

Break-in protection

To foil a thief

Homeowners have never had it so good, at least according to the Department of Justice's most recent survey of crime victims. Break-ins have dropped from 110 per 1,000 households in 1973, when the surveys began, to fewer than 32 per 1,000 in 2000, the latest data available. While demographic and economic factors account for most of that decline, experts we interviewed suggest that better protection may also have played a part.

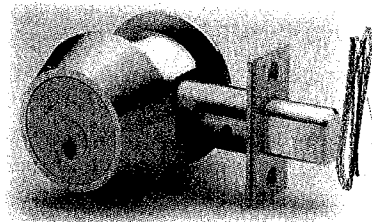
Some 17 percent of U.S. homes now have a professionally installed alarm system, compared with only about 9 percent in 1992. The results of our own nationwide survey of nearly 900 CONSUMER REPORTS readers who experienced an actual or attempted break-in within the past five years point to alarms as your best defense against burglaries.

▶ Along with dogs, alarms were more effective than other measures at keeping out intruders. Dead-bolt locks also helped.

▶ Alarm owners who experienced a break-in reported significantly less property loss than did those without an alarm.

Alarms can be a pricey proposition, however. You can easily pay \$3,000 for the hardware and installation, plus a monthly fee for the monitoring center that's linked to

the alarm by phone and dials the police once a break-in is verified. Monitoring centers greatly reduce police response to false alarms compared with older systems that dial police directly. But even the best system can't compensate for carelessness; in our survey, 34 percent of those with an alarm admitted the system wasn't turned on at the time of the incident. Many of them experienced an actual break-in as a result.



A LOCK ON SECURITY Dead-bolt locks are better than key-in-knob locks at preventing break-ins. Medeco's locks have been rated highest in our previous tests. Its *Maxum* locks, like the one above, range from \$115 to \$170 and include single- and double-cylinder models.

But police and other experts also stress that alarms, while important, are one of many essential security measures. Here's what to think about when choosing

an alarm, along with tips that can help you stop a burglary before it starts.

BUYING AND INSTALLING AN ALARM

Prices start at about \$50 for basic systems that may partially cover the first floor, where 80 percent of break-ins occur. These are sold at home centers and installed by the owner. More comprehensive systems that are linked to a monitoring center are sold by large installers such as ADT Security Services, Protection One, and Brink's.

Paying more usually buys protection for more doors and windows. It can also buy an alarm that includes infrared detectors and

glass-breakage sensors, along with smoke, carbon-monoxide, and even heat-loss and flood detection. Figure on \$2,000 to \$3,000 or more for an involved system, including the \$60 to \$80 per door or window typical for the professional installation required.

The two types. About half of all alarms installed are wireless. A locked and hidden control panel sends radio-frequency signals to motion sensors, magnetic contacts, and other linked devices at various entry points. When a protected door or window is opened—or movement is detected within a motion sensor's covered area—the device responds to the control panel, triggering an alarm and a call to the monitoring center and overriding voice calls in progress.

Wireless systems used to be plagued by low battery life and false alarms. Better batteries that typically last for at least five years have addressed those problems, according to experts, though constant use of a protected door may reduce battery life.

Wired alarms, which have motion sensors and other devices hardwired to the control panel, account for the other half of alarm sales. They cost less than wireless, but they're harder to install and may involve spackling, painting, and other touch-ups.

Regardless of the type, our survey results indicate that alarms linked to all windows and doors are more effective than those linked only to some entry points.

The monthly fee. Most alarm systems are sold by the installer as a package. The deal typically includes a three-year contract during which a monitoring center takes any alarm calls, verifies them, and contacts police as needed. This basic service usually costs \$20 to \$29 per month. Extras include cellular backup, in case your phone line is cut, and service plans that cover repairs. Such plans may provide peace of mind, but the fees can add \$30 to your monthly bill.

Finding an installer. Along with recommendations from friends and neighbors,

Alarm systems: What you pay, what you get

SYSTEM	COST	FEATURES	PROS	CONS
Basic	\$50 to \$300 for systems, plus \$20 to \$29 per month for monitoring.	Control panel, one or two sensors for doors and windows, siren, motion detector. Wired or wireless.	Covers a burglar's common entry points.	Leaves many areas unguarded. Typically requires a 3- to 5-year binding monitoring contract. After warranty, repairs charged per visit.
Midlevel	\$700 to \$800, plus \$20 to \$29 per month for monitoring.	Often adds infrared motion detectors, glass-breakage sensors, pressure mats, a panic button. Some include smoke detectors linked to monitoring service. Wired or wireless.	More doors and windows covered. Optional cell-phone 911 alert (\$15) and repair contract (\$10 to \$15).	More motion detectors increase chance of false alarms if they are inadvertently activated in vulnerable areas while you're home. Typically requires a 3- to 5-year binding monitoring contract.
High-end	\$2,000 to \$3,000 or more, based on home size and number of doors and windows, plus \$20 to \$29 per month for monitoring.	System typically includes smoke, carbon-monoxide, flood, and heat-loss detection linked to monitoring service. Priciest combine wired and wireless technology.	Every vulnerable entry point is covered, maximizing protection from break-ins. Optional cell-phone alert and repair contract.	Added sensors further increase chance of false alarms, requiring added care by family members and guests. Typically requires a 3- to 5-year binding monitoring contract.

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check with your home insurer; many offer leads as well as discounts for homes equipped with an alarm. Check the National Burglar and Fire Alarm Association (301-585-1855), which certifies members and lists them on its web site, www.alarm.org. And get at least three price estimates.

Help prevent false alarms. More than 90 percent of alarms are false, largely because of user error. False alarms were a problem for nearly 30 percent of our survey respondents. Sgt. Stephen Carolan, a crime-prevention specialist for the New York City Police Department, says confusion about motion sensors is frequently to blame. "Motion detectors can't be used when you're occupying the space," Carolan says. "If you go downstairs in the middle of the night to get a glass of milk, you're going to trip the alarm."

Many municipalities fine owners after three to five false alarms. The best way to prevent them: Have the installer walk you through the system as long as it takes for you to feel comfortable operating it.

KEEPING OUT INTRUDERS

Good doors and locks can also help prevent a break-in. Some of our survey respondents learned this the hard way; about a third of them changed their locks after the incident.

Better locks. The usual spring-loaded, key-in-knob lockset found on most exterior doors isn't very secure. Supplement it with a dead-bolt lock (about \$15 to \$150, depending on its strength and durability) that has at least 1 inch of horizontal movement, or throw. Also see that the screws securing its strike plate are 3 inches long.

Double-cylinder dead-bolts (about \$20 to \$165), which require a key on both sides of the door, are an option for doors with glass in or around them. But some areas prohibit or restrict their use for fire safety.

Beefier doors and windows. Even the best locks can't keep a thief from kicking down a door or breaking a window. Each of these actions accounted for about 30 percent of the break-ins reported in our survey. Make sure exterior doors are solid core, not hollow. Solid-core doors (about \$400) are sold by Larson, Stanley Door Systems, and most other companies that make exterior doors. And consider replacing glass windows that flank an exterior door with shatter-resistant polycarbonate.

You can improve double-hung wooden windows by supplementing their locks with an eyebolt that passes through the two sashes where they meet. Commercial locks from companies such as Trileen follow a similar

principle but require a special key. You can also add locking and nonlocking devices from First Watch, National, and others to vinyl and aluminum windows.

Fortifying an easy target. Sliding patio doors are a common entry point for intruders. Putting a wooden or metal bar in the track is a low-cost way to keep thieves from sliding the door open. Also consider patio-door pins or locks (about \$2 to \$3 from M.A.G., National, and others), which can deter intruders by holding the moving and fixed portions of the door together.

Other ways to deter a thief:

- ▶ Lock the garage and the door leading from it to the house. Remote controls for the garage-door opener should have rolling-access-code technology, which changes the remote's code after every use (see "For Openers," January 2002, page 36).

- ▶ Keep shrubbery trimmed clear of first-floor windows so that intruders are within view. Keep trees clear of the roof and consider thorny bushes to deter climbing.

- ▶ Hide anything on which a burglar could stand or climb.

For safety's sake, make sure any locks, bars, or gates you add can be easily opened from inside during a fire or other emergency. The National Fire Protection Association reports multiple deaths each year, often of entire families, attributed to security measures that violate fire codes.

Hiding the goods. Most burglaries are drug-related, says Simon Hakim, a Temple University economist and home-security consultant. "Rather than TVs and other electronics, thieves are looking for money

and jewelry, and it's in the bedroom," says Hakim. Besides hiding cash and valuables elsewhere, engrave items with a code to make them less appealing to thieves.

MAKING THIEVES THINK YOU'RE HOME

Do this convincingly, and your other security measures may never be put to the test.

Tricks of the light. Most burglaries take place during daytime work hours. But you can deter nighttime intrusions with plug-in timers (about \$15) from companies such as First Alert, Honeywell, and Intermatic. Today's timers can operate lights, radios, and other devices according to a schedule you program and vary times, day to day. You'll find both mechanical and electronic models, the latter with battery backup in case of a blackout. Look for easy operation and as many on/off programs a day as needed to mimic your routine.

Photo- or motion-sensitive outdoor lighting can prevent a break-in by frightening off thieves. Manufacturers include Heath Zenith and Journeyman, with prices ranging from \$12 to \$80, depending on construction and style. Mount such lights high so that thieves can't disable them.

Other precautions you can take:

- ▶ Stop mail and newspaper deliveries while you're on vacation. And have the lawn mowed, or the driveway and walk cleared of snow in winter.

- ▶ Leave a car in the driveway, if possible, or invite a neighbor to park a car there.

- ▶ Put up a sign saying you have an alarm—even if you don't—and be sure it can be seen from the street.

10 questions to ask an installer

Once you've narrowed your list of alarm installers, check with your county or state consumer-protection agency or Better Business Bureau about prior complaints. Then ask:

- 1 Do you and your company hold the required licenses and certification? Requirements vary by state; check with your state's attorney general's office.
- 2 How many alarm systems of this type have you installed?
- 3 Are you willing to provide three or more references?
- 4 Can you show me how the system you'll install works? Most such devices are demonstrated to dealers, not potential users, and can be overly complex.
- 5 What renovations may be needed to my home after the installation?
- 6 Can you install a system that works when I'm home? Such systems should keep entry-point sensors active while temporarily disarming motion sensors, which you could trigger.
- 7 What kind of warranties do you offer? Some companies will reimburse you for your insurance policy's deductible if a break-in occurs. Some, including ATD and Protection One, will reinstall a basic system for little or nothing if you move.
- 8 What kind of background checks do you do on prospective employees?
- 9 What company identification must your employees carry?
- 10 Can contracts be canceled if I change my mind? The initial security-system contract often covers the installation cost and is usually binding. But you should be able to opt out of later contracts if, say, you no longer want or need an alarm.