

# Los Angeles Times

## Safety Trap?

*Only quick-release window bars are allowed in California, but retrofitting rules vary*  
KATHY SENA | SPECIAL TO THE TIMES

The stories are tragic: Security bars welded shut on a San Bernardino home's windows trapped six people, including three children, who died in an early-morning blaze last summer. Two disabled veterans, their live-in caretaker and her boyfriend died behind window bars as a fire raged through the Carson home they shared in the fall. In both instances, fire department investigators cited security bars as the reason the victims were unable to escape the flames.

Although building code allows California residences to have only security bars equipped with a release mechanism that can be opened from inside the house, many homes still have outdated, welded-on bars. And homes can change hands in many communities without retrofitting. Sellers are required only to disclose the presence of welded-on bars.

Without an interior lever, button, pedal or other mechanism for quick release, the very bars that thwart potential burglars can keep firefighters from reaching occupants in time during a fire.

"The ability to open the bars is critical," said Battalion Chief Ralph Terrazas of the Los Angeles Fire Department. "It takes us an average of five minutes to arrive on scene. That's an eternity for someone who is trapped in a house with fire lapping behind them."

Los Angeles Fire Department trucks carry rotary saws for cutting through bars, but the delay of several minutes as firefighters pry off or cut through bars can be the difference between life and death.

"It's just one more job for firefighters to do when seconds count, the house is on fire and full of smoke and you're searching for victims," said Capt. Mark Savage, spokesman for the Los Angeles County Fire Department.

Within the city of Los Angeles, the standard is the minimum requirement set by California Uniform Building Code. "Security bars are allowed on windows if they have a release mechanism that is able to be opened without a key, special

knowledge or special effort," said Bob Steinbach, assistant bureau chief of the Los Angeles Department of Building and Safety. Homes with security bars must also include smoke detectors.

"Individual cities are authorized to be more strict, but not less strict" with their local ordinances, Steinbach said. Because Los Angeles County has 88 cities, homeowners should contact their city's building and safety department for specific guidelines.

When installed correctly -- and safely -- security bars serve a useful purpose. "They're a great deterrent," said David Gregor, a field training officer for the Hawthorne Police Department. For bars to be most effective, he added, it's important to position the release mechanism far enough from the window so that a would-be intruder can't break the glass, reach through the bars and release the mechanism.

After purchasing her Los Angeles home five years ago, Joyce Birdsong chose to keep the existing security bars, which include a release mechanism on the bedroom window. "They make me feel comfortable," Birdsong said. "I've always wanted a house with bars as opposed to other types of security systems, where you have to program in numbers. That seems like such an inconvenience."

Given that break-ins often occur on hot summer nights when residents leave first-floor windows open, Birdsong feels better about opening a window or door for fresh air knowing she has security bars on both. "We have a great neighborhood watch group here," Birdsong said. "We all look out for one another. With the bars, by the time an intruder would be able to get in, the police would likely be here."

Potential home buyers should always know what they're getting regarding home security, said Tom Pool, spokesman for the California Department of Real Estate. "A real estate agent must disclose all material facts he or she is aware of about a property, and security bars might be among them."

California law requires that the seller, in the transfer disclosure statement, indicate the existence of security bars and whether they include a quick-release mechanism.

"But the seller is not required to take off the bars unless that is negotiated between the parties," said June Barlow, vice president and general counsel for the California Assn. of Realtors.

The seller also is not responsible for retrofitting the bars with a release mechanism, she said. However, some cities or counties may have individual ordinances regarding removing or retrofitting security bars as part of the sale of a home, she added.

A professional home inspection is the best way to identify potential problems in a home before purchase, according to Jerry McCarthy, spokesman for the California Real Estate Inspection Assn.

Although licensed inspectors don't perform code inspections, he said, "a home inspector will explain the current operating condition of a home, including safety conditions."

Renters of dwellings with welded-on security bars should contact the landlord and ask him or her to replace the bars with approved quick-release bars, said California State Fire Marshal John Tennant. If there is no response, put the request in writing and mail it to the landlord. If there is still no response, take a copy of the letter, along with the landlord's address, to your city's building officials and ask for their help in enforcing the law.

Sometimes, however, tenants can thwart a landlord's best intentions when it comes to keeping a property fire-safe. Psychotherapist Tina Tessina and her husband, choreographer Richard Sharrard, own rental properties in Long Beach.

"One had break-away bars on the bedroom windows," Tessina said. "But we had to fix or replace them several times because the tenants were a lot more afraid of burglars than of fire, and they kept altering them."

It's a story McCarthy has heard repeatedly. "It seems people have more fear of being robbed than of burning to death in their homes," he said. Even after being advised of the risks, many homeowners elect not to remove welded-on security bars or install bars with release mechanisms.

"People put up these security bars to protect themselves, but the bars are their worst possible enemy," Tennant said. "It's a two-way tragedy."

### **For more information on fire safety**

- **California State Fire Marshal**, [osfm.fire.ca.gov](http://osfm.fire.ca.gov). This office provides public education about security bars through its website and during fire safety talks. To download a homeowner's fire safety checklist, visit [www.fire.ca.gov/php/education\\_checklist.php](http://www.fire.ca.gov/php/education_checklist.php).
- **National Fire Protection Assn.**, [www.nfpa.org](http://www.nfpa.org). For a fact sheet on security bars, visit [www.nfpa.org/Research/NFPAFactSheets/SecurityBars/SecurityBars.asp](http://www.nfpa.org/Research/NFPAFactSheets/SecurityBars/SecurityBars.asp).
- Click on "Public Education" from the home page for links to fire prevention tips and educational materials.

- **Los Angeles County Fire Department**, [www.lacofd.org](http://www.lacofd.org). Visit [www.lacofd.org/firepreventiontips.htm](http://www.lacofd.org/firepreventiontips.htm) for a safety checklist and tips on fire escape, fire prevention, home hazards and smoke alarms.
- **Los Angeles Fire Department**, [www.lafd.org](http://www.lafd.org). Click on "LAFD Neighborhood Preparedness" on the home page for fire safety tips.
- **U.S. Fire Administration**, [www.usfa.fema.gov](http://www.usfa.fema.gov). The agency's site provides links to many fire and home safety pages. Visit [www.usfa.fema.gov/public/factsheet/wintertips.shtm](http://www.usfa.fema.gov/public/factsheet/wintertips.shtm) for tips.

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