

## **Burglars' Potential Rewards: A Qualitative Study in a Korean Context**

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### **Abstract**

*Rational choice theory explains that potential offenders will consider the relative rewards and risks before breaking the law. With respect to the two categories of factor, reward and risk, the latter has been the topic of countless studies and controversial discussions in the field of criminology. However, the studies on the reward have rarely been conducted. Therefore, in this study, the potential rewards that could foster burglary were assessed for a more accurate understanding of the crime; and for a qualitative analysis, fifty-two burglary suspects were selected for interviews. The findings revealed that financial gain was the primary motivation for most burglars. However, some subjects claimed that the prospect of psychological rewards led them to commit their crime, and to some of these subjects, such rewards were more coveted than were the monetary acquisition.*

**Key words:** Burglary Decision Making, Potential Reward, Monetary Reward, Psychological Reward

### **1. Introduction**

Burglary is a significant social problem that affects the lives of a great many people in various ways. Maguire and Kynch (2000) identify a number of different forms of impact that residential burglary has on its victims. They state that financial loss is the most immediate consequence, which is rarely covered by insurance because less than half of the burglary victims are insured. Moreover, significant emotional reactions to the burglary, on the part of the victim, are also quite common, and they are often shown in the following forms: Posttraumatic stress disorder, feelings of anger, and desire for revenge (Maguire and Kynch, 2000).

Burglary in Korean society is a serious issue as it is the most frequently occurring crime that brings negative economic and emotional consequences to the victims. Despite the fact that burglary poses great danger for the victims, the crime has not been dealt with seriously in the country so effective countermeasures have to be employed.

First, understanding residential burglary is an essential part in bringing the change. Decision making as well as the target selection by burglars have to be examined thoroughly; especially, a prominent theory related to the crime, Rational Choice theory, must be studied to understand the burglars' behaviour. Supported by various scholars throughout the world, including Ronald Clarke and the researchers at the British Home Office Research and Planning Unit (HORPU), the theory asserts that burglars employ the same cognitive strategies when they plan an offence as they do in making "normal" everyday decision. In the study of Cornish and Clarke (1986), the authors propose a Rational Choice Perspective, claiming that criminals make conscious and reasonable decisions by weighing the costs and benefits of their actions (Cornish and Clarke, 1986). Closely related to Rational Choice Perspective, is the reward-risk perspective as proposed by Conklin (1995).

Conklin argues that if the rewards of crime are great and its risks small, and if the rewards from a non-criminal way of life are comparatively small but its risks are relatively great, people will choose to violate the law and to commit crime. Thus, in this view, potential offenders will consider the relative rewards (or benefits) and risks (or costs) of criminal and non-criminal behaviour respectively, before breaking the law. With respect to the two categories of factors, namely, reward or risk, the category of risk has been the topic of considerable study and disagreement in criminological circles. However, the studies on the reward have rarely been conducted. Therefore, the potential rewards that promote the criminal activities among burglars are examined to obtain a more profound understanding of the crime and present effective preventive measures.

## **2. Methods**

Fifty-two burglar suspects detained at the Detention Centre at the Incheon Public Prosecutor's office in Incheon, Korea were selected using a non-probability sampling method for interviews; and the semi-structured form was employed as the interview method. The subjects at the detention centre provided a diverse sampling frame of residential burglars with easily accessible records. Subjects were selected based on the crime for which they were being detained, and their records were reviewed in order to determine that each subject met the sample criteria.

Every participant of the interviews that were held over ten months was male, and the average age of the interviewees was 25.1 and their mean number of burglary commission was 40.1. The interview content was recorded and transcribed for analysis. Despite the qualitative nature of the research in the study, the use of numbers and frequency counts were regarded as important techniques in the verification of the research expectations, and in the subsequent process of trying to make judgements with respect to the agreement or disagreement of variables across the subject interviews. According to Huberman and Miles (1994), judgements involving 'number of times' and 'consistency' that are made almost unconsciously by a researcher during the analysis phase of their research, are based on counting.

## **3. Potential Rewards**

### **3.1. Monetary Rewards**

In the study, the subjects identified many commonly cited reward motivations for burglary as applying to themselves. But above all other such reward motivations was that of money. The response of the subjects in this regard was nearly uniform: 45 of the 52 subjects in the study sample (86.5 per cent) reported that money was their primary motivational factor for committing burglary, and that the need for money determined the rate of frequency for their committing burglary.

*You need something and you do not have money for it. What are you going to do? When I needed some money for anything, I hit a house. That was the way I got money. (Respondent 9)*

*When straight people need money for something and they do not have it, they will get some overtime in order to make the money, or they will ask for a loan. But thieves will think, "I will go out and steal money." Thieves' thinking is different from that of average people. (Respondent 42)*

The findings of this study concerning the clear primacy of money as a reward motivation for burglary are borne out by prior research. Interviews with burglars, in prior studies, have consistently shown that their desire to acquire other people's cash, or property that is easily convertible into cash, is the leading factor contributing to their decision to burgle. In a study on robbery and residential burglary in the Boston Metropolitan Area (US), Reppetto (1974), for example, found that,

*The satisfaction of a perceived need for money... was the prime motive for most burglaries, although interviewees did acknowledge such subsidiary satisfactions as excitement, revenge, curiosity, and feelings of group solidarity (p.21).*

Studies by Bennett and Wright (1984) and Cromwell et al. (1991), for instance, further confirm the leading role of the burglar's need for money as motivation for burglary. Thus, Bennett and Wright (1984), in their three-year UK study, examined the perceptions and decision making of 309 burglars; and they found that 46 per cent of these burglars gave 'instrumental needs' as their primary motivation for burglary, with money ranked as the highest of such needs.

Cromwell et al. (1991), in their study, interviewed 30 active burglars in Texas (US), and observed that money, primarily used for drugs and alcohol was the highest motivator for these burglars' commission of burglary.

Although for the subjects in the present study, money was the primary motivation for committing burglary, and although this was true for both the older and the younger subjects in the study sample, there was a slight difference between the groups in this respect. 92 per cent of the older subjects (21 years and over) identified money as the primary motivation for their committing burglary, compared to 81.5 per cent of the younger subjects (under 21 years) who did the same. Thus, a greater proportion of the older subjects reported that money was their primary motivation for burglary, than was the case with the younger subjects.

During the interviews, it was quite apparent that most subjects in the sample were materially deprived. One young subject was from a wealthy family, although at the time of the burglary for which he was now being detained, he was totally cut off from them. A few other subjects were lower-middle-class men, who either had regular employment and well-paid jobs, or who were living with their parents who themselves enjoyed steady employment. However, most of the subjects were poor, uneducated, and unemployed or employed in low-paying jobs. Pressed by legitimate or 'illegitimate' economic demands, the subjects saw burglary as their best option for obtaining cash quickly. For them, other types of income-producing crime did not match burglary as a way of obtaining immediate relief from a shortage of cash. During their interviews, thirteen subjects specifically mentioned that the most important reason for their having recourse to burglary, was its nature as a fast and easy way to obtain money. They also stated that they were generally in immediate need of money when they went out to do a burglary.

*I needed a lot of money, to drink and live. Burglary was a fast way to get cash. Breaking into houses was not difficult. I went into a place, and I made a few million wons if I got lucky. That is enough for a whole month. The average person does not make as much as I did. (Respondent 17)*

*I learned at a very early age that burglary was a fast way to accumulate a lot of cash. There was money to be made at it. (Respondent 34)*

*It's the quickest way to get money. It is an easy crime.... It takes only a few minutes at the most. There are no hassles. I just need to break into a house and pick things up. (Respondent 31)*

The money that subjects could make from burglary was defined by them as especially attractive when compared to the low wages that they could have expected to earn from a legitimate job. Subjects in the sample were not well educated, and most of them (88.4 per cent) had less than twelve years formal education. Generally, they did not have any employable skills, so that, taking into account their lack of job skills and their incomplete education, the only legitimate jobs that were open to them, were very low-level ones that were poorly paid. According to their institutional files, the subjects in the sample tended to work in non-specialised areas of employment where their pay was often little more than minimum wage. Few of them held white-collar positions. Their occupations varied, but most of those subjects who had a legitimate job were labourers or casual workers. Temporary or unsettled occupations or jobs were predominant among them.

In the present study subjects who had had legitimate jobs at some time in the lives knew, from their own experience, how long it took working at low-paying legitimate employment, to make anything like the equivalent that they could make from burglary. In fact, for them, the money that they could make from burglary far exceeded anything that they could earn legally.

*I never made more than fifty thousand wons a night when I drove a cab. (Respondent 24)*

*I have never been so broke in my life as when I was working. I made about one million wons a month, but by the time that I paid the rent, and bought some things that I needed, there was nothing left in my wallet. (Respondent 31)*

Furthermore, as noted in the preceding section, subjects generally regarded money as the means to solve their immediate problems, and no legitimate job could meet their immediate need for money in the same way that burglary could.

*Housebreaking does not pay good money. But I can get the money when I need it. For example, when I feel like drinking and have no money, I cannot wait until payday. No friends or relatives will lend me money any longer. Housebreaking is the easiest way for me to get some money when I am broke. (Respondent 29)*

*With a legitimate job, I had to go to work at nine in the morning, and came back at six in the evening, all for one million wons a month. That really put me off.... When I need money, I can make a month's salary, doing burglary, in less than a day. (Respondent 43)*

In addition, five subjects in this study claimed that having a legitimate job would not only bring them less money, less quickly, than burglary did, but would also compromise their desired lifestyle. These subjects described ordinary men's lives as being physically tiring or mentally boring, and as always being lived under someone else's supervision. As well, they disliked the fixed routine that regular work would impose on their lifestyles. In contrast, these same subjects viewed the flexibility of life, and the freedom from external supervision that they perceived burglary to offer, as attractive plus factors, especially when comparing burglary with possible legitimate-employment alternatives.

*Burglary is a good job for me. It gives me mobility. I can do whatever I want to do, whenever I want to do it, and I can go wherever I want to go. I do not have to get orders from anybody. I can get all these flexibilities from burglary. (Respondent 13)*

*I did not have to listen to anybody. It was a good living. At least I could do what I wanted to do with this job [doing burglary]. (Respondent 16)*

Several prior studies have found that property offenders spend much of their criminal gains on alcohol and drugs (e.g., Cromwell et al., 1991; Maguire and Bennett, 1982). Walsh (1986) noted that they typically use the proceeds from their crimes on personal, non-essential, items. The subjects in the present study were no different in this regard. Of the seventeen subjects referred to above who were asked how they spent the money that they obtained from burglary, ten (58.8 per cent) said that they used it for the maintenance of their lifestyle. Some of these referred to buying alcohol with the money, while others reported that they used it to buy expensive clothing. In particular, all of the youthful subjects of this group were drawn to styles and brand names that were regarded on the street as 'cool'. The lifestyle that these younger subjects aspired to reflected the values of the street culture current at the time. In general, subjects, as already mentioned, regarded money as the means to provide for their immediate needs; and this was especially true of the younger subjects in the sample. These latter demonstrated a tendency to live for the moment.

*I like to look good and I need to buy fancy clothes. My parents are not rich enough to afford the kinds of brands I like. I need good brands to hang out with girls. My parents never buy me those kinds of brands. Stealing is the only way for me. (Respondent 30)*

*I had done burglaries for a few years and had never been caught. I did probably more than a hundred burglaries before I was caught, which accumulated to quite a lot of money. Things were going pretty good at that time. I had nice clothes and a nice car. (Respondent 43)*

The monetary proceeds from burglary were often used by subjects to contribute to throwing a party, or having a celebration, at which various forms of conspicuous consumption were evident and drowned out all sense of responsibility or concern about possible consequences. Further burglary might even be committed at the time of such a party, in order to keep it going once it had started. Because the monetary rewards of burglary were not gained through 'normal' hard labour, they were easily shared; and sharing them through throwing a party was also a way of showing off. In these situations, subjects often helped their friends and associates, especially when it came to the provision of alcohol. One young subject explained how he used the money from burglary to buy alcohol to share with his friends, and to maintain himself in a state of intoxication that had already made him bold and carefree.

*When I was drinking with my friends, they wanted more alcohol. So I went out and did a burglary to buy more alcohol. I was just getting the money to party that night. (Respondent 19)*

Wright and Decker (1994) also discuss the phenomenon of 'desperate partying' by offenders as a motivation for burglary, since money is needed in order to indulge in such reckless behaviour. They found that in most cases, burglars did not save the money that they obtained through burglary, but, instead, spent it to "keep the party going" (Wright and Decker, 1994, p.38). Street culture has been the focus of several discussions in the relevant literature, of foreground factors in the etiology of street crime (e.g., Fleisher, 1995; Wright and Decker, 1994; Shover and Honaker, 1992).

Shover and Honaker (1992) saw street culture as putting an emphasis on spontaneity, and as dismissing careful planning and thinking about tomorrow, in favour of “enjoying the moment” (p.283). Fleisher (1995) characterised it as encouraging the hedonistic pursuit of sensory stimulation, a lack of orientation with respect to the future, and the neglect of responsibility. Wright and Decker (1994) found burglars, as street-culture figures, spending without thinking, in an attempt to create an impression of affluence. In the present study, the conspicuous consumption of alcohol, and the dropping of money on other ephemeral or self-indulgent pleasures and activities by subjects in the sample symbolised their commitment to the street-life.

### 3.2. Psychological Rewards

It is a basic assumption of behavioural science that most repeated behaviour recurs as a result of positive reinforcement. In line with this assumption, some behavioural scientists have argued that many people find risky behaviour, of both a criminal and a noncriminal variety, intrinsically rewarding, and that the intrinsic reward associated with such behaviour, plays a critical role in why a person persists in it. According to Ellis’ (1991) Arousal Theory, persons who are prone to criminality are thought to become bored quickly and easily, and need to seek out new and more intense stimulation than they find in their normal daily experience. Further, such persons’ stimulus-seeking behaviour is likely to include ‘deviant’ and criminal acts, particularly if these persons lack legal and legitimate means or opportunities by which they can satisfy their stimulus needs. As Gibbons (1989) notes, there are good reasons for thinking that individuals differ in their personal attraction to risk-taking and similar forms of behaviour pursuing excitement; and thus, there are some people who can easily be attracted to law-breaking by the excitement that it provides. Such excitement, therefore, is not merely an incidental by-product of the criminal act, but may represent a major motivational force for the commission of the crime. Hence, in considering burglary and burglary decision making, it is necessary to pay close attention to the psychological dimensions that are present in these activities, including, among other aspects, the desire for thrill and excitement.

It became clear in the present study, that money was not the only form of reward that entered as a factor into the subjects’ burglary decision making. Although most of the subjects said that there was nothing positively enjoyable about burglary, other than the money that one could obtain as a result of doing it, some of them did express enjoyment from the feeling that they got from committing a burglary. Thus, the thrill and excitement of burglary must, in the case of some subjects, be considered as a potential intrinsic reward that motivated them to commit burglary, and that entered as a factor into their burglary decision making. In fact, almost one-fifth of the subjects (19.2 per cent) stated that for them, the psychological rewards of burglary were as important as the monetary ones. Indeed, occasionally, the perceived psychological rewards of burglary transcended these subjects’ specific financial needs, as a motivational factor for burglary.

*There are some thrills in stealing. I liked the excitement of burglary. You see, there was a good deal of excitement and interest involved in the crime. It is certainly the thrills and not the money that motivates me. (Respondent 52)*

*I would say that I never burgled in order to get rich. Doing burglary gave me a good feeling.... It also gave me a thrill, and I felt that I was accomplishing something. (Respondent 16)*

Because of this excitement and sense of thrill that these subjects derived from burglary, to do a burglary could be quite an emotionally draining experience for them. In fact, four of the subjects, for whom the psychological rewards of burglary were as important as the monetary ones, specifically expressed feeling ‘high’, or experiencing a ‘rush’, during the actual commission of burglary as the following excerpts demonstrate.

*If you have to worry something is going to happen soon, you feel some kind of ‘high’. (Respondent 43)*

*Burglary gives me a real rush. That feeling becomes more addictive than the money after a while. It was always exciting to do something I was not supposed to do. (Respondent 26)*

This feeling of exhilaration was what led subjects, such as these, to continue doing burglary. Maguire and Bennett (1982), too, suggested that burglars experienced feelings of excitement in connection with doing burglary at times during their career. They found that the surreptitious nature of burglary gave the burglar a psychological high, and a rush, similar to the euphoric feeling that they might experience from the consumption of narcotics.

Other psychological rewards experienced by the subjects in the study, in association with burglary, included a sense of power and the satisfaction of being able to show off to friends and associates.

With respect to getting a sense of power from committing burglary, this seems, in general, to be lacking in this form of crime, owing to there normally being no victims actually present at the time of the crime, over whom the burglar can directly exercise his power. However, one subject in the study related how, in one burglary, he had encountered the occupants in the residence during the actual burglary; and how he had enjoyed a sense of power from being able to victimise them personally.

*It was the power. The power was in my hands. I told the people they had to do what I tell them, or I would kill them. You have a feeling of power when you have a weapon in your hand. (Respondent 26)*

Three young subjects confessed that one of their motivations for burglary, and a factor in their burglary decision making, was their desire to show off to their friends. The risks and dangers associated with burglary, and the ability to overcome those risks and dangers, gave these young subjects many opportunities to engage in such exhibitionist showing off. In addition, their success at burglary gave them the chance to display, to their criminal peers, that they were brave and skilful criminals.

*I would estimate that I committed about one hundred burglaries, between the ages of eleven and sixteen years... I became famous, or maybe infamous, among my friends. Some of them respected me, and others feared of me. Any way, I felt good and I did burglaries, more often to look cool to my friends. (Respondent 21)*

*I did burglaries primarily for the challenge they presented, and when I had finished a burglary successfully, I felt I was cool. It also brought me a good reputation among my friends. They respected my technical competence and wanted to learn from me. (Respondent 3)*

With reference to burglars' concern with impressing their friends and associates, according to Katz (1988), group crimes present the perfect opportunity for someone who is a member of the group, and who wishes to establish his/her reputation with the group, to prove that he/she is a 'skilful criminal', in any risky situation. In Katz's (1988) findings, once a group sets itself on a criminal course, the intense focus on the proposed criminal action makes the ensuing situation an especially promising theatre for showing off and making an impression. An individual member of the group may gain recognition by intentionally entering into a risky situation, or by making a particular criminal action more risky than properly is necessary.

In such a context, that person can be perceived by others as an 'action-taker' and as the one shaping or fulfilling the group's 'collective agenda'. By these means the individual can exert considerable power over their cohorts and associates. In this connection, for those subjects in the study who confessed that one of their motivations for burglary was their desire to impress their friends, to gain a reputation as a skilful and daring burglar was very important to them. The subjects liked to have others present during the actual commission of burglary, in order to be able to show off, during the action. To have others around them enhanced both the enjoyment of the physical sensation of committing a crime, and the sense of accomplishment that they obtained from doing a successful burglary.

According to Sutherland (1956), some thieves in his study, experienced a thrill when stealing, although what a professional thief mostly sought was money, not some temporary thrill. Bennett and Wright (1984), in their study on burglars, found that most of them, in response to being asked about their motivation for doing burglary, not surprisingly, cited the need for money as their main reason for doing it. However, at the same time, over half of the burglars in the study, spontaneously elaborated on their response to this question and noted other satisfactions that they associated with the commission of burglary. They noted that they found the risks associated with doing burglary, exciting. Correspondingly, in the present study, while only a small number of the subjects (10 out of 52, or 19.2 per cent) said that they committed burglary primarily for the thrills and excitement that were to be obtained from doing it; more (15 out of 52, or 28.8 per cent) noted that committing a burglary was exciting for them.

In other words, for this larger number of subjects in the sample, the anticipated excitement to be gained from burglary constituted a significant secondary reward of such activity.

*Burglary was not just for the money. Burglary was fun as well. I hit a house for money, but there was also a lot of thrill and excitement. There was the possibility that I would get caught. But it was exciting as well. (Respondent 18)*

*I do burglaries for the money. Sometimes it is kind of fun as well. Burglary is a kind of adventure to me. (Respondent 46)*

For the subjects who referred to excitement as one of their motivations for burglary, the excitement was not the same for all burglaries. Thus, there was little thrill, if a proposed burglary was close to a 'sure thing', and if the subject involved had enough experience to know that in advance, the burglary could be just like work. One subject, for example, who got inside information on a house that was unoccupied while the residents were on vacation, reported that burglary was a banal experience.

*It was just something to do. I mean, I really did not have fun doing it. I just went and did it... and I came back... I did not really worry about it. (Respondent 27)*

A few subjects claimed that they had kept their emotional enthusiasm for burglary throughout their lives, up to the time of interview. In general, however, the maintenance of such enthusiasm seemed to depend on the age of the subject. The younger subjects in the study sample more often referred to excitement in connection with burglary than did the older subjects. Such excitement was often a primary motivational factor in relation to burglary among the younger subjects, but its importance declined with the age of the subject until, typically, it became no more than a subsidiary motivational factor.

*When I was younger, I just did burglaries for fun and pocket money. But I make my bread out of burglary now. It is no fun any longer once it is a means of living. (Respondent 9)*

*I enjoyed breaking into the houses when I was young. However, I am not as young as I once was. It does not give me the same kind of excitement any longer. (Respondent 29)*

#### **4. Conclusions**

In this study, as expected, the primary motivation for most burglaries committed was money. However, the study also showed that some of the subjects in the sample, especially among the younger ones, enjoyed intrinsic 'psychological rewards', consisting of feelings of stimulation, thrill, and excitement, from doing burglary. Indeed, for some subjects in the sample (about one fifth of the study sample subjects), such psychological rewards were more important than the purely monetary rewards from residential burglary. Further to that, other subjects in the sample, for whom money was the primary motivational factor for committing burglary, nevertheless expressed the view that burglary was exciting for them, and that this excitement, as a 'by-product' of doing burglary, constituted a quite significant 'secondary reward' of engaging in that activity.

In Korean society, one popular response to the crime issue is imposing harsher punishments, which derives from the belief that individuals engage in criminal activities for profit. It is in agreement with the argument made by the proponents of the classical school that if the risks attached to crime increase to the degree that would significantly outweigh the criminals' anticipated rewards, crime will decrease (Cook, 1986).

The problems with this approach is that, as found in this research, other factors, including psychological rewards such as excitement could be the prime goal for some burglars. For these people, a more severe punishment without certainty of apprehension could be a counterproductive factor. For example, the authorities might increase the excitement and appeal of residential burglary for the offenders that seek non-material rewards. In this regard, the current legislative efforts in Korea are not taking accounts of the actual factors that affect burglars' decision making appropriately. In addition to the effort to deter burglars by increasing punishment, reducing the attractiveness of potential target residences could be another option. In fact, Fatta (1976) states the following:

*Physical deterrents, which render the commission of certain crimes more difficult and less tempting, seem to be more effective in reducing the incidence of these offences than is the threat of punishment (p.100).*

This approach, employing the physical deterrence techniques, is based on the view that environmental factors affect the decision making processes of burglars to some extent; and the environmental stimuli in question have to be reduced in terms of their effects to deter the crimes. Specifically, the target and its environment must be engineered in such a way to make committing crime difficult or impossible (Jeffery, 1999). Therefore, individual resident should try to reduce the opportunities for burglary by increasing the level of risk for apprehension and reducing the possible rewards from the crime.

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