CHAPTER 1

Chapter 1: The Nine-Second Decision at Your Front Door

The man on your porch has not decided anything yet.

He is standing there with his hands in his jacket. He knocked, maybe rang the bell. Nobody answered. Now he is doing quiet arithmetic: how solid the door looks, how close the neighbors are, whether a light is on, whether anyone across the street is watching.

I call this **the Nine-Second Decision**. I can't hand you a stopwatch study that proves it takes exactly nine seconds. The number is my shorthand for something every burglary story shares. The choice to break in, or to walk away, happens fast, at the threshold, before any wood splinters. This book is about winning that short window, and the few seconds after it, without needing the body you had at thirty.

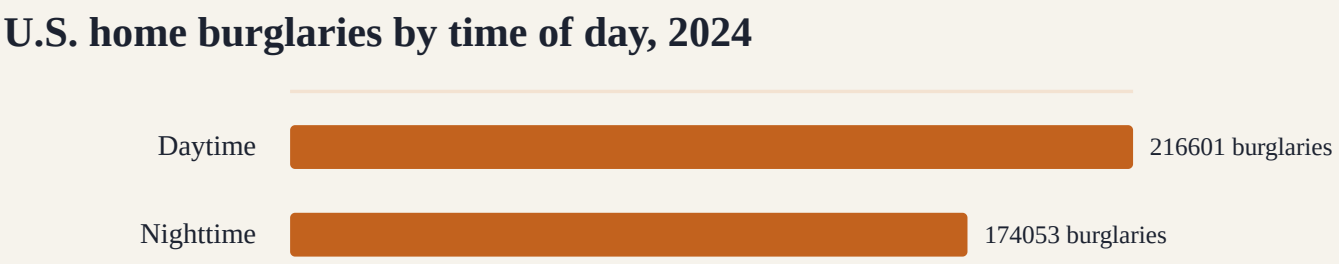
How most break-ins actually begin

Start with the scale of the problem, because it is smaller than the evening news suggests and closer to home than most people like.

The FBI counted 779,542 burglaries across the country in 2024. That was 8.6% fewer than in 2023. The rate, 229.2 per 100,000 people, is the lowest in FBI records going back to at least 1961[10]. That is the most recent full-year national count, and it is genuinely good news.

Good news nationally doesn't help much if your house is the one picked. Homes made up 405,776 of those burglaries, about 52% of the total (MoneyGeek). The detail that surprises most of the men I talk to is when they happened.

> **216,601** home burglaries in 2024 happened in daytime, compared with **174,053** at night (MoneyGeek).



U.S. home burglaries by time of day, 2024

Most of us picture the 2 a.m. intruder. The numbers point to a quieter scene: a weekday, a house that looks empty, a person testing whether anyone is home. That is why the knock matters. A knock with no answer gives him the green light he wanted. Chapter 2 looks at that daytime pattern in detail, along with the rarer and more frightening nighttime case.

Why the front door is still the favorite way in

I'll give you the honest version. My research doesn't include a clean national figure on which door burglars use most. I won't invent one. What I can show you is why the front door keeps turning up in the stories, and why it is so often the easiest door to beat.

The reason is a few small pieces of metal.

On most homes, the **strike plate** (the metal plate on the door frame where your bolt slides in) is held by short screws, roughly 1/2 to 3/4 inch long. Screws that short only reach the thin decorative trim. They never touch the solid framing stud behind it. A basic residential door can be kicked open with roughly 100 to 150 pounds of force (Security Man). The Seattle Police Department's door security guidance points to the same weak spot (Seattle Police Department).

Think about what that means. Your deadbolt can be excellent. The door can be solid wood or steel. Yet the whole system is anchored by screws shorter than your thumbnail is wide, driven into wood about as stout as a yardstick.

The fix is just as simple. Screws 3 inches long, driven through the strike plate into the framing stud, greatly increase how hard the door is to kick[9]. Chapter 7 walks you through that swap one screw at a time.

> **Case:** On the Bob Is The Oil Guy forum, a homeowner described a cheap way to make a front door "almost impossible to kick in." He swapped the short factory strike-plate screws for 3-inch screws that reach the framing, sometimes adding a reinforcing plate. On TractorByNet, a rural property owner told how someone broke into his shop through a residential-grade utility door. Afterward he installed a 12-inch strike plate.

That second story matters. Weak doors aren't only a city problem, and they aren't only the front door. Any door built with residential-grade hardware can carry the same flaw.

What retired officers noticed on almost every burglary call

Ask anyone who has stood in a living room after a forced entry, and they describe a familiar scene. I'll paint it as an illustration, built from the mechanism above and not from any one case.

The door is open. The deadbolt is often still extended, still "locked." What broke is the frame. A long strip of wood has split away from the jamb, with the strike plate still hanging off it. The tiny screws are bent or pulled clean out. The lock did its job. The wood around it didn't.

Once you understand that picture, you stop shopping for fancier locks and start looking at the frame. Chapter 5 takes this apart in detail. For now, hold on to one idea: **a kicked door usually fails at the frame, and the frame is held by the screws.**

The second thing worth noticing is what made burglars leave. In a KGW News survey of 86 Oregon prison inmates serving time for burglary, most said they would leave right away if an alarm went off (KREM / KGW). One put it bluntly:

> "I would try to turn it off or get the hell out of there." (Anonymous burglary inmate, KGW survey)

Many said cameras deterred them too, though some said a camera can also signal there's something worth stealing inside (KREM / KGW). The lesson is the one this whole book rests on. A burglar is running a clock. Anything that makes him slower, louder, or more visible pushes him toward the second answer: leave.

> You don't need to overpower the man at your door. You only need to make your door cost more seconds and more noise than he's willing to spend.

That is the Nine-Second Decision from the other side. He decides quickly whether to try. Then he decides quickly whether to keep trying. Your job is to make both answers come out "no."

A word of honesty about guarantees. On the Grassroots Motorsports forum, one member replaced his strike screws with 3.5-inch deck screws and felt it was enough to discourage a serious kick. Another member wrote that his door had been kicked in twice. No single upgrade is a force field. Layers are what work, and this book builds them in order.

The question this book answers by Sunday night

Here is the question I want you to be able to answer, out loud, by the end of your first weekend:

> If someone kicks my front door tonight, how long does it hold, and what happens in those seconds?

Right now, most homeowners can't answer it. By Sunday night, you'll have an answer you built yourself, with a screwdriver, a short shopping list, and no contractor, landlord, or monthly bill. Chapter 3 explains the rule behind every choice: cheap first, legal first, and never dependent on your strength. Chapter 25 lays out the weekend hour by hour.

My own wake-up call was small. When I first backed a screw out of our front strike plate, it came loose after a few lazy turns. It was barely three-quarters of an inch long. I stood there holding it and realized that tiny screw was all that stood between my wife and anyone with a bad idea and a good boot.

Do the same right now. It takes five minutes.

- ✓ Go to your front door in daylight, with someone home and the door closed.
- ✓ Use a hand screwdriver, not a power drill, so you can't strip the screw head or slip.
- ✓ Stand on the floor with steady footing. If kneeling is hard on your knees, use a sturdy chair rather than crouching.
- ✓ Remove **one** screw from the strike plate on the frame. Keep it in a cup so it doesn't roll away.
- ✓ Look at its length. If it's around 1/2 to 3/4 inch, it reaches only the trim.
- ✓ Put it back right away and snug it by hand. Don't leave the plate loose overnight.
- ✓ Don't kick or shoulder your own door to "test" it. You can hurt a hip or wrist, and Chapter 7 shows safer ways to check your work.



Write the screw's length on a scrap of paper and tape it inside a kitchen cabinet. That's the first line of your weak-point list, which you'll finish in Chapter 6.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- **Treat the doorstep as the battleground.** The decision to break in, or leave, happens fast, before anyone touches the lock.
- **Plan for daytime, not just 2 a.m.** Home burglaries in daylight outnumbered nighttime ones in 2024 (MoneyGeek).
- **Check the frame before buying a new lock.** Short strike-plate screws that reach only the trim are the usual weak point.
- **Use time and noise as your defense.** Most surveyed burglars said an alarm sends them running (KREM / KGW).
- **Measure one strike-plate screw today** and write the length down. That number starts your plan.

Still, a single screw tells you only where your door is weak. It doesn't tell you who is likely to test it, at what hour, or why a man in his late sixties might be chosen over the young family next door. Those are the questions Chapter 2 answers, and some of the answers aren't what you'd expect.