

Anyone who has been caught in northbound traffic on a Friday afternoon can attest to the fact that Minnesotans love to hit the road in summer. Surely, enduring the arctic cold builds our determination to capture all the wonderful but fleeting hours we can around a campfire with friends and family. Burglars are also fans of summer vacations, hoping to find an easy score in an unoccupied home.

The vast majority of burglars take steps to ensure they will be alone in the home of their victim, employing varying degrees of effort and sophistication to determine if a home is empty. Most will watch a home from the road or knock on the door to test for an answer. Making your empty home appear occupied is a great strategy to avoid falling victim to a burglar.

Technological advancements have made creating the illusion of occupancy much easier today. Just a decade or so ago, the latest technologies available were simple timers that would turn lamps or appliances off and on at set intervals every day. Today's network connected devices offer almost limitless possibilities for making a home appear occupied. Home automation solutions, like Google Nest or Apple Homekit, can control lights, play music, play recordings, control televisions, or access a host of other connected devices. Using home automation solutions, users can create routines with varying events to fool even the most observant burglar. Commercially available systems, like HomeShadows or KEVIN, take this to the next level with the ability to create the illusion of occupancy by adding moving shadows in the home to the lights and sounds of connected devices. Using technology to create this illusion is a great step to convince a burglar yours is not the home to target.

If a high-tech solution isn't for you, there are plenty of low-tech options to make a home appear occupied. Leaving lights or a television on inside a common area of the home along with keeping an exterior light lit is a good start. Burglars don't like to be seen and any indication of someone home is better than nothing. Low-tech timers are still a cheap and effective tool to make it appear someone is home. Keeping shades or curtains shut makes it harder for burglars to be certain no one is home. Also, be mindful of things outside your home that might indicate no one has been around for a while. Is your garbage can the only one still sitting at the curb? Are there packages waiting on your doorstep? Is your lawn much longer than your neighbors? How full is your mailbox? Planning for friends or family to keep your home looking occupied from the street is a great low-tech way to ward off burglars.

Security systems offer another level of burglar deterrence. Security systems of today are much more accessible to the average person. Systems that do not require expensive monitoring contracts can be installed by almost anyone who can run a Wi-Fi router and a screwdriver. For some, systems that connect to a monitoring service will be the best solution. For many though, a system that connects to their smartphone is a great added layer of protection from burglars. The ability to know and report, in real time, when suspicious activity is occurring is a great tool to keep away criminals. Most security systems allow two-way communication remotely, permitting residents the ability to interact with someone at or near the residence to create the illusion that someone is inside the home or tell them law enforcement is on the way.

A discussion about burglary prevention wouldn't be complete without mention of an involved and connected neighborhood. Involved neighbors who look out for each other are the greatest asset any neighborhood can have. If you see something suspicious happening in your neighborhood, report it to your local law enforcement agency right away. You could be the reason we are able to stop a crime and catch a burglar.

Harry Houdini, David Blaine, and Penn and Teller gained fame creating next-level illusions for us to puzzle over. None of us need to make our homes disappear in a puff of smoke, but taking time to create the illusion that someone is home when we are away enjoying our vacation time is crime prevention magic. For more crime prevention information and safety information visit the Benton County Sheriff's Office website at: <https://www.co.benton.mn.us/211/Crime-Prevention>. You can also like and follow us on Facebook and Twitter at @BentonMNSheriff for regular updates and crime prevention messages.