

While Asian Immigrants Work, Burglars Target Their Homes

Some law enforcement officials say they think organized crime rings from South America, in particular from Colombia, are responsible for the crime sprees.



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Reporting from Eugene, Ore.

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One night in August, Chong Man Kim and his wife, Byung Sook, arrived home after a long day working at their grocery store to find that their house in Eugene, Ore., had been ransacked.

Nearly every drawer had been emptied. The pockets of many of their clothes had been turned inside out. A safe hidden deep upstairs had been pried open. Another safe had disappeared altogether.

Gone was their life savings. Their wedding rings. Family heirlooms. Even the Eisenhower dollars that Mr. Kim had collected over the years.

Only the pennies were left behind.

“Fifty years of saving money, 50 years of dreams,” Mr. Kim, 69, said in a recent interview. “I just wanted a better life for my kids, and now for what?”

The police told him that they believed the robbery was among the first in a wave of burglaries targeting Asian households in the area.



Chong Man Kim and his wife, Byung Sook, own an Asian grocery store in Corvallis, Ore., and live nearby in Eugene.

Around the country, burglary rings have been targeting Asian business owners — many of them immigrants — in what police say are highly organized and technically sophisticated operations. While most victims have not lost their life's

savings, the burglaries have resulted in the cumulative loss of millions of dollars and left these business owners and their families feeling vulnerable and afraid.

In just the past year, police have reported such rings in Florida, Wisconsin, Ohio, Colorado, Pennsylvania and Oregon. The police say that many suspects are from South America, and are, in particular, Colombian nationals who were on expired visas or were undocumented.

It is not known whether Asian business owners are more likely than other groups to keep large amounts of money at home. But the presumption that they do, the police say, has made them targets. There are other factors, too. Linguistic and cultural barriers can make Asian immigrants more hesitant to report crimes, the police say. Small business owners also tend to have more predictable routines and, like other groups, including professional athletes, who have also been victimized by burglary rings, are often away from their homes.

In some cases, there have been arrests and successful prosecutions at the state and federal levels. But the stolen cash and goods are rarely recovered, and many local law enforcement officials say their efforts have become akin to playing Whac-a-Mole. Even if they take down one crew, another pops up.

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The mystery is whether these rings in different states are connected. Some law enforcement officers think they are loosely linked. A few think there are more powerful forces pulling the strings behind the scenes.

“I honestly believe there’s a chance that this is a separate business model for a cartel type of organization,” Chris Skinner, the Eugene police chief, said at a recent forum at a local Korean church to address the continuing burglaries in the area.

The Kim family’s home, after the burglary. Chong Man Kim

Those who see a larger criminal enterprise behind the burglaries say that they need federal law enforcement agencies to address the root cause of the problem.

Some local police departments said they have gotten help from the F.B.I.

But a convergence of issues has made cooperation complex.

Tackling the burglaries was already difficult because overstretched police departments have not always been able to prioritize nonviolent crimes, and because, in some places, bail laws intended to make the system more equitable have allowed suspects to flee.

It's become even more challenging in the last year as the Trump administration has stepped up efforts to deport undocumented people. Some local law enforcement officials say they have had to tread more carefully when it comes to cooperating with federal agencies because of concerns that information they share as part of a criminal investigation could be used in a way that would put them in violation of local sanctuary laws, leaving them vulnerable to a civil lawsuit.

"Everybody's a little bit skittish in being able to do the job as we would ordinarily have done it 10 years ago," Christopher Parosa, the district attorney for Lane County, said.

The F.B.I. did not respond to a request for comment.

Finding Targets at H Mart

The burglars often use similar techniques, according to interviews with police and police reports from around the country.

The thieves arrive in a town and check into a short-term rental. They enter during the day, when they know the owners are working, often by smashing a back door. They might strike several homes in one area over a few weeks before moving on to a new town or state.

Some have used public databases to find the home addresses of Asian business owners. Others have reportedly identified their targets at Asian grocery stores like H Mart.

They use hidden cameras to learn their routines and illegal signal jammers that can render wireless-based alarm systems useless. They spend days, even weeks, observing their targets' homes, often dressing up as landscapers or delivery workers to blend in.

Last month, police officers in Central Florida arrested a group that they said spent weeks conducting surveillance on homes and businesses by walking around, dribbling a basketball and setting up trail cameras in the trees.

In Eugene, a crunchy university town of 177,000, the Asian population is not large, around 4 percent of the population.

And yet, since early 2024, there have been three known waves of robberies targeting Asian residents. Police in Eugene said the value of stolen cash and goods from 22 robberies was around \$1.7 million.

Chong Man Kim and Byung Sook having dinner with their daughters at their home.

The exact scale of the issue nationwide is difficult to assess. A new report from The Asian American Foundation found that in 485 robberies affecting Asians from 2018 to 2024, a majority took place in the victims' homes. And, the report said, "ethnic targeting is widespread and intentional."

Police in Eugene have arrested 13 people in the last two years in connection with targeted burglaries of Asian households. But the state's recently reformed bail law, enacted after the murder of George Floyd, allowed some of the burglary suspects to post bail last summer. They later fled without appearing in court.

Last month, police in Eugene detained a separate group of seven men — all believed to be Colombian nationals, according to federal court documents — in connection with a different set of burglaries targeting Asian families. In addition

to bags of stolen cash and jewelry, the police found evidence of money transfers and shipping receipts to Colombia, according to federal court documents.

The men quickly posted bail. But three of them were then detained by ICE, according to federal court documents.

For several weeks, the group seemed destined for deportation, a move criticized by some community advocates and victims for neglecting the due process rights of the accused, and for denying accountability and restitution for the victims.

Mr. Parosa, the Lane County district attorney, said that conversations with the federal government had initially been impeded because of his concern that information shared could be used to aid immigration enforcement, which would be a violation of his office's obligations under Oregon's sanctuary law. Sanctuary laws, supporters say, are necessary to protect undocumented immigrants from deportation risk when using public services.

Christopher Parosa, the Lane County district attorney, spoke during a panel at the Asian American and Allies Public Safety Forum last month in Eugene, Ore.

But after more discussions with federal officials, Mr. Parosa said that it became clear that their interests were aligned.

From there, Mr. Parosa said, local law enforcement officials worked with the local U.S. attorney's office and the F.B.I. to bring federal criminal charges against the seven men for conspiracy to transmit stolen property. That ultimately persuaded ICE to yield jurisdiction and send the men back to be prosecuted, he said.

Mr. Parosa said he hoped that the case could serve as a springboard to open a federal investigation into a larger organization, if there is one. He said his office would seek to prosecute the men in state court as well.

Attempts to reach the men through their court-appointed attorneys were unsuccessful. According to federal court documents, one of the men told the Eugene police that he was a surveillance camera repairman and that he had no knowledge of illegal activity.

Lost Their Savings, Lost Their Trust

Less than two weeks after the recent arrests, there was another targeted burglary in Eugene, deepening the feeling among many Asian business owners that they have to fend for themselves.

Some business owners are using safe deposit boxes and installing wired alarm systems. One owner of a South Asian grocery store said she had been sleeping with a baseball bat ever since her home in Eugene was burglarized last fall.

A South Asian grocery store owner said she had been sleeping with a baseball bat ever since her home in Eugene was burglarized last fall.

Others are taking more extreme measures. Bruce Chen, the co-owner of a Chinese restaurant in Eugene, said that after a 2022 burglary, he bought several guns. “You have to confront violence with violence,” he said. “That’s how they respect you.”

As for Mr. Kim, the grocery store owner who lost his life savings, his case remains unresolved. The police told his family that they have no evidence so far tying the recent arrests to his case. In the three months since the burglary, he said he had been cycling between different emotions.

Anger at the burglars for preying on hardworking first-generation immigrants. Depression because his retirement now feels hopelessly out of reach. Shame for thinking that his home was safe.

The experience has shattered Mr. Kim’s image of America. When he arrived in Eugene more than 45 years ago, he was struck by the city’s natural beauty and just as important, his sense of security and safety.

“Now not anymore,” he said. “We can’t trust anyone.”

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