

## **Home Security: Preparing for Protection.**

By Dr. Kenneth S. Cheng

Home security is of paramount importance, both in disaster and non-disaster scenarios. Those who have experienced property loss know the feeling of intrusion and violation. Recently, the Nellie Gail HOA formed a Security Committee that has thoroughly investigated various forms of neighborhood-based security measures. They also held a Security Faire, highlighting some of their findings, as well as recommendations for homeowner-based security. Our idyllic Nellie Gail Ranch has also been the target of several attempted and successful burglaries, including teams posing as housekeepers, gardeners, utility employees or other workers. These teams would walk up to homes with minimal cleaning supplies or trade tools in hand, and in official looking uniforms, enter through an unlocked door and ransack the home in 15-20 minutes before moving on to other homes. Fortunately, some of these teams were recently apprehended by local law enforcement, but other teams likely exist.

Another common tactic involves young adults/youths who are selling magazines and later ask to use your bathroom. The magazines you may order often never arrive with the scammer now having your credit card or checking account information, and worse, if you have let them in, they will have important information about the interior of your home, such as the general layout, occupants, and the presence of alarm monitors.

During disasters or civil unrest, looting is commonplace. In studying the psychology of looting, John Pitts, a prominent criminologist, notes, "looting makes powerless people feel powerful." This power is "contagious" causing a cascade of others to desire that same power. The recent images of the local looting during demonstrations in Santa Monica and Los Angeles, and the devastations from natural disasters such as Hurricane Katrina and Hurricane Sandy are all too vivid. Of particular interest was a discovery by local law enforcement that tweets by some of the looters were suggesting to "stop looting from your own. Go to the 'rich' areas." It is well known by criminals in this county that areas such as Nellie Gail Ranch, Coto De Caza and Newport Coast are some of these "rich" areas. Nellie Gail Ranch is commonly a preferred target due to its close proximity to the freeway.

Whether it be mass looters, organized but unsophisticated crime rings, or the lone individual who has selected your home for home invasion or burglary, the examples highlighted above should serve as a reminder of the importance of security and protection, not only of our property but also for our families. The recommendations in this article will focus on general security in non-disaster situations, but these recommendations may also be applicable to situations of civil unrest or natural disasters.

**Security Patrol.** For several years, Nellie Gail Ranch has implemented a 24-hour private security patrol. Although this can be helpful in deterring crime, it is critically important that residents understand that our **security patrol does not replace your diligence and responsibility in crime prevention or reporting.** Criminals may be deterred by such patrols, but they also know that patrols have no law enforcement authority. Specifically, the Nellie Gail Security Patrol cannot arrest, apprehend, or detain individuals, nor can they investigate or determine if criminal activity has occurred. They will not be able to guard or protect you or your property; residents should have no expectation that these things will occur with security patrol. Instead, one can expect the patrols to act as an extra set of eyes and ears; they can call the sheriff's department if they observe suspicious activity or behavior.

Social media posts (Nextdoor, Facebook, Ring, etc.) often describe or question observed suspicious activity, and occasionally these posts seek the phone number to our private security patrol. Posting suspicious activity can be helpful at informing the community, but should be done after contacting the sheriff's department. Additionally, calling the home owners association office or the private security patrol to report suspicious activity only serves to delay law enforcement involvement and decreases the likelihood of successful investigation or apprehension of criminals.

**Situational awareness.** Most important is for residents to maintain a level of situational awareness. This is where you take on a greater level of attentiveness to your surroundings. It is often helpful to think like a burglar or home invasion robber. Are you aware of the areas that make good hiding places on your property? Do you notice when unfamiliar vehicles are parked on your street? Have you noticed if someone has followed you home from the market or mall? These questions are not meant to cause fear but to alert you to inattentiveness. It is not uncommon for criminals to sit in their cars to get a feel for the activity on one's street; it is not uncommon for criminals to follow individuals home and enter your garage just after you pull in your car. Greater awareness of your surroundings is the first step to prevention of being a victim of criminal activity.

**Locking your car.** With the passage of Proposition 47 in 2014 and Proposition 57 in 2016, there has been a spike in theft of personal property. The propositions decreased the punishment for simple theft crimes. One such crime is "car phishing", where an individual walks down a street, checking all car doors to see if any are unlocked. An unlocked car door usually results in the perpetrator getting wallets, purses, phones, computers, iPads, and even recently purchased merchandise. Additionally, they may also now have access to your garage (and home) via the remote garage door opener. Very simply, remove all valuables from sight (including your garage door opener) and lock all the doors of your car.

**Catalytic converter thefts.** Theft of catalytic converters takes only a few minutes and has exponentially increased over the past several years. These can be worth several hundred dollars to thieves, and cost as much as \$3,000 to replace. The most

common car models for catalytic converter theft is the Toyota Prius. Other common vehicles include Ford trucks, Honda Element, and Jeep Cherokees. In addition to parking your car in the garage, other steps to prevent catalytic converter theft includes: purchasing and installing a catalytic converter cage or cable, turning on your car alarm so that jacking up the car sets off the alarm, having motion-activated cameras and lights on your driveway, and even backing your vehicle as close to the garage door or wall as possible to limit the ability of a thief to jacking up your car.

**Locking doors and windows.** Although this sounds overly simplistic, according to FBI statistics, 22% of burglaries occur when the perpetrator enters through ground floor window. Additionally, 30% of home burglaries occur through an unlocked door. Even when your door is locked, most doors can be easily breached by kicking in the door. These doors can be reinforced and made 17-fold stronger for less than a dollar; strike plate screws (normally  $\frac{3}{4}$  inches) should be replaced 3 inch screws (89¢ at Home Depot) that penetrate the door jamb and the adjacent stud (the strike plate is the metal plate in the door jamb that allows the door to latch and stay closed.) This simple, do-it-yourself fix will increase the strength of the door and make it less penetrable to forced entry. Another common entry point is an open garage door. Make it a habit to close your garage door anytime you are not in the garage. Lastly, most burglars don't bring tools with them when breaking into your home. Don't leave your tools around the exterior that can help a burglar enter your home. This would include ladders, crow bars, gardening tools, sledgehammers, etc.

**Lighting.** A well-lit house lessens the chance of a burglar selecting your home to invade. Having your neighbors do the same exponentially lowers that risk. Exterior lights can be placed on inexpensive timers where the wall switch is replaced with a timer/switch (also available at Home Depot). These timers can be set to turn on and off at specific times, in addition to functioning as a regular light switch. Installation takes 10 minutes and can easily be done with basic home repair knowledge.

**Shrubs.** Our landscaping is often a source of pride for us. However, it is important to keep shrubs low so that criminals can't hide behind them while making entry through a window. Additionally, shrubs with thorns (roses, bougainvillea, etc.) make excellent shrubbery near windows as they serve as a deterrent as a hiding place. Lastly, keep in mind that shrubs or trees used to provide you privacy from your neighbors can also provide criminals sufficient privacy from your neighbors to enter your home.

**Home Alarms.** Many of the homeowners in Nellie Gail have home alarm systems. Not surprisingly, however, is that only 19% of homeowners actually set the alarm when not at home according to a national home alarm association. Unfortunately, criminals are also aware of this statistic. Certainly alarm company signs may provide some deterrence, but criminals often "test" to see if you have even set your alarm by jiggling doors or otherwise disrupting the door or window contacts. A common excuse for not setting the alarm is due to pets in the home. Fortunately, all reputable alarm manufacturers have adjustable motion or infrared detectors that

can discern between a large dog and a human being. Inquire with your alarm company if this is one of your reasons for not setting the alarm.

**Self Protection.** Even within your home, one must always be prepared, as personal protection doesn't end at the front door. This can include learning self defense/martial arts (available and effective for all ages), having a "safe room" built into your home (using an interior walk-in closet with a solid core door and a deadbolt lock), understanding how to use common, everyday home items for self defense (fire extinguisher, tools, etc.), use of commercially available pepper spray, Electronic Control Devices (commonly known as "Tasers") or if properly trained, having a home protection firearm. The author acknowledges that controversy may exist with the concept of having a firearm in the home. The purpose of this article is to neither advocate nor dissuade various forms of self-protection, but to implore that all of the tools mentioned above, including firearms, can be excellent tools in your self-protection arsenal as long as you are properly trained and maintain proficiency in the use of these tools. An alarm system serves no purpose if you don't know how to use it properly. The same can be said of martial arts, pepper spray, firearms, or any other form of self-defense. Regardless of the form or forms of self-protection selected, one must also practice in order for self-protection to be effective. Learning karate 20 years ago with no practice in the meantime is of limited value.

**More Information.** Additional information on this topic can be obtained by our local law enforcement agency, the Orange County Sheriff's Department Crime Prevention Specialist, as well as the Department of Homeland Security. The Crime Prevention Specialist can also assist in developing a "Neighborhood Watch" Program, should your neighbors decide on taking a more proactive approach. It is always best to prevent home burglaries, home invasions and other criminal activity. Your situational awareness and preparation are the cornerstones to such prevention.

*About the Author: Dr. Kenneth Cheng is a 23-year resident of Nellie Gail Ranch and a member of the Nellie Gail Emergency Preparedness Committee (EPC). He is also a volunteer deputy sheriff with the Sheriff's Department. Within the Sheriff's Department, he is a member of the SWAT team as a tactical physician and a member of the Search and Rescue team as a High Angle Rope Rescue Technician. The opinions expressed by the author are his alone and do not represent the Nellie Gail Homeowner's Association, the EPC, or any specific law enforcement agency. Additionally, the contents of this article are for informational purposes only and should not be construed to be complete or comprehensive for the reader's individual security and protection needs.*

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**Attention Nellie Gail Residents!**

Over the last several months, the Nellie Gail Emergency Preparedness Committee has held monthly educational zoom meetings on emergency preparedness. These are informal sessions designed to help you better prepare for any disaster. In addition, the Nellie Gail Homeowner's Association has improved the Nellie Gail website to help you determine if your street or block has an active Block Captain. We encourage you to go to the website to check out this new feature. Additionally, consider being a well prepared Block Captain should your block be vacant of a Block Captain. As a resident (and as a Block Captain):

- Learn the importance of preparation
- Learn how to communicate any urgent needs or concerns when electricity and phones are down
- Learn how to prepare an earthquake kit for your family
- Learn how to preserve water needed for survival
- Learn how to shut off water and gas

We hope that you not only prepare, but consider helping your neighbors prepare as well.