

One burglary in 10 is solved, reveals auditor

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MORE than 90 per cent of all household burglaries in NSW are left unsolved, making it the second worst-performing state in Australia, according to a report by the state's Auditor-General.

Three out of five of NSW household burglaries occur in Sydney, but, by head of population, residents of Bourke, Moree Plains, Wentworth, Narrandera and Armidale are at greatest risk.

Police forensic officers were not always on hand to take fingerprint evidence in time, the report said. And police decide whether to attend a burglary crime scene based on what the victim tells them. The Opposition said this situation was "not acceptable".

Since 2001 there has been a 30 per cent drop in household burglaries, largely owing to a rise in the rate and length of imprisonment, the heroin drought in 2001 and low levels of unemployment, the report found. The chance of being burgled was higher in disadvantaged communities and for those who have been burgled previously.

The police have also failed to meet targets. Last year each police command set out to cut break and enters by 8000. They ended up falling by 2500.

The Auditor-General found that although forensic evidence was crucial to solving burglaries, there was no guarantee that a forensic officer would be available to collect it. Even if one did attend, there was no guarantee he or she would arrive before the evidence had been corrupted.

Forensic specialists went to three out of five household burglary crime scenes, but the authors noted "we cannot judge if forensic officers attended all crime scenes they needed to", because there was no data on which scenes had been assessed as having collectable evidence.

The Auditor-General also found a mismatch between the pattern of household burglaries and the way the crime was tackled. Although the risk of being a victim of a burglary is greater in disadvantaged communities, the police response to the crime is determined by local protocols and resources, not the victim's location.

The fact that police do not record specific data on household burglaries separately from commercial break and enters was also criticised.

The report made seven recommendations, including the suggestion that all crime scenes with collectable evidence should be attended and response times for collecting forensic evidence should be reviewed.

The Deputy Police Commissioner, Andrew Scipione, acknowledged that "more work could be done", but denied that household burglary was not a policing priority. "You don't get a 30 per cent reduction in five years unless it is a priority," he said. "Household burglaries are an unusual crime, they're not always easy to solve, unlike an assault where you have always got a witness."

For that reason, the collection of forensic evidence at the scene was important, he said.

Research showed that on average, offenders in custody for this type of crime had committed up to 38 household robberies before.

The Opposition's police spokesman, Mike Gallacher, said clear-up rates were not being met and police needed more resources to tackle the crime. It was "alarming" that an Australian Bureau of Statistics report had revealed that almost 30 per cent of break and enters were not reported.