

Foreign Burglars: Primary Results of an Interview Study with Arrested Offenders in Germany

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Abstract: Given that the domestic burglary rate in Germany has been on the rise for years, there is currently a huge debate in political arenas and in the media concerning the offenders—especially foreign offenders. However, there is little specific research on burglars, particularly foreign burglars. This paper reports on the main results of a qualitative interview study with convicted foreign offenders in Germany. We conducted 30 narrative-biographical interviews with offenders from 15 different countries. The findings suggest the stereotype of foreign burglars in high-crime gangs is too one-dimensional. Moreover, there is a large range of different motives, biographical backgrounds, and *modi operandi*. Further, results show that specific circumstances in Germany support the behavior of foreign criminal, such as accommodation possibilities from contacts already living in Germany, or the availability of local fences (i.e. receivers of stolen goods).

Keywords: Residential burglary, offenders, burglary prevention.

1. INTRODUCTION

Between 2006 and 2015 the residential burglary rate in Germany increased by 57.52% according to the Police Crime Statistic (Bundeskriminalamt 2006-2015). Only recently, from 2015–2016, has the number of cases declined by 9.5%. It remains to be seen whether this is the beginning of a downward trend or an indicator of stabilization at this level. Nevertheless, 151,265 cases of residential burglary in 2016 is still a high rate, even though there were more cases and higher frequency rates¹ in the 1990s (see Figure 1).

Despite these increasing rates, the clearance rate has remained very low over the years. The Police Crime Statistic (Bundeskriminalamt 1994-2016) indicates that in 2016, one suspect was found by the police in only 16.9% of burglary cases. Moreover, analyses of criminal case files indicate that in more than half of the criminal investigations, suspects were not charged due to insufficient evidence. Only 2.0–2.6% of burglary cases resulted in at least one convicted offender (Dreißigacker *et al.* 2016; Kawelovski 2012).

Therefore, one of the key results to come out of previous research done on suspects and convicted offenders is that there is not one single category of burglar (Dreißigacker *et al.* 2015; Dreißigacker *et al.* 2016; Kawelovski 2012; Landeskriminalamt NRW 2013). Analyses of case files have shown that local

offenders, drug addicts, juveniles, and acquaintances of the victim (e.g., an ex-partner) also commit residential burglaries (*ibid.*).

In addition to the types of offenders listed above, there are also foreigners who travel to Germany to commit burglary (*ibid.*). Despite the fact that such offenders can be differentiated from local offenders due to the higher cost they incur in order to commit the crimes (e.g., due to travel and organizational costs), little is known about their personal backgrounds, motives, or methods of committing such crimes (see Van Daele, Vander Beken, and Bruinsma 2012). In particular, there is a total lack of research in this area in regards to Germany. Recently however there has been a huge debate in media and political circles on foreign burglars, who have been described as highly professional offenders in criminal organizations.

This became the starting point of a one-year research project on the phenomenon of foreign offenders, i.e. burglars travelling from abroad,² committing domestic burglaries in Germany. The research questions attempted to address the offenders' motives, backgrounds, criminal methods, and behavior after their crimes were committed. Other research issues included why foreigners chose Germany to commit burglaries and what we could learn from these offenders to prevent residential burglaries. This paper aims to present the main results of the study.³

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²By this, we are not solely focusing on migrant offenders since mostly the burglars do not have the intention to immigrate to Germany but to stay for a certain time and then go back to their home countries.

³The study has been funded by the German Forum of Crime Prevention and the Police Crime Prevention. For the full report see Wollinger and Jukschat (2017).

¹Frequency rate indicates the number of offenses per 100,000 inhabitants.

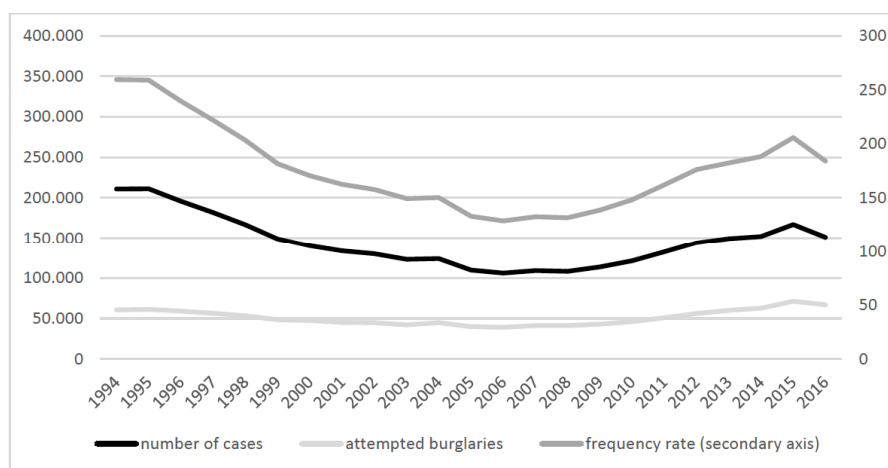


Figure 1: Fluctuation in the number of cases and frequency rates of residential burglary in Germany (Police Crime Statistic 1994-2016, Bundeskriminalamt 1994-2016).

2. METHOD AND SAMPLE

To answer these research questions, a qualitative research approach seemed most suitable. Due to the study's emphasis on offenders' biographical history, data were collected using biographical narrative interviews (see Küsters 2009; Schütze 1983) that were complemented by open questions concerning social milieu, target selection, modus operandi, and the self-perception of the burglars. We interviewed foreign offenders who committed burglaries and who were subsequently given prison sentences. We addressed two categories of foreign burglars: (1) offenders who traveled to Germany just for a short time period to commit the burglaries and then planned to leave the country afterwards; and (2) offenders who immigrated to Germany to build a better life and started committing burglaries only a short time after entering.

To gain access to the offenders, we first asked all 16 State Ministries of Justice in Germany for permission to conduct the study in their prisons. After 13 of these ministries granted permission for the survey, we contacted the corresponding prisons in their states. We specifically requested access to prisoners who were convicted for residential burglary in Germany but who were maintaining residency abroad at the time of the crime. The respective prison staffs informed all inmates matching our criteria about this study. To help with this process, we provided an information sheet about the survey and the interview procedure in 15 different languages. We offered an incentive of 20 € to each inmate for their voluntarily participation.⁴

⁴Upon request of a particular prison, the incentive was given in the form of coupons for the prison commissary or as a deposit into their prison bank account.

In total, we contacted 30 participants (29 male, one female) from 15 different countries⁵ who were 18–55 years old, with most being between 20–30 years of age. They were imprisoned in 20 different prisons throughout Germany where they were serving sentences of several years. In addition to residential burglary, most of the offenders had also committed other property crimes, and some of them had also been involved in drug-related crimes.

The length of the interviews varied between 30 minutes and 3.5 hours. To create an atmosphere of trust, interviews were conducted in an unsupervised room, mostly in the so-called "lawyer room." In those cases where the interviewees could speak German or English fluently (eight cases), the researchers conducted the interviews by themselves. In all other cases, we drew on native speakers of the languages in question who were also fluent in German. We then trained them in interview techniques and we especially focused on the unique challenges regarding the translation process in qualitative research.⁶ Thanks to these methods, not only were interviewees able to speak freely and fluently in their mother tongue, but the common cultural background between interviewee and interviewer also increased the atmosphere of trust during the interview, thereby improving the quality of the interviews.

⁵These countries are Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Germany, Georgia, Kosovo, Croatia, Libya, the Netherlands, Poland, Moldova, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, and Hungary. The selection of one German offender was an exception and included only because he committed many burglaries together with the brothers of his Romanian wife.

⁶In these cases, the interviewer transcribed and anonymized the interview in the original language. Then the interviewer translated the interview transcript word-for-word into German, trying to stay as close as possible to the original.

All talks were recorded. The audio files were transcribed to include emphasis, speed, tone of voice, timing, pauses, and so forth. It was then anonymized. Transcripts were analyzed following grounded theory methodology, especially drawing on systematic comparisons and extensive line-by-line sequential analysis of relevant sequences from each interview, which led to the reconstruction of recurring patterns (Strauss 1998; Strauss and Corbin 1996).

3. RESULTS

In the following sections, we present the findings that emerged from the research questions described above.

3.1. Motives and Backgrounds of the Offenders

The offenders vary in their self-interpretation of their criminal acts and in the extent to which they self-identify as a burglar. By means of these interpretive patterns, as well as taking into consideration the specific biographical and social backgrounds, we determined three different motives for burglary: first, as an act of necessity; second, as a quick and easy way to make a lot of money; and third, as a profession.

Offenders of the first type typically enter Germany without the intention of committing a crime. Moreover, they immigrate with the hope of building a better life through legal work or by seeking asylum. Shortly after immigrating, a process of disillusionment begins as they soon notice that their idea of life in Germany, which they had before they arrived, does not correspond to the actual situation. Typically, these offenders grew up under difficult economic circumstances. After they fail to earn money legally in Germany, their plight intensifies and leads to concern over their lack of prospects. From this situation, which they perceive as hopeless and desperate, they commit their first residential burglaries, often after randomly coming into contact with people involved in similar criminal activities. One example of this type of offender is the Albanian interviewee AT01, who described his own situation as follows:

“To know that .. also the problems (1) are making you criminal. (4) /Ehe ok./ Personally, I have never stolen for fun, (1) because if you have, you do not steal. And if I have had, I would have never done that. But if you do not have, (1) one is obliged. (1) /Ehe./ For me it was like that.

But normal (2) that I regret me now, because everything came out of my nose [Albanian saying, offences brought something bad]. I do not know if you understand me in dialect what that means? (1) /Yes, I understand./ Now I pay that, what I did. .. So that I regret very much, without doubts. And it will never happen again in my life, as I said, better bread and salt and calm in my head and with my problems (1) so (2) (takes a deep breath).” (AT01)

Similarly, all interviewees of this type deeply regretted what they did afterwards. Being imprisoned is a shock and a deterring experience for them. They all share an orientation towards legal work and a normal life. Once this type of offender obtains work or has enough money to make his living, he stops committing burglaries.

In contrast, offenders of the second type consider burglary as a rewarding opportunity to make quick and easy money. It is less an economic plight, which motivates the offenders of the second type to commit burglaries. Rather, offenders are motivated by the desire to achieve a bourgeois existence or a luxurious lifestyle that they cannot otherwise afford through normal work in their country of origin. The money from burglaries, for instance, enables them to buy their own houses in their home countries or to finance parties, drugs, and expensive clothes. In retrospective and facing sentences of several years, this second type reevaluates its offences more ambivalent than the first one, weighing benefits and costs of their offences. Interviewees of this type are often embedded in a deviant peer group. One example of this is an offender from the Netherlands. In the following quote he describes how impressed he was by the opportunity to make a huge amount of money within a short time and without any great expenditure of effort:

“well I just went into this apartment and it was very normal for me like like going shopping /Mhm./ (2) and that brings money in the bag (1) and not only a little bit .. sometimes, sometimes I have found mone-, uh, uh (1) uh .. how how do you say that this uh (1) money cards found as well with numbers /Mhm./ yes you go to the bank and after walking with with six seven eight thousand euros, little boy, eighteen years still seventeen years old, is

walking with so much money in the bag. /Mhm./ .. Yes, because of this of course I could (1) buy a lot and .. give away and /Yes./ give to my girlfriend and yes have parties (1), (deep breathing) because we were not junkies, no uh (1) /Mhm./ cocaine or /Mhm./ something like that came into play. We smoked pot, we have had parties, we were dressed in beautiful clothes, the most expensive .. Italian brand (deep breathing) and uh (2) yes there there we put our money. (3)" (GW02)

The possibility of easy money is also an important reason for the offenders of the third type, burglary as a profession. However, they understand their burglaries more as a high professional job. When they talk about their burglaries, they use metaphors, concepts, and terms of the semantic field of work, and emphasize the importance of special skills and knowledge as conditions for being a "real" and successful burglar. Usually, within their milieus, such expertise is passed on from experienced burglars to novices. The offenders of this type are proud of their performance and are highly regarded within their social milieu. Furthermore, offenders of the third type experience an upgrade of their own status due to their criminal acts. The following quote illustrates how being a professional burglar is viewed as a result of a qualification process. Here, the Polish burglar PU03 describes how he acquired "working experience" over time:

"There was a time when I went with my friends, and after that there was a time, when I already went alone, because I did not need anyone any longer. .. I already have had working experience. Do you know what that is, working experience yes? For example I already went into apartments for five years and for me does something like adrenalin does not longer exist .. /Mhm./ fear, because that is like for you your job, sitting here with me and talking to me, for me my work is to break in in someone's house and take away all valuable goods." (PU03)

For these professional type of criminals, contacts with other burglars are business-like and professional. As with entrepreneurial activity, other persons are typically engaged for specific "services" (e.g., the breaking open of a safe). These people are usually

paid in advance, which underlines the professional relationship, and differs clearly from other forms of cooperation (e.g., friends who do the burglaries together and divide the ill-gotten goods amongst themselves). In contrast to type 1 and 2, this third type is not deterred by facing sentences of several years. These burglars interpret being imprisoned more or less as an "occupational risk", which belongs to their profession or even enables them to further qualify in their job or to make useful contacts for further burglaries ("schools of crime").

3.2. Modus Operandi

Regardless of the self-perception of the burglars concerning their own activity, three patterns of modus operandi can be differentiated: (1) search for favorable opportunity, (2) search profitable contraband, and (3) burglary "to order" and receiving tips.

The modus operandi of the first pattern is determined by the fact that offenders are primarily trying to break in unnoticed. For this purpose, offenders are looking out for windows tilted open and entry opportunities which are difficult to see from the street. The expectation of the quality of the contraband is secondary. The primary concern is a reduction of the detection risk.

By contrast, the focus of the second pattern of the modus operandi is on high-value contraband. Rather than looking for a good entry opportunity, offenders search for signs of a wealthy household, which probably offer valuable goods. In this case, each burglar has his own philosophy about indications for profitable contraband. For instance, some of the offenders try to determine the age of the dwellers by the type of curtains they have; others are oriented toward the condition of the front yard or of the brand of the car. If a target is selected, to some extent, offenders of this type take more time for the break in and make more of an effort to get in. This is a fundamental difference to the first modus operandi pattern, which is mainly characterized by the attempt to gain entry into the residence quickly.

However, a third pattern of modus operandi separates itself from the other two: burglary "to order" and receiving tips. On the one hand, the interviewees describe a practice of hiring accomplices, for example, because they need specific knowledge or particular skills (like the ability to break open safes), or because they require additional support, like someone to drive a

car or to stand watch out while the crime is being committed.

Regarding tips on the other hand, the givers of the tips are not involved in committing the burglary. Instead they give specific information about valuables in particular households and about the schedules of the residents, such as when they usually go to work and come home. Tip receivers usually verify this information on site by watching and observing the dwelling as well as the behavior of the residents some time prior to breaking into it. The givers of tips themselves, which receive money for giving the tip, do not necessarily belong to a criminal milieu. Typically they live an inconspicuous, legitimate life in Germany

3.3. Behavior after the Burglary Offence

With regard to the behavior after the burglary, all offenders have in common that they act very cautiously. If they are worried about police controls during the night, they avoid travelling long distances. In these cases, it is typical that the offenders stay near the crime scene after committing the act- they may, for instance, sleep in their car. Next day, they take advantage of the rush-hour traffic to slip away unnoticed. Furthermore, cheap guesthouses, hotels, and local contacts (people already living in Germany) are used for a stay for a certain time in Germany.

Concerning types of mobility used, the results of the interviews revealed a huge range. Besides using their own cars, public transport is also often used. If the offenders have an accommodation in Germany, they often commit the burglaries close by it. Here, they look for burglary opportunities while moving around in neighborhoods by foot or by bike. These practices allow them to remain inconspicuous.

Another way used to minimize the risk of detection is to sell the contraband very quickly after the offence. This is where local pawnshops and second-hand shops play an important role. In particular, jewelry can be sold easily, whereby the practice of melting gold jewelry immediately is not unusual.

3.4. Committing the Burglary Alone versus Together with Others

Regarding the question concerning the method of committing the burglaries - alone or together with others - results indicate that the medial picture of mobile offenders from abroad, who are solely organized in criminal gangs with a highly professional

structure, cannot be supported by the data. The interviews also demonstrate a plurality of constellations in the way different people work together in crime. Some offenders prefer to commit the offence alone, arguing that this has the advantage that the contraband does not have to be divided and that there is no accomplice who might talk to the police in case of a conflict. This practice of committing the burglary alone is found amongst all types of offenders, from those acting from necessity to those who are highly professional.

Not all burglars who commit burglaries together with others are organized into gangs. More often, we find collective offences, which evolve from casual acquaintances. The constellations of the persons who are acting together often change and are often based on random contacts. However, beside this kind of collective acting there are highly professional collaborative structures as well, whereby the offenders come together for specific objects of crime depending on which skills are needed. Furthermore, among those interviewed, there were also offenders who committed crimes consistently with the same accomplices. These groups are indeed close to the medial picture of mobile burglars from abroad. To summarize, the results do not demonstrate that the medial picture is completely wrong, but it is incomplete because of the fact that there are also other types of collaboration, as well as offenders who only act alone.

3.5. Germany as a Target of Burglary

Mobile offenders from abroad associate with Germany the idea of a wealthy country. Some of the offenders migrate for this reason to Germany - first without criminal intention, but with the hope to attain a better life. Other offenders come to Germany because they assume there is profitable contraband. This is often coupled with the knowledge that security standards of the houses and apartments in Germany are often inadequate. In addition, the participants in the study emphasized the negligent behavior of home-dwellers, such as having windows tilted open and leaving doors unlocked. They indicated that many people do not do a very good job of hiding their valuables. The image of Germany as a suitable target to commit burglary is also perpetuated in the home countries of the offender. Often burglars return to their home countries with stories of their successful exploits. One example comes from the Rumanian offender VP02 who told:

“And yet he is coming back, he is coming back to Germany again and again, he told me, that here is money. (Laughing) He travels also to other countries, (1) however over and over he comes back here.” (VP02)

The selection of the target region within Germany depends on several aspects. Offenders with contacts to people who live in Germany use their homes as an anchor point and commit offences in the surrounding area. However, if someone gets a burglary “to order” or receives a tip, a specific address is then targeted. Because of the fact that most of the offenders know that there is an abundance of contraband, they will also travel long distances within Germany to commit a single offence. Other offenders who come from countries bordering Germany usually intend to stay for just a short period of time (e.g., only on weekends) where they commit their burglaries relatively close to the border. However, motorway access does not appear to be a relevant factor for those interviewed.

3.6. What We Can Learn to Prevent Burglary

Concerning the question of how to prevent burglary, various aspects of the interviews can be considered. Due to the relevance of minimizing the detection risk by committing the offences as quickly as possible, the findings indicate the high importance of mechanical security like additional door and window locks. Even professional criminals, who take more time and effort to enter a house or apartment, take advantage of a favorable opportunity if they see that a dwelling is inadequately secure. “Weak points” include plastic doors and windows, which often are not old but do not have such special safety features such as mushroom-head locking. Several participants of the study mentioned how easy it is to open plastic doors and windows. Some of them focus solely on plastic doors. However, negligent behavior like open, tilted windows is an incentive for break-ins. Furthermore, the results support the need to hide the absence of the household members, because offenders do not want to come into contact with the victims and therefore look for indications that they are away (e.g., no lights on during the afternoon).

Apart from this, we find ambivalent results in regard to burglar alarms and CCTVs. Even though there is a small amount of offenders who are deterred by such technological safety items, it is more typical that criminals equip themselves to circumvent alarms and

CCTVs. They either destroy the alarm or accept that the alarm is triggered. The latter behavior is explained by the fact that most offenders only need a few minutes to commit the crime and they know that they will be long gone before the police arrive. The Dutch criminal mentioned above is specialized in specific car brands. He breaks into a home in order to find the keys to the car. Given the fact that most people store their car keys in the entrance area of their home, he only needs a few seconds to pull off the act. An active alarm will not prevent that.

Should there be CCTVs in the area, offenders typically hide their face by wearing a hood or something similar. The Rumanian burglar VP03 noted that he would simply turn the CCTV camera up:

“If I see a CCTV there, I have to find a specific angle, get it from behind and to turn .. it up .. upwards, I will not tear it off, will turn it upwards, so one can watch the stars.” (VP03)

Furthermore, some offenders are aware of attentive neighborhoods. They avoid areas in which they get the sense of attracting attention easily and of being observed. Criminals assume that in these neighborhoods, residents are more likely to call the police if something appears suspicious.

In addition, another question of research addressed the deterrent effect of possible punishment. Our research is in line with the general criminological finding that the detection risk has a higher influence on criminal behavior than any possible penalty (Bliesener 2014, among others). Indeed, burglary is an attractive offense because of the high expectation of contraband along with the possibility of committing a crime that is low risk and does not involve coming into contact with the victims personally. Furthermore, the interviews indicate that offenders do not know the legal consequences. In some cases, they even assume very unrealistic sentences by confusing the experiences of the various criminal offences of themselves or others.

4. DISCUSSION

To sum up, the findings of the interviews indicate a huge range of motives and modus operandi amongst burglars from abroad (as is the case with native offenders - see, e.g., Wright and Decker 1994). This indicates that the picture given by media and politicians of foreign burglars organized into highly professional

crime groups cannot be supported and has to be rejected as too one-dimensional. This specific type of foreign offenders does exist, but represents only one part of the whole group. Apart from this, highly professional offenders are not necessarily involved in organized crime groups, as there are also professional burglars who deliberately decide to commit burglaries alone.

When viewing the results in a larger context, the relevance of several structures within Germany for committing burglary is obvious. On the one hand, local anchor points, e.g. known persons (friends, acquaintances, family members) who permanently live in Germany are important. Such contacts provide an accommodation, and therefore enable the committing of burglaries in a more inconspicuous manner. On the other hand, the offenders interviewed became very quickly involved in criminal milieus, which can be found in specific bars as well as in public spaces such as those areas around railway stations. In these bars and other meeting points, mobile offenders exchange experiences. The relevance of such places, we found in our study, is in line with the results found by Van Daele *et al.* (2012). Even if offenders moved to Germany without criminal intention, they easily become involved in criminal milieus when searching for people from the same home country, who speak the same language. Along with their disillusionment, these contacts provide a structure of opportunities for committing burglaries. In criminal milieus such as these, burglaries were planned spontaneously. On top of that, it is in these situations that they can conduct “professional exchanges” and do some “networking.” Therefore, when conducting investigations on burglaries, police should also consider the local structures.

Other relevant structures within Germany are related to the phenomenon of receivers of the contraband. Typically, offenders quickly get to know who the possible receivers are. It is here that pawnshops, jewelers (especially those that can melt gold jewelry), and second-hand shops have a high impact. A law requiring identification if someone wants to sell valuable goods would complicate this criminal practice.

Results concerning effective preventative measures correspond to previous empirical research (Dreißigacker *et al.* 2015; Tseloni *et al.* 2016, among others) and the advice of the police. The right strategy appears to focus on mechanical safety measures such

as additional door and window locks, as well as emphasizing the importance of both cautious behavior patterns and a good neighborhood.

In conclusion, it should be mentioned that it took an enormous effort to reach these particular offenders. It could only be accomplished with a trained interviewer, who could speak the same language as the criminal. This proved to be a door opener to the field and enabled us to gain valuable insights into the motives, backgrounds, and behavior, of these kinds of offenders.

Nevertheless, a limitation of the study is that only burglars who had been caught could be interviewed. Still nothing is known about burglars who have never been sentenced by the court. Further surveys should think about ways to include the so-called criminological dark field.

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