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## Toolbox

Adrian Alarcon

Archdiocese of Los Angeles - San Pedro Region ▼

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### Beware of Inviting Other People—and Vulnerability—Into Your House

(Posted July 28, 2003)

When we invite people into our homes, our guests bring their own set of motivations and behaviors with them. Most of the time, this doesn't create a problem. But, the mere fact that other people do things differently than you can lead to some serious security issues in your home.

So, whether you've hired a plumber to replace the garbage disposal, or your teenage child has an overnight guest, or someone is feeding your pets while you're away on a trip, or you're cooking dinner for the church youth group—any time you invite others into your house you create security vulnerabilities. But, a helpful checklist and a simple daily routine can help you overcome many of these vulnerabilities.

It's never safe to invite a total stranger into your home. If you don't know who the person is and why they are there, you're asking for trouble. Whether it's an apparent contractor suggesting that you need a particular type of home repair (such as a roof), or teenager selling magazine subscriptions, or child selling candy to raise money for the local school, you should never invite a stranger into your house. Whether the salesman is a child or adult, door-to-door sales people could be masquerading in hopes of seeing what and who is in your house. So, when someone knocks at your door, keep in mind the possibility that the person knocking could be a con artist, burglar, home intruder, child abductor, rapist, or worse.

#### When someone knocks on your door:

- Always look through your peephole before answering the door.
- Don't open the door unless the person is someone you know, such as a friend, relative, or a neighbor.
- If you do open the door for someone you *merely recognize*, step into the doorway to effectively block the person from having access into your house.

Door-to-door solicitation creates its own set of security risks. If you believe it is safe to buy something from a door-to-door sales person, you may find yourself needing to step back inside your house to get your purse or wallet.

- Do not invite the sales person inside your house. Ask him or her to please wait outside the door and tell them you'll return shortly.
- When you retreat back inside the house, close the door securely and lock it. Then go get your money. Sometimes a burglar will disguise himself as a door-to-door salesman, only to have the resident invite the burglar inside the house and,

#### Author:

**Jeff Lester**

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unwittingly, to show the burglar where the resident keeps their purse or wallet.

- When you return to the door, don't take your purse or wallet with you. Take only the amount of money you'll need to complete the transaction. This simple step prevents a "grab-and-run" robber from taking your wallet, identification, and credit cards, and jumping into a getaway car.
- Don't allow the solicitor's age to lull you into a state of vulnerability. Traveling burglary rings will sometimes canvass a neighborhood with children or teenagers masquerading as members of a youth organization when, in reality, the children are merely the eyes and ears for adults who are planning to come back later to burglarize your house. If you don't recognize the person who is knocking, don't answer the door.
- And, never allow a sales person to enter your home to use the bathroom or telephone. Burglary rings will sometimes send one person to the door (generally a child, teenager, or young female), and have that person gain access by requesting to use the telephone or go to the bathroom. Once inside, the person may conduct a quick visual inventory of the house, its contents and its occupants, then place a call to someone else in the burglary ring. Though the call may not make much sense to you, the caller will likely be reporting on both the value of your house as a potential target and the presence of any visible security measures.

**Even when you contact a local home repair specialist, you create a certain amount of risk.** A repairperson may "come and go" through your door several times over a period of several hours. Any time that your door is unlocked or ajar and your attention is elsewhere (e.g., with the repair person), you are vulnerable to having a stranger walk into your house. And, sometimes, contractors will hire workers who are not licensed and bonded—and sometimes that's because those individuals are not eligible for licensing or bonding due to a criminal past. Plus, if left unattended, a potential burglar or intruder can disable most security systems in a matter of minutes, rendering the system unable to alert you to a break-in. So, it's probably a good idea to keep an eye on anyone who is working inside your house.

- First, make sure you acquire the services of a reputable contractor with employees who are properly licensed and bonded. This, alone, will improve the odds of you getting good service while minimizing the risk of having a criminal working inside your house.
- If you're going to be at home "alone" with the repair person, make sure to call a friend, relative, or co-worker ahead of time and ask him or her to call you periodically during the repair to check on the progress. Keep in contact with your friend to make sure they know when the repairperson has finished or if you otherwise intend to leave your house for any reason. The mere fact that you're on the phone telling someone else that the repairperson is working on your sink, for example, will let the repairperson know that someone else knows he or she is in your house. It's also a good idea to give your friend a visual description of the repairperson—especially any unique physical characteristics, such as scars, tattoos, or unusual hairstyle.
- If you can do so without creating problems, remain in a common area—an area where you can see (or at least communicate with) the repairperson, while keeping an eye on the door.
- It can be particularly effective if you act as the "doorman" for the repairperson—opening and closing the door as they come and go. A legitimate repairperson will appreciate your kindness, and

you can maintain control over the door—making sure it is locked if you are unable to keep an eye on it.

**Any time you have invited guests, be aware that guests will generally treat your property the same way they treat *their own property*.** For your own protection, you should assume that guests—especially overnight guests—will open doors and windows, make multiple trips to the bathroom, and even sometimes snoop when you aren't around. Altogether, these behaviors create several vulnerabilities. Always keep your mail, important documents, and prescription medications in a secure area of your house where strangers and guests aren't likely to access those items. The same goes for your purse, wallet, keys, and other important personal items.

- Never leave your mail or other important documents “on display” in a public area of your house. A con artist or potential burglar can acquire enough information from a handful of “bills” to wreck your personal finances. And, by raiding your bank or credit card account, a burglar can do as much or more damage than by raiding your jewelry box, or stealing your car.
- Never keep prescription medications in the same bathroom that is used by your houseguests. Whether it's a small child who doesn't know any better, a teenager looking for a way to get “high,” a potential burglar looking for your potential medical vulnerabilities, or “Aunt Judy” who's simply nosey, you shouldn't allow anyone other than appropriate adult family members or caregivers to have access to your prescription medications.
- Never allow guests to use a bathroom that's inside your master bedroom. Our most dangerous home security risk is being attacked by an intruder while we sleep. By allowing people into your master bedroom, you give potential burglars or intruders an opportunity to create a solid mental image of the layout of your sleeping quarters, as well as the opportunity to create a new access point by, for example, unlocking a bedroom window or patio door. Plus, a burglar could take your house key, car key, or credit cards from a nightstand, and steal your car during the night—using your keys to start the ignition and your credit card to fill the gas tank.
- It's best to designate one particular bathroom as the “community” bathroom, and keep its contents to a bare minimum, which means no personal effects (e.g., prescription medications) that belong to you or your family members.
- A child's bedroom should be strictly “off limits” to everyone except for specific relatives and other known individuals who have your explicit approval to be in the child's room.
- Assume that, if left alone, anyone might snoop through your personal and intimate effects. Then, make in-home security choices based on that assumption. If there's anything you wouldn't feel comfortable discussing with your mother at Sunday dinner, then make sure your visitors and overnight guests cannot access it.

**SPECIAL NOTE:** One highly overlooked vulnerability is the risk of having your friends and relatives tell their friends and relatives about things they've seen inside your home. Somewhere in the extended web of *friends and relatives of friends and relatives*, trouble is lurking. If a troubled friend of a friend finds out, for example, that someone in your house takes a particular kind of pain medication, that troubled friend of a friend may target you for a break-in—or worse!

- Generally, by inviting anyone into your home—even close friends and relatives—you create the opportunities for other

people to leave your doors and windows unlocked, or to inadvertently breach your home security system. By leaving a single window or door unlocked, you are inviting the random home intruder into your home. And, if a stranger is left unattended in your home, a potential burglar or intruder can give himself or herself access to your home, your belongings, and your family by unlocking a single window. Plus, a bad guy needs only a couple of minutes alone with your home security system to render it useless.

**If you have a home security system:**

- Don't use your security code in front of anyone. A stranger may memorize your security code and use it later to enter your house unnoticed.
- Check your control panel at least once a day for signs that any part of the system is not functioning. It's an especially good idea to check the system at bedtime.
- Conduct a full test of your alarm system regularly—at least once every couple of months—to make sure everything is functioning properly.

**Even if you don't have a home security system:**

- Check all doors and windows upon first entering your house, and at bedtime. And do the same immediately after guests have departed from your home. This may sound paranoid and burdensome, but it's an inexpensive and easy habit that provides a reasonable level of security for your home and your family. For most people, this should take only three or four minutes, and it will give you the peace of mind that nobody will be able to just walk in through an open door or crawl in through an open window.

**Bottom Line:**

Don't focus too heavily on the specific examples I've used in this article. Instead, I encourage you to consider the vulnerability *issues* and to think through your own "at-home" behavior. Identify your own vulnerabilities and modify your behavior to keep yourself and those around you safe.

A sure way to maintain a modest level of home security is by allowing only invited guests into your home, restricting the access that guests have to your windows, doors, security system, and important personal effects, and by getting in a habit of conducting a daily security walk-through to make sure your doors and windows are securely closed and locked, and that your security system is functioning properly.

You can always minimize your risk from crimes of opportunity by taking away the opportunity for the criminal to commit the crime. Often, criminals select their victims based on opportunity. By securing doors and windows, eliminating access by strangers, and restricting the access of those you invite into your home, you can take away many, if not most, of the opportunities for a burglary or other home-intrusion type of crime. In the process, you'll create a safer home environment for you and your family.

*Next month we'll take a look at some particular vulnerability we create when we're leaving for work and school in the morning, and returning home in the evening.*

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**EDITOR'S NOTE:** In addition to his background in journalism and public policy, Jeff Lester served for two years as part of an executive protection detail for a government official. In this article, he shares his personal security experience to help parents avoid inadvertently exposing themselves and their families to dangerous intruders.

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