



Invitation to break in: criminologist Patrick McClanahan incites prison inmates to rob virtual homes. This street was created using modern virtual reality technology.

80 Max Planck researchers cooperate with partners in more than 120 countries. Here they write about their personal experiences and impressions. Patrick McClanahan from the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Crime, Security and Law in Freiburg travelled to Pennsylvania for seven months. He met convicted burglars in four different prisons and encouraged them to rob houses in the service of science.

I guess I was a serial junkie as a kid. I loved the crime series of the early 2000s! We had a family dog back then called Jethro, named after the main character of NCIS. Unfortunately, my television viewing at such a young age caused me to develop a phobia. I could no longer fall asleep for fear of

being killed. With the help of a therapist, I got my fears under control. What remained was the desire to understand criminals and their motives. That is why I decided to study psychology and criminal justice and become a criminologist.

As a postdoc, I am currently working on the “Virtual Burglary Project.” In addition to our Freiburg Institute, the University of Portsmouth, Leiden University, and the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam are also involved in the project. The goal of the large-scale research program is to record the different methods used by burglars, with the hope of developing better prevention measures and averting crime. My study participants are incarcerated burglars in four different prisons in Pennsylvania.

For my study, I spent seven to nine hours a day in prison. Of that, two hours alone were spent on activities related

to security or administration. Before I arrived, I was told to send the prison management a list of everything I needed and wanted to bring into the prison for my work. I had to stick to it meticulously. At the entrance to the prison, you pass through a security checkpoint, similar to the ones used in airports. I was searched and all the items I was carrying were checked individually. I was not allowed to move around freely inside the building and was accompanied by security personnel at all times.

Prior to my first visit, the prison management sent me a list with the names of all prisoners who were eligible to participate in the study. I spoke to most of them individually and introduced them to the project. In a conversation like this, the first 30 seconds are crucial for building trust and winning someone over for the study. At the beginning, I asked them how their day was going. Even this simple ques-

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tion frequently turned out to be a door opener, because hardly anyone else is interested. Many were persuaded that by participating they would be making an important contribution to turning the world into a safer place, something that their families would benefit from. Another decisive factor is certainly that I am an independent scientist and have never worked for the police or the judiciary. About 40 percent of the inmates I spoke with were willing to take part. A total of 160 people from Pennsylvania participated.

The study participants had the task of committing a burglary – purely virtually, of course. Virtual reality goggles made it possible to scout out an imaginary neighborhood and evaluate specific houses, just as in reality. The virtual reality system records all actions in real time. This enables me to follow how the burglars select their target and see what is important to them. By

changing street lighting, alarm systems or the position of parked cars, for example, I can test what influence these factors have on their decisions and their subsequent actions. It was important for me that both amateur and “professional” burglars participated because both work very differently.

Only a few scientists who conduct research in the field of criminology go into prisons and work with offenders. However, it is essential for my research and very important to me personally. I have yet to have any bad experiences. What is difficult for me is dealing with the at times shocking personal stories that prisoners tell me and to which I must not react in my role as a scientist. After my time at the Max Planck Institute, I would like to apply for a professorship in the USA. In any case, I want to include prison inmates in my research in the future.

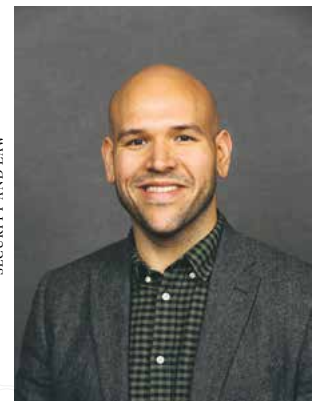


PHOTO: MPI FOR THE STUDY OF CRIME,  
SECURITY AND LAW

Patrick McClanahan,

30, is an American scientist who studied psychology and criminal justice at Roanoke College in Virginia. After completing his doctorate at the University of Cambridge, he took up a postdoctoral position at the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Crime, Security and Law in Freiburg in 2021. As part of the “Virtual Burglary” project led by Institute Director Jean-Louis van Gelder, he uses virtual reality technology to study the behavior of criminals.