

## **What are SATG?**

South American Theft Groups, or SATG for short, are organized crime syndicates whose members travel to the United States on tourist visas, purportedly for tourism but instead commit burglaries and other crimes while in the United States. Very often these individuals are able to obtain short term tourist visas as they come from countries that are part of the visa waiver program with the United States and are granted nearly automatic 90-day visas that allow them to visit the United States. As a result their crimes are sometimes referred to as “tourist burglaries.” Many of these SATG originate from countries such as Chile and Columbia. They tend to be highly organized and follow similar patterns and employ similar methods when committing residential burglaries. (“Burglaries” are often misidentified as a “robbery.” The main difference is a robbery is generally taking property from a person, often using violence or threats. A burglary involves entering a property with an intent to commit a crime.) SATG have operated in many US states, in addition to other foreign nations including Australia and the UK. Since 2016 they have been very active in southern California. While SATG have been very active in Southern California, there are also other home grown groups and individuals who commit burglaries and their methods could vary from SATG.

## **Modus Operandi of SATG**

SATG tend to be well organized when committing residential burglaries. They typically operate in groups of 3 to 4 individuals, including a driver who remains with a vehicle or serves as a lookout while the others commit the burglaries. They have been known to use mobile devices to communicate with each other. They will often spend time scouting out targets in advance, generally in affluent areas where there are homes that back up to open space or golf courses, or homes that can be easily accessed from public streets. They are not afraid of a little hard work, as they will often walk long distances or climb steep terrain in order to access properties from the rear where they are less likely to be observed. Many burglaries occur between the hours of 4pm and 8pm, when homeowners are out for dinner or other activities. There is even a seasonal component to their crimes, as more burglaries are committed from November to March when it gets dark earlier. Law enforcement believes it’s not unusual for the SATG to observe homes from a distance and wait until they see the residents leave the property before they enter the home and commit the burglary. It’s very unusual for SATG to commit burglaries when residents are home, and there are multiple examples of SATG members fleeing a property if a resident arrives home mid-burglary. Violence against a person is almost unheard of as part of these SATG burglaries, and law enforcement states when SATG members have been arrested they have not been carrying any sort of weapons.

SATG members are “professional” burglars, meaning they have refined their illegal craft to such an extent that law enforcement frequently sees very similar methods employed, and similar items taken from homes. As previously mentioned, SATG often commit burglaries during the evening hours when residents are not home. They often target homes that back up to open space that provide a means of accessing the property where they are less likely to be observed. The criminals are well versed in cameras and alarms, so they know that many houses will have robust alarm systems on the ground levels, but less comprehensive systems on the upper levels. As a result they will frequently enter homes via the upper level, using anything they can find to climb to the second level including ladders left outside, patio furniture, trellises, or any other item that can help them climb. When making entry to a home they often try to determine where the primary bedroom is located and will enter the home via a

door or window to the primary bedroom, bathroom, or closet. It's common for them to break a window and enter through the broken glass as opposed to opening the door or window, as they know that alarm systems on the second level are more likely to have contact sensors than motion or glass break sensors, so they are less likely to set off an alarm if they do not open the door or window. In addition these individuals anticipate that valuables and safes are more likely to be stored in a primary bedroom or bathroom than other rooms in the home.

SATG members will generally be in and out of homes quickly. They are specifically targeting smaller easy to carry items such as watches, jewelry, cash, and expensive purses and accessories. As professional burglars they've even educated themselves on the value of items and have been known to select the most expensive watches in a collection or the most expensive handbags in a closet and leave other similar but less valuable items. They have been known to carry small unsecured safes from homes, but that is less common. They have not been interested in heavier items like TVs, items that are easy to track like cell phones or computers, or firearms. Their primary interests appear to be in items that are small and easy to carry in a backpack, are valuable, difficult to trace, and can be easily sold and converted to cash or consolidated and shipped back to their home countries.

### **What Can You Do?**

Sadly residents need to recognize that these groups are here and operating in our communities, and are unlikely to go away. There are a number of things that homeowners can do to protect their homes and valuables. They include:

1. Lock all doors of your home and vehicles and secure your property. Don't leave valuables in your vehicles or in plain sight in your homes. If you do not have a well installed safe or vault that cannot be removed, consider hiding valuables in locations in your home other than the primary bedroom or bathroom. Even better, store your valuables and cash in banks or other offsite vaults that can offer better security.
2. Have up to date and comprehensive intrusion detection systems that include contact sensors on doors and windows, glass break sensors, vibration/impact sensors, and motion sensors. Make sure they are installed on all levels and areas of your home and turn them on at all times. Many burglarized homes had robust alarm systems, but they were not activated when the burglary occurred because a resident was just planning to be gone for a short period of time. Other attempted burglaries were thwarted when the criminals broke a window and a glass break or impact sensor triggered an audible alarm and the criminals fled without gaining access to the home. There are a wide range of systems that are excellent, including ones that are professionally installed as well as "do it yourself" kits. All systems should be monitored in real time by monitoring agents that can contact law enforcement on your behalf if a sensor is triggered. The most comprehensive systems will even allow operators to view your cameras and determine if an intrusion is occurring and provide that information in real time to law enforcement.
3. Make sure your high definition camera systems are operational. Advanced systems can send you or your alarm monitoring service alerts when there is motion or unusual activity, allowing you or monitoring agents to observe the cameras in real time and see if someone is attempting to enter your home. Law enforcements response to a confirmed crime in

progress will often be more immediate with more resources deployed than just a report of an alarm being activated for an unknown reason.

4. Use motion activated lighting on the exterior of your home. However, while motion activated lighting can be useful to draw attention to the area that is lit up, law enforcement states that these criminals are often not deterred just because a motion activated light is turned on. Install timers on interior lighting and consider leaving TVs or radios on when away to make your home appear occupied.
5. Install protective films on windows and doors that make it extremely difficult for glass to be shattered to the extent that a person can enter via the opening. Many of these products will not change the look or aesthetic of glass but will make it nearly unbreakable.
6. Dogs can often be an effective deterrent, especially larger dogs that bark or otherwise might appear aggressive.
7. Get to know and look out for your neighbors. While these burglaries can occur at any home, it's more common at homes that back up to open space or golf courses. Be especially observant in these areas and look for any suspicious or unusual activity. It's common for these SATG operators to be in groups of 3 and wear backpacks. If you observe a group of individuals in areas that should be closed at the times you see them immediately contact law enforcement (911). Do not attempt to approach or apprehend them yourself!

### **What Can Communities Do?**

When homes are burglarized in your community, many residents look to homeowners associations to take actions to protect residents. Ideas proffered often include adding vehicle, bike, drone, or foot patrol services, installing cameras or intrusion systems in common areas, adding monitoring services to observe common area cameras, adding or increasing lighting in common areas or open space, installing fencing on common areas, amongst many others. While many of these ideas could have merit, they need to be evaluated for:

1. Practicality: Can a community really install fences large enough to keep people from climbing over them?
2. Effectiveness: Will a patrol vehicle driving on streets deter someone from entering a home from the rear? Can enough monitored cameras be installed to provide sufficient coverage and still have an impact without breaking budgets?
3. Cost: Fences, lights, cameras, personnel, etc. all cost money so it has to be determined if they will offer sufficient return for the investment?
4. Legality: Can a HOA install fences, cameras, lights, etc on non-HOA owned property? Or, can a HOA implement patrol operations on non-HOA property?
5. Zoning Requirements: How bright can lights be, when can they be illuminated, and what areas can be be illuminated according to local ordinances?

In practice, most HOAs do not take responsibility for providing security or protection of individual resident's homes. That responsibility is typically the homeowners, so homeowners should consider some of the options previously listed to protect their homes and personal property.

## **Other Considerations**

There are things that individual homeowners and HOAs should definitely consider in an effort to combat the scourge of SATG burglaries. They include:

1. Helping local law enforcement. Residents have more eyes and ears on a community than law enforcement can ever hope to have. Residents can provide important information to the police that can aid them in their efforts to apprehend these criminals. From formal programs like neighborhood watch to residents just being extra vigilant and reporting any suspicious activity, homeowners can help in the effort to prevent burglaries.
2. Getting educated about SATG and what can be done. Local law enforcement agencies will host community meetings to educate the public about SATG and provide information that is useful to help prevent burglaries. They can provide recommendations on how to secure homes, what to do and not to do if you encounter suspicious activity, and how best to provide information to law enforcement agencies.
3. Contacting local, state, and federal agencies and politicians and consider asking them to do the following:
  - a. Invest more in policing and task forces. While there has been a popular misguided movement towards defunding the police, things like the SATG burglaries prove now more than ever we need to maintain funding for the police. Federal and state agencies can also support local law enforcement by funding special task forces to add resources, share information and help combat these types of crime.
  - b. Eliminating visa waiver programs with countries that are sending SATG and immediate deportation of SATG members. While we all want tourists to visit our amazing country, we don't want them to come here and victimize homeowners. Politicians should consider limiting or eliminating visa waiver programs with nations that are sending large numbers of these SATG to the US to ensure that all visitors from those countries are here for the right reasons, and the criminals remain in their home countries.
  - c. Proper charging of crimes and increased bail to keep suspects off the streets. Law enforcement works hard to catch all criminals, but too often after being arrested they are either not charged and released or charged and receive a nominal bail amount that allows them to be back on the streets.
  - d. More severe penalties when convictions are obtained including longer sentences and immediate deportation following release after time is served.
  - e. Electing politicians at all levels (local, state, federal) that acknowledge crime issues and have plans or support programs to protect community members and property.

## **Conclusion**

SATG have been operating in local communities for many years, and there is no reason to believe that they will stop any time soon. Pressure can be brought to bear on local police agencies, DAs, and other local state and federal politicians to enact programs and legislation to deter these SATG, but it's unlikely that they will completely stop them. Homeowners need to take precautions to ensure that they are not victimized by these groups. If all homeowners enacted the precautions listed above, it's likely that these SATG would stop targeting our communities and move to areas that presented easier targets.