

## Home Security - reality or the perception of the improbable?

Dr. Saviour Formosa PhD

Malta Business Weekly

22<sup>nd</sup> April 2011

(Dr. Formosa is a spatial environmental criminologist and is a senior lecturer at the Institute of Criminology, University of Malta and Director of CrimeMalta)

Dealing with options for home security is no easy matter. It is actually the last thing that comes to mind when one acquires a property, following building and utilities permitting requirements, innovative designing and installation processes and the eventual moving in. It is only then that the idea of security really hits in; when the actual physical move occurs. A process, not without its psychological trumas (scientific studies show that one of the major causes of separation is triggered by the stress caused in moving house...). Once the move occurs, an awareness check settles in: that related to the proximity factor. Who are the neighbours, what types of movements occur in the locality, how many incidents are reported, and a myriad of other potential 'fear of crime' factors that seem to somehow take precedence.

### *Perception of the improbable*

Whilst one assumes that a ground-check would have occurred prior to the investment being ventured, it is really rare; a cursory check in the 'property for sale or to let' columns or the free mailshots have never to date given a single smidgeon of security factors for their wares. By the time the transaction is made, it is **too-late-time** and the feeling of having pulled the short straw seeps through. Such services have been around for over 3 years (<http://www.crimemalta.com/risc.htm>) and one wonders why the scientific methods are not employed when purchasing a property. The relative index of spatial crime (RISC) tool aids in understanding the risk to their property prior to purchasing. Why such occurs is ingrained in our sense of perceived security that the activity will never occur to me and that it is domain for the others.

### *Reality-Check*

Taking a global view of residential offences from 2004 to 2010 one immediately realizes that there is a case for more awareness and security implementation. Of 108,000 reported offences during these 7 years, 71,000 were theft-related with 10% of those directly related to residential units. 7,100 home-related incidents over 7 years or 20 per week seems minuscule but it is 20 too many. Which means there are 1000 families who are psychologically wrecked every year, who end up abhorring their own dwelling, with remote chances of moving to other areas. A deeper analysis shows that this process starts from the embryonic stage when the development strives through the earth, through the completion process through the actual residential cycle. And no part of the buildings are immune, with internal and external thefts being targeted, whether occupied or vacant. To make matters worse, the climax is achieved just prior to moving in when the goods have been transported and the resident yet to move in: talk about presenting everything on a golden plate! The goods,

sitting pretty in their packing, await the moment for predators to just pick them up and none is the wiser since the owners are as yet unknown...

This cycle is vicious since it is fed by the same occupants even when they move in; routinely leaving and entering one's dwelling unit presents a mental map for offenders to strike, advertising your whereabouts on social networks posits an add-on sticky note for the friendly goons biding their time. These realizations and a thousand other issues only slip in our awareness cycle once the proverbial horse has bolted. And only then does one think about the whole plethora of actions that might have been taken: expert advice from the seller/agent, fieldwork on the area, spending a few days in the locality prior to moving in, talking to neighbours, scientific outputs, technologies available.... the list is endless.

Being reactive is natural enough, but deadly in terms of security and safety where the home is the 2<sup>nd</sup> most important survival structure in Maslow's hierarchy of needs, following basic physiological needs that include food, air and water. Though primal, once satisfied, humans strive to feel safe and ironically a rat-race occurs on trying to acquire shelter but little thought is given to security. Maslow would spin in his grave if he had the time to review the Maltese home security-awareness situation. Fuelled by price rather than social cohesion, our communities have become one mix-and-match social engineering insufficiency that has led to a golden handshake for theft occurrences.

This calls for a proactive approach aimed at the reduction of thefts through the entire process, starting from social awareness to increase in cohesion through the implementation of community approaches such as neighbourhood watches to the installation of high-end security systems that are both non-invasive and serve their purpose, in reducing those 1000-a-year to nil.