

Burglary Prevention in Private Households in Vienna - An Exploratory Study

Contractor: MA50 Vienna City Council
Police Advisory Board and
Siemens Austria

Project management: Institut für Rechts- und Kriminalsoziologie Wien
Project team: Univ.Doiz.Dr. Wolfgang Stangl
Dr. Günter P. Stummvoll
Alexander Neumann

Contact: guenter.stummvoll@irks.at

Duration: April – October 2005, completed

The problem

The police bewails the lack of burglary protection in private homes, and the insurance companies threaten to mark up insurance rates, if the crime rates keep rising like in the previous years. The prevailing strategy to appeal to the population to engage in technical self-protection seems futile. This unsatisfying situation was considered the starting point of a research project at the Institute for the Sociology of Law and Criminology in Vienna.

In an explorative research project the meaning of home safety and corresponding burglary prevention measures were studied from different viewpoints in order to better understand the conditions for future cooperation between tenants, security industry, the police, local administration and housing developers. During the year 2005 crime statistics were joined with data from earlier and recent public surveys on fear of crime and insecurity. Additionally qualitative interviews were conducted with representatives of housing developers, housing management, security companies and particular council departments. Particular consideration was given to the initiative by the city council, that supports private households as they purchase safety doors with 20% or max. 400€ of the total price.

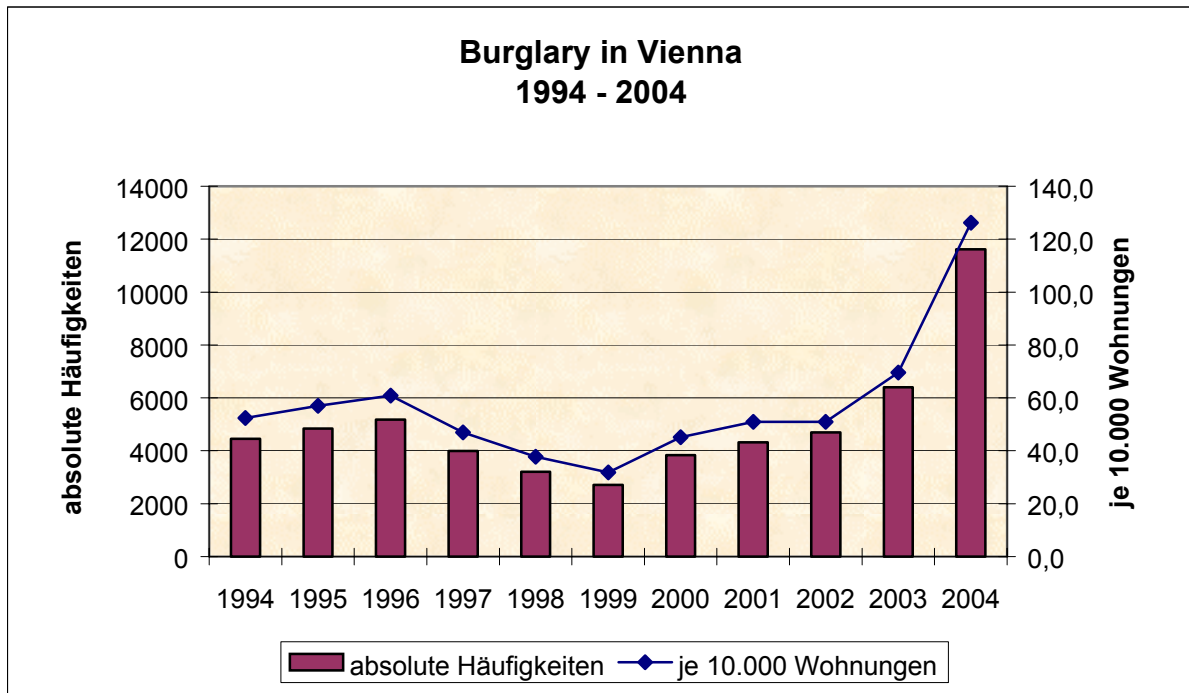
General résumé

In Vienna we find an outstanding irony of increasing crime rates in burglary together with a continuously high feeling of safety: Burglary rates rose from 4.691 registered cases in 2002 to 11.613 in 2004 (see table 1 and graph 1). In various public surveys accomplished in recent years only 9% - 13% of the tenants indicate fear of crime in the neighbourhood, 11% - 17% say they are afraid of burglary in general and 14% worry to become a victim of burglary.

year	Burglary in private homes	Frequency for 10.000 flats ¹
1994	4.453	52,4
1995	4.842	57,0
1996	5.175	60,9
1997	3.993	47,0
1998	3.208	37,7
1999	2.707	31,8
2000	3.839	45,2
2001	4.325	50,9
2002	4.691	51,0
2003	6.404	69,6
2004	11.613	126,2

Table 1: Burglary in private homes in Vienna.

Source: Police crime statistics and Statistisches Taschenbuch der Stadt Wien, ed. 2003, p. 60.



Graph 1: Burglary in Vienna 1994-2004.

Source: Police crime statistics and Statistisches Taschenbuch der Stadt Wien, ed. 2003, p. 60. and „Statistik Austria Wohnungszählung 1991 und 2001“.

25% unprotected households – who and why?

In a telephone survey from June 2005 tenants were asked for their burglary protection measures. As many as 25% admitted to have neither a standardised safety door, a safety lock, window grills, nor an alarm system or any other security device in their home. 31% of private leasers and also 31% of tenants in public housing estates report no burglary protection, whereas family homes and semi-detached houses are better protected with only 11% - 15% unprotected. The most frequent reason given are “I also feel safe without special protection” (55%). This mainly accounts for the younger population under 30 years of age

¹ before 2001 calculation on the basis of 1991: 853.091 households, since 2001: 920.083 households

and also for homeowners. For 17% security measures are “too expansive”, 12% say “neighbours watch out” and 10% have “not yet thought about it”. For 9% it is sufficient to have an insurance-contract. In an earlier survey (Karmasin 2000) only 3% indicated a motivation to improve their safety standards at home.

Target hardening

In their financial support for home security the Vienna City Council takes a social approach by focusing on a certain needy segment of the society: The explicit exclusion of (1) households in modern houses (construction in the last 20 years), (2) apartments over 150 sqm, (3) second homes in the city, and (4) private and semi-detached houses makes clear that the support serves the socially deprived households in inner-city, low standard rental apartment houses.

However, the results of the telephone survey from June 2005 (after 3 months in operation) showed that the information about the financial support reached less than half of the population (38% heard about it). 547 respondents do not have a safety door at home (55% of the total sample), 157 respondents say they needed one (16% of the total sample), 117 respondents showed an interest in the offer (12% of the total sample). In the time from April until October 2005 1.626 households made use of the offer by the City Council. 644 owners and 982 leasers entered applications.

Unfortunately no information was collected about social, spatial or criminological peculiarities of people and places where applications were demanded. Since the project did not focus on certain neighbourhoods no conclusions can be drawn with regard to effectiveness. In other words: It is not certain, whether the project has any effect on the development of crime figures in certain urban areas in Vienna.

All we know is that retailers of safety doors reported a significant increase of sales in 2005. Firms have more or less contributed to the circulation of information about the support, either in the form of hand-outs or personal help with the application-forms. However, the financial support through the City Council can not count as an initial motive for the interest of households, but rather as a welcome side-effect.

Also, the installation of safety doors is not of principal concern of housing associations and property managers. Technical installations such as water-pipes, central heating, electricity and thermal-insulation (windows, facade) are primary matters because such work can count as ongoing maintenance, whereas security measures count as secondary qualitative improvements of a building.

Social control as burglary protection

Comprehensive concepts of crime prevention integrate target hardening measures and behavioural measures in the community. Considering the assumption that burglars wish to be unseen and inconspicuous, social control of residents play a vital role for crime prevention and public safety. How is “community policing” evaluated by the public in Vienna?

Our interviews showed that the subjective feeling of safety results as a side-effect of communal activities and services such as a common swimming pool on the roof-top, sports- and leisure facilities. Housing associations promote such structures, but certain social trends that foster an anonymous and isolated lifestyle in Vienna cannot be ignored: Housekeepers are gradually replaced by cleaning-firms, migration leads to multi-cultural living with substantial communication problems, clubs and churches loose their integrating function and individualisation and privacy prevails over publicity. All this contributes to a trend towards a moral minimalism in the city, especially in suburbs. Although housing associations mainly feel responsible for technical maintenance of a building, they frequently employ caretaker-

teams who should look after the rules of the house and respective discipline. In that way, they can act as mediators in cases of conflict and work for a better understanding in the community. Sometimes they also distribute information about home safety and burglary protection.

A more bottom-up approach can be found in council housing estates, where tenants elect representatives as caretakers in the building who mainly have a social function. But they hardly ever act as “neighbourhood watch agents” in terms of crime prevention. Safety is not the trigger for community-building in Vienna.

Conclusion

Burglary protection has not reached a very high position on the ladder of priorities - neither in the housing administration nor in the general public. The police offers support and information for home safety, but the service is mainly consumed after experiencing victimisation. The quality of life cannot be shattered by an increasing burglary rate. In contrast to examples in England, Germany and the Netherlands there is no comprehensive home-safety management that integrates the police, housing associations, industry, council departments, researchers and the local community in a concerted burglary prevention initiative.