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How to pick locks and escape handcuffs

Lock-picking champion Schuyler Towne gave crash courses in how to pick a lock and break out of handcuffs. Find out Towne's tips on which locks to look for and which to avoid for your own locker, apartment or home. Plus, the truth about deadbolts.

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by Jennifer Kavur

Schuyler Towne is sort of like MacGyver with a mohawk.

At the [SecTor security conference](#) in Toronto this week, the American lockpicking champion and editor of Non-Destructive Entry (NDE) Magazine gave attendees free crash courses in how to pick a lock, bump a lock, make a key impression and escape from handcuffs.



"Lock picking forensics was a completely dead art [in America in particular] until one of our people came forward and created [Lockpickingforensics.com](#) and reproduced some incredible work," said Towne, who was presenting at the TOOOL LockPick Village.

The Open Organization of Lockpickers (TOOOL) is one of several lock picking organizations in North America that include Locksport International and the Fraternal Order of Locksport.

"The one uniting factor of all the groups is there is an extraordinary ethic preached across all of them," said Towne.

The two basic tenets, explained Towne, are "never pick a lock you don't own" and "never pick a lock that's in regular use" because it can break. When Towne first learned how to pick a lock, he immediately tested his new skill on the front door to his apartment. "[I] broke it and had to sleep in the hallway," he said.

TOOOL has local chapters across the U.S. that hold meetings for members to get together and practice lockpicking as a sport. The organization also acts as a security advocate and works on research and disclosure with lock companies.

"We are evangelistic about the ethic of the sport and we are actively improving the security of things around you," said Towne.

Responsible disclosure is currently one of the biggest issues in the industry, according to Towne. "Trying to get a manufacturer to update their product in a safe way without alerting everyone to it before they have the time to is the biggest struggle we are all having internally," he said.

Bumping is a very simple and very powerful attack, said Towne, and the biggest problem with locks right now. If someone really wants to break into your house, they will get into your house regardless, but bumping is so simple and easy to make in your home that it "invites crimes of opportunity and crimes of curiosity," he said.

The technique "uses a simple transfer of energy from the back of a screwdriver into the head of a filed down key. That energy transfers into your lock and throws everything into chaos and when that happens, you can turn it without needing a proper key, without even needing lock picks, without anything," he explained.

But there are "affordable, bump-proof locks out there," said Towne, who provided some tips on what locks to look for and which ones to avoid.

Towne suggested the Weiser SmartKey lock as an affordable, bump-proof solution. "It's cheaper than the lock on the shelf next to it, but it's completely immune to this attack," he said.

"If somebody is going to come in and break your windows, they are going to get in. But if someone is just curious about a very popular fad attack that never should have existed in the first place, it's time to move to a different

system of lock and the SmartKey is physically impossible to bump," he said.

But avoid Weiser's biometric lock, Towne suggested. Schlage door locks also got a thumbs-down from Towne, who said they are affordable but very easy to open and easily prone to bumping attacks.

Whether you choose a combination or key-based lock to secure a locker doesn't make a significant difference, according to Towne. "If someone wants to get in, they are more likely to cut it," he said.

One lock to absolutely avoid is the sesame-style *carabiner* lock from Master Lock, which are often sold in gyms, he said. They can be visually decoded by looking carefully at a gap in the disks, he explained.

"They are really popular in lockers and you can go up to it and look like you just don't know you own combination very well and open it in less than a minute," he said.

Master locks in general are "pretty miserable" locks, said Towne, but there are really good options in the same price. Padlocks from the American Lock Company, according to Towne, are great.

The American brand of padlock uses a nice housing for its pins and uses security pins, which "is a cheap way to dramatically improve the security of your lock," said Towne. Any lock that says it has a sidebar will also usually be "a dramatic step up" in security, he said.

It's a mistake to assume that deadbolts are significantly more secure than standard key-and-knob locks, according to Towne. "There is a really strong, sometimes even emotionally connected prejudice that deadbolts are a dramatic step up from the key-and-knob ... but it is not at all the truth," he said.

"The only difference in a deadbolt and a key-and-knob cylinder where the lock is actually in the handle set is the mechanism that holds it closed, not actually the mechanism that locks or unlocks it. It is the same exact lock," said Towne.

Deadbolts do prevent carding attacks, which use a credit card to slip a door open, "but you can't do that to most good key-and-knob locks either," he said.

Towne, who has won the American speed picking championship and American open, currently holds the second place title for speed picking in the U.S.

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