighted apartment becomes dark. Typically, you want to use light-timers near the front and back windows with the curtains drawn. The pattern of them clicking on and off simulates actual occupancy. It is also comforting not to have to enter a dark residence. Timers can also be used to turn on the television or radio to simulate occupancy during the daytime. After dark, a bright television can be seen flickering through the curtains and gives the feeling that someone is home. Similarly, the radio or television can be heard through the door if turned on loud enough. Exterior lighting is also very important. It becomes critical if you must park in a common area parking lot or underground garage and need to walk to your front door. The purpose of good lighting is to allow you to see if a threat or suspicious person is lurking in your path. If you can see a potential threat in advance then you at least have the choice and chance to avoid it. Exterior lighting needs to be bright enough for you to see 100 feet and it helps if you can identify colors. Good lighting is definitely a deterrent to criminals because they don't want to be seen or identified. Apartment management needs to have a system in place to periodically inspect and replace lighting outages. Another important area to be well-lighted is the perimeter of your apartment building especially at the entryway. Common area lighting on apartment properties should also be on a timer or photo-cell to turn on at dusk and turn off at dawn. Exterior lighting at the rear of an apartment usually do not turn on automatically. They require you to turn on the light inside switch. The resident can choose to turn these lights on or off. A better idea is to install security lights that activate by infra-red motion sensor. They are relatively inexpensive (\$25) and can easily replace an exterior porch light or side door light on townhouse style apartments with rear doors. The heat-motion sensor can be adjusted to detect body heat and can be programmed to reset after one minute. These infra-red security lights are suggested for apartments with patios and back doors. Use interior light timers to establish a pattern of occupancy Use timers to activate the radio or television while away Exterior lighting should allow 100 foot visibility Use good lighting along the pathway and at your door Use light timers or photo-cells to turn on/off lights automatically Use infra-red motion sensor lights for the back door of townhouse apartments

## Alarm Systems

Alarm systems definitely have a place in an apartment security plan and are effective, if used properly. The reason why alarms systems deter burglaries is because they increase the potential and fear of being captured and arrested by the police. The deterrent value comes from the alarm company lawn sign and from the alarm decals on the windows. Apartment burglars will usually bypass a unit with visible alarm decals and will look for another property without such a decal. Some people, with alarm systems, feel that these signs and decals are unsightly and will not display them. The risk here is that an uninformed burglar might break a window or door and grab a few quick items before the police can respond. Also, don't write your alarm passcode on or near the alarm keypad. Alarm systems need to be properly installed and maintained. Alarms systems can monitor for fire as well as burglary for the same price. All systems should have an audible horn or bell to be effective in case someone does break in. However, these audible alarms should be programmed to reset automatically after one minute. The criminal will get the message and will be long gone without your neighbors having to listen to your alarm siren for hours, until it is switched off. If you use a central station to monitor your alarm, make sure your response call list is up to date. Burglar alarms, like car alarms, are generally ignored except for a brief glance. However, if you have established and nurtured your neighborhood watch buddy system, you will experience a genuine concern by your neighbor. It is not unusual to have a neighbor wait for the police, allow them inside for an inspection, and secure the residence. A good neighbor can also call friends or relatives for you, if pre-authorized by you. Alarm systems are effective deterrents with visible signage Alarm systems to be properly installed, programmed, and maintained Alarm systems need to have an audible horn or bell to be effective Alarm systems should automatically reset in one minute or less Make sure your alarm response call-list is up to date Instruct your neighbor how to respond to an alarm bell

## Operation Identification

This is a program supported by most police agencies. They recommend that you engrave your drivers' license number (not social security number) on televisions, stereos, computers, and small electronic appliances. They suggest this so they can identify and locate you if your stolen items are recovered. I suggest that you go way beyond this step. I recommend that you photograph or videotape your home furnishings, electronic devices, and small appliances and make

a list of the make, model, and serial numbers. You should keep this list in a safety deposit box or with a relative or neighbor for safe keeping. Beyond that I recommend that you photocopy important documents and the contents of your wallet annually. You will be thankful that you took these steps in case your home is ever destroyed by fire or flood, is ransacked, or if your wallet is lost or stolen. Identify your valuables by engraving your drivers' license number (not your SSN) Photograph, video, or record the description and serial numbers of all valuables Photocopy the contents of your wallet annually and other important documents Store the copies off-site in a safe deposit box or with a relative or neighbor Apartment Security Rental Housing