

# Making Life Safer

## Part 4

*by*

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This is the final segment of a four part series on making your life safer. In this segment we will discuss security systems and actions to take if your home is breached.

### Home Security Systems

The experts, retailers, and literature all tell us that home security systems make our homes safer. The truth however is that they don't make your home safer and often cause a false feeling of security. A lot of people will disagree with this statement but let's look at why our homes are not any safer if we have a security system installed.

Home security systems consist of one or more of the following components:

- motion sensors,
- indoor and outdoor cameras,
- glass break detectors,
- door and window sensors,
- yard signs and window stickers,
- smoke detectors,
- heat sensors,
- water detectors,
- carbon monoxide detectors,
- temperature sensors,
- medical remotes
- automation controls,
- activation fobs, control panels, keypads, or apps

Whether a security system is monitored or not, all of the components listed above are passive devices until some event, such as an intruder opening a window, or a fire that has started, activates the component(s).

The purpose of a security system is to let you know when an event is happening. It does not prevent an event from happening but once activated can help deter the event from becoming worse. In order for any security system to work,

- it needs some form of electrical power. While electricity, batteries, and solar panels are the most commonly used power sources, a backup power system is needed. Otherwise if there is no power, the system will just sit there as a pile of junk.
- it needs to be turned on (activated). Statistics show that in more than 90% of homes that have security systems and were broken into, the security system was not turned on. Similarly, in homes where people died of smoke asphyxiation, the fire/smoke detectors were not active (dead batteries or no batteries).
- it needs some method to alert people to an event that is happening. Some self installed systems use sirens to alert residents to an event. Some of these systems will also contact 911 or a “monitoring” company, which usually first calls the system’s owner and then 911. Systems that are usually installed by commercial providers such as ADT or SimpliSafe, often offer customers monitoring services for a monthly charge.

Monitoring services and “automatic” emergency notification programs are only effective if there is the system has power, is turned on, if the phone is working, if wifi and internet connections are active.

Even though all of the possible issues mentioned, your system may not be effective if you are a heavy sleeper, have hearing problems, playing music too loud, wearing hearing buds or protection, etcetera.

## **Safe Rooms**

The concept of safe rooms has several different meanings depending upon circumstances. In the mid-west for example, a safe room is a room or space specially designed and built to withstand tornadoes and hurricanes. During times of political and social strife, safe rooms were/are usually hidden rooms used to hide people. Thanks to Hollywood, safe rooms have also come to mean rooms that you can go to for protection against intruders. Such rooms are also called Panic Rooms.

Wikipedia defines safe rooms as, “A safe room or panic room is a fortified room that is installed in a private residence or business to provide a safe shelter, or hiding place, for the inhabitants in the event of a break in, home invasion, tornado, terror attack, or other threat.”

While the concept of having a safe room for security purposes sounds great, such a room has many drawbacks. Again, thanks to Hollywood, the basic model, and a very misleading one at that, of a safe room is

1. a room that has a single, heavy duty door,
2. reinforced door frame and hinges,
3. a room without windows,
4. a phone,
5. a camera monitor to view outside the door area.

Several government agencies advocate this model for their own safe rooms and when advising others on building the rooms. According to one agency, depending on the materials used, an 8' x 8' safe room would cost \$6,600 or more to build. To retrofit a room or to construct a larger room it would significantly cost more. In addition to the five considerations above, following are additional considerations when building a security based safe room.

- What is the maximum number of people would the room need hold?
- Can you expect rescue within a reasonable amount of time?
- What is that time period for rescue?
- Ventilation is needed in the room. Where will the air source come from? Can the source be breached – by gas, fire, people, etcetera?
- If the time spent in the room is 4+hours,
  - a toilet will be needed.
  - drinking water will be needed
  - food may be needed
  - bedding may be needed
- Are there any gas lines nearby that can be used to create an explosion?
- Are water, ventilation, electrical lines, and communication lines separate from the home supply lines and secure?
- Can the walls, ceiling and floor be breached either by hand, mechanical devices or firearms? A secure safe room would have the walls, ceiling and floor lined with appropriately thick sheets of steel.
- Is the room also used for other things such as storage? Safe rooms should not contain anything that is not geared toward security and survival.

Give these considerations a safe room would probably cost more than \$15,000 to build. An alternative approach however would cost considerably less. This approach is to construct a “semi-safe” safe room. Such a room would have an escape avenue such as a window, trap door or tunnel. The door and frame would still be steel and the walls

adjacent to the door could be reinforced with concrete, brick, or metal grating. The idea is to slowdown, not stop, the intruders while you make your escape.

### **The Least Secure Room**

For many reasons the least secure room, often overlooked, and easily breached in many homes is the attached garage. Following are some of the reason why garages are often not secured:

- Garage doors are often left open when people are doing yard work or children are playing in the yard.
- While a garage door is opening or closing for a vehicle to enter or leave, it is fairly easy for someone to slip into the garage without being noticed.
- Most garage doors today are operated by garage door openers. These mechanisms have a “release lever” that allows the door to be opened/closed by hand. With just a coat hanger, an intruder can easily pull the release lever and then open the door.
- Most attached garages have an entry door into the home. These doors are often left unlocked during the day and often times at night.

Relying on garage doors for security is not a great idea. Most garage doors today also have a locking latch. When leaving your home for any extended time (days), you should back out your vehicle, close the door, and then activate the door latch and lock it with a padlock. This action will prevent any easy access into or out of your home. It also prevents intruders from backing in their vehicle and loading it up with your property.

### **When an Intruder Gets In**

Whether you are at home or not, when someone breaks into your home it is a very scary situation. Often after such incidents you and your family will have lost a sense of security that your home provided you. This very traumatic reaction is exacerbated if you or a family member were at home during the incident.

Many so-called security experts, including law enforcement, erroneously tell us how to respond if there is an intruder in our homes. It's not necessarily that their advice is wrong, but could be very misleading. There is no pat answer as to what you should do because, every person, family, situation, and home is different.

There are four basic types of intrusions, each having its own attributes, which you must consider.

1. When you are in your home during the day
2. When you are in your home at night sleeping, bathing, etc.
3. While you are outside the home in your yard
4. When you are coming home from somewhere else

Of all websites dealing with home invasions most of them list one of the seven steps as the FIRST step that you should take.

- Verify presence
- Get out of the house immediately
- Hide
- Alert others
- Press the emergency alarm
- Call for help
- Go to safe room

While the advice is good, it is definitely not the very first step you should take. The very first to do is to create a written plan of action for the different types of intrusion. The first two types, for when you are inside your home, will have multiple sub plans. There should be a sub plan for each room in your home, including the attic and basement.

Your plan should include the following elements and when they take place:

- Verifying an intruder's presence
- Notifying others in your home to get out
- Securing your children
- Getting out of your home
- Blocking/barricading doors to give you more time to escape
- Location to meet once out of the house
- Alerting the authorities
- Where and how to activate any alarms
- What to do if you cannot get out of the house
- Taking or recording notes and details
- Determine what weapons and weapons of opportunity are available for each room
- Teaching rules about letting in strangers and answering doors

Once you have written your plan, discuss it with each family member for their input and to let them know what to do in the event of an intrusion.

Create a bulleted list of steps for each sub plan and post a copy of each plan in its appropriate room. This is especially needed for each child's room.

Now comes the hard part. Remember back when you were in school that at least once a year there would be a fire drill? Today's kids still have fire drills but also have active shooter drills. Fire departments advocate that homeowners make an escape plan in case of a home fire and to practice that plan.

So what good is a plan if you don't practice it? At least once every 6 months you should practice your intruder plan. Better yet, practice it every 3- 4 months and depending on your location you may want to practice it monthly. Vary the times and make it as realistic as possible. In addition to practicing how to escape, each family member should also practice what to do when confronted face-to-face by an intruder.

Unfortunately times have changed. In the past it was more likely for an intruder to enter a home with the intention of stealing property rather than harming others. But that is not the case anymore. If someone has forced their way into your home it is safe to assume that they may intend to harm you or your loved ones. For this reason, you need to have a weapon in case of having to defend yourself or family.

In most states if someone has unlawfully entered your home, you are entitled to act in self-defense using reasonable force. You do not have to wait to be attacked to defend yourself, but you must only take actions that are deemed necessary to the situation. The general rule of lawful self-defense is that the more extreme the situation the more force you could reasonably use.

If you plan on having firearms in your home, know the laws from your state so you know what you are legally allowed to do or not. Self-defense laws are generally fall within one of three categories:

1. stand your ground laws
2. castle doctrine
3. duty to retreat

You can search for these laws on the Internet using the phrase: "*[state] self-defense laws.*"