

DON'T BE CONNED!

Sound Advice from the Metropolitan Police

Surveys show that crime, in particular violent crime, is one of the major causes of concern for ordinary citizens, none more so than the elderly; but although violent crime is often sensationalised by the media it constitutes no more than 6% of all reported offences. True, the elderly are at risk from violence, but provided they take sensible precautions such as staying away from known trouble spots and avoiding going out at night unescorted they need not worry unduly. It is far more likely that an elderly person will be "turned over" in his or her own home, and the victim may not even realise it.

Inspector Keith Brayne has been a police officer for 20 years and a Crime Prevention Officer for the past two-and-a-half. I recently visited him on behalf of "Pensioners' Voice" at his office at the Headquarters of the Metropolitan Police Crime Prevention Branch in London's Pimlico and got some sound advice "straight from the horse's mouth" about how the elderly can best avoid being conned.

The Metropolitan Police call it burglary artifice "when a person enters a dwelling as a trespasser using a trick", usually verbal. According to Inspector Brayne there were 3,500 such incidents in 1988 out of a total of 93,650 residential burglaries. That means on average 10 people every day were conned in the Greater London area alone, the vast majority of them elderly, most of them living alone.

The con-men target their victims in a number of ways, including watching old people collect their pensions from the Post Office. There are also a great many opportunist burglars. These are usually young men who will ring the front door bell and if no one answers, walk round to the back of the house and break in. If someone does answer they will either ask "Does so and so live here?", or if it's any elderly person who comes to the door, try to bluff their way in on some pretext.

Inspector Brayne was obviously reluctant to discuss the methods used by doorstep con-men in any detail, but he did say there are over 200 known "scams", and that con-men come in all shapes and sizes.

"Con people are predominantly white, usually men and work in pairs," but he warns against stereotyping; women and even children are by no means unknown.

A typical example is that of the fake roof repairers. Two men knock at the door and tell the occupant there are some loose slates on his roof, quite a common occurrence due to the freakish weather we've been experiencing recently. They say they are builders/repairers and will fix them, and say it will cost anything up to a thousand pounds. If the victim says he or she hasn't got that amount of money in the house, it doesn't necessarily end there.

"Don't worry, we'll take you down to the building society." . . . "They will even accompany the person to the building society," says the Inspector, and in some cases they will actually do the work. If they don't repair the roof the victim will realise he (or she) has been conned, but if they do the work it's quite possible the victim won't, and will have parted with perhaps £1,000 for a job which should have been done for a fraction of the cost, or might even have been covered by an insurance policy or repaired free by the council.

Other cons include posing as Electricity Board, British Telecom or other officials. If there are two of them, one will distract the victim while the other searches the house for valuables and cash. Both men and women have been known to pose as social workers. Very often elderly people may be expecting such a visit so may answer the door saying: "Are you from Social Services?"

"Yes dear, can I come in?"

Children may pretend to be selling raffle tickets or say: "I've just kicked my ball into your garden, can I come through and get it?"

If the con-man is adept, or if the elderly person is not very sharp, they may not realise anything is missing until weeks afterwards.

To younger people and to those elderly people whose faculties are relatively unmarked by the passage of time it may seem implausible that people can be conned so easily. **What they don't realise is that as we get older we slow down and our memories are perhaps not what they used to be. Also, many old people who live by themselves are often lonely, so a friendly, young face will often take them in.**

PRECAUTIONS

Inspector Brayne says there is no need for people to become paranoid, but they should never let a stranger into the house without first satisfying themselves that both the person and the reason for the visit are genuine. The very first things they should do is look through the window or speak to the caller through the unopened door. The front door should always

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be kept on a chain. All utilities officials carry identity cards, but, Inspector Brayne points out nearly everybody carries some sort of card nowadays, so it is not sufficient just to glance at it. If the householder has any doubts about the caller he should check by phoning the caller's office.

Reassuringly he adds that most con-men are concerned solely with making a fast buck and are far too wary to try to force their way in. Many of these people make a living out of crime, so if they can't gain immediate entry and get their hands on your money and valuables with a minimum of fuss, they'll be on their way to try their patter on some less suspecting person.

BEATING THE BURGLAR

Being a little suspicious of strangers may save you from the con-man, but the burglar forces rather than charms his way in. Basically there are two things you can do to protect your home against uninvited guests: protection and deterrence.

Protection means having strong locks on strong doors, and on ground floor and any other windows which might be accessible. External doors should be robust, just as important, so should the frames, and firmly fixed to the fabric of the building. Ideally the front door should have two locks: a good rim lock and a mortice deadlock further down. The back door should have morticed security bolts in addition to a good five lever sash lock. If you can, try to get a spy hole fitted in the front door too.

Window locks can be purchased for as little as £3-£4 from a DIY shop; laminated glass offers both security and deterrence.

Turning finally to deterrence, bear in mind that **the burglar like the door step con-man is interested only in**

obtaining the maximum reward for the minimum effort. If he sees a burglar alarm displayed prominently on the outside wall he will walk past. If you put a Police Marked Property sticker in your window he knows that if he does steal anything from your home it will be traceable.

Neighbourhood Watch Schemes have mushroomed over the last few years, and if nothing else they may make the potential burglar think twice.

Information on property marking and various leaflets about crime prevention and deterrence are available both from your local Crime Prevention Officer and from Help The Aged.

ALEX BARON

STOP BEFORE YOU ANSWER THE DOOR

- **IS THE CHAIN ON?**
- **WHO IS IT?**
- **WHAT DO THEY WANT?**
- **CHECK IDENTIFICATION CAREFULLY**

**IF IN DOUBT
KEEP THEM OUT**