

Thwart kick-in burglaries with reinforced doors.

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Burglars won't bother knocking on your front door. They will just kick it in. That is what has happened in the East Dallas and White Rock areas recently, where neighborhood associations report a string of kick-in burglaries in the past year.

It is not an isolated problem. Sgt. Rector McCollum of the Dallas Police Department says most burglars target a house that looks easy to get into – even if people are home.

"Instead of stealth, they simply go up and kick the front door in," he says.

Nationwide, there were more than 1 million residential burglaries in 2006. Most burglars enter homes the same way: through a door in the front, the back or the garage, says Lauren Russ, director of the Burglary Prevention Council. Most homeowners, she adds, didn't even know they were vulnerable.

"People don't evaluate their homes," she says. "They don't realize they need stronger locks and a stronger door frame."

During a kick-in attack, it's rarely the door itself that breaks. Instead, it's the doorjamb, which absorbs the force of the kick. Protecting your doorway means strengthening all of these pieces – and more.

First stop: the strike plate

The least expensive – and most effective – way to strengthen your door is to replace the screws that secure the strike plate in your doorjamb. The strike plate is the metal piece that reinforces your doorjamb at the point where it connects with your deadbolt.

It is attached to the doorjamb with several screws that are designed to connect it with the 2-by-4s that frame your home, says Tim Zehring, executive director of the

International Crime Free Association, a nonprofit that trains police officers in crime prevention.

Some homes, and some new lock sets, come with screws that are just 1 inch long, he says. That makes them too short to reach the frame. The short screws will only reach the wooden trim of the doorway, making the doorjamb far more likely to break during a kick-in attempt, Mr. Zehring says.

The screws should be at least 3-1/2 inches long. If you don't know how long yours are, unscrew them from the doorjamb. If they are shorter than 3-1/2 inches, replace them.

"I have seen experienced police officers, trained on the SWAT team, kick a door with the long screws installed and it will withstand that kick for a minute or more," Mr. Zehring says. "Most people kick it two or three or four times, then they move on."

Homeowners can also buy security-style strike plates, which come with reinforced metal and a wraparound design that can withstand extra force. **Another option is the Sure-Strike, a strike plate that has a long metal casing for the deadbolt. That casing is long enough to extend into the framing of your house, just like the long screws that hold it in place. It's also a good option for homes with a foundation that has shifted, because it's designed to correct misalignments that usually occur with deadbolts.**

Doorjambs

Because they are common weak points in doorways, homeowners should take care to strengthen doorjambs and door frames, experts say.

Wood is a common material for frames, but it is vulnerable to insects and rot. High-heat composite frames and steel frames can be sturdier options, says Jim McElroy, a general manager for door maker Therma-Tru. Homeowners with wood frames need to maintain the caulking and paint to prevent the frame weakening, he says.

Other products are designed to strengthen door frames and to fix jambs that have been kicked in.

Door Jamb Armor is a kit with three main components: A jamb shield slides over the existing doorjamb; hinge shields protect the hinges; and a door shield reinforces the knob and deadbolt. Alan Young of Saddle Brook, N.J., who owned a home renovation company, says he invented the product, made of steel, after repeated kick-ins at homes he was renovating. Each piece of the kit was added after testing it on his houses. Mr. Young says when he reinforced only the jamb, burglars kicked in the door's hinges, another weak point. After he reinforced the hinges and the lock area, the burglars left, rather than trying a window or another route.

"There were too many easy targets around for them to spend an hour trying to get into our house," he says.

Locks

A simple key lock isn't enough for entry doors. They should be secured with deadbolts that extend at least 1 inch into your doorjamb, says Sgt. McCollum. If the deadbolt is any shorter, burglars can pry apart the jamb with a screwdriver.

Locks also come in different qualities. Look for a grade one or grade two deadbolt, advises Ms. Russ. These will withstand picking, twisting or prying better than lower-quality locks.

Double-cylinder deadbolts are a good idea for homeowners who have glass near their entryway, says Mr. Zehring. They require a key to operate from either side. That keeps burglars from unlocking the door if they break adjacent glass and reach inside to turn a knob.

Multipoint locking systems are another way to thwart kick-ins. These systems have three locks at different levels in the door, making it harder to kick in, says Mr. McElroy.

Other doors

Buying stronger doors is also an option. Look for one rated to withstand hurricanes, which also offer added protection against burglars. Therma-Tru tests its reinforced fiberglass door by propelling 2-by-4s at it at 30 mph, says Mr. McElroy. Some doors also come with hurricane-rated impact glass. Homeowners can use the same steps to secure side and rear doors as they use for the front door. Roughly the same number of burglars enter a home through the front door as through the side and back doors, says Sgt. McCollum. Their choice depends on how attractive the door is – shrubbery near a front entry makes it more appealing; dogs in the back yard make a rear door less appealing.

Kate Goodloe writes frequently about new products for The Dallas Morning News.

- Most occur during the day.
- In 2006, burglaries cost victims an estimated \$4 billion in lost property
- Average loss per burglary: \$1,834

SOURCE: Federal Bureau of Investigation, Uniform Crime Report 200

- Your local hardware or home improvement store should have a selection of deadbolts, security-style strike plates, double-cylinder deadbolts and doors with multipoint locking systems.
- Sure-Strike. \$49.95. Available only online, through www.sure-strike.com or by phone at 1-888-474-2341. Through May 31, the price is discounted to \$34.95.
- Door Jamb Armor. Standard kit, \$124.