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# PROPERTY CRIME

Crimes against property have been a central concern in many societies and cultures throughout history. In the United States, the term *property crime* typically refers to the criminal offenses of burglary, larceny, fraud, embezzlement, forgery, motor vehicle theft, and arson (Inciardi 1998). Other less known property crimes include pick pocketing, counterfeiting, and shoplifting (a type of larceny). Since the range of activities included in the property crime definition is vast, the term should be viewed as a representation of offenses that describe material-based criminality in society. In other words, the focus is on crimes against property, not persons.

## DEFINITIONS AND HISTORY

Legal definitions of property crime and the government agencies that collect and publish data on it tend to focus mainly on burglary, larceny, motor vehicle theft and arson. The two leading data collection agencies in the United States are the Uniform Crime Reports (UCR) of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS) of the Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS). The information the agencies collect on a yearly basis guides criminal justice policy and acts as an important knowledge source for citizens about crime in their communities.

The FBI makes a distinction between the levels of crimes against property. The bureau defines index-one property crime as burglary, larceny-theft, motor vehicle theft, and arson. Index-two offenses include bribery, counterfeiting and forgery, vandalism, embezzlement, extortion, and fraud. While the FBI defines property crime in this way, the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS) does not include arson in its definition.

## PREVALENCE AND NATURE OF PROPERTY CRIME

The UCR and the NCVS show property crime offending has fallen dramatically during the latter part of the twentieth century. According to victimization data, the downward spiral started as early as 1974. For example, the 1999 burglary victimization rate is about a third of what it was in 1973. Motor vehicle theft victimization has also declined, albeit more slowly, since 1974. It peaked in 1991 then leveled off only to decrease since 1995. Larceny victimization remained stable between 1974 and 1977 but has since declined steadily (Rennison 2000; BJS 2001). In 1999, the adjusted theft victimization rate was 61 percent lower than in 1974. Property crime victimization comprised 34 percent of all crimes reported to the police in 1998 but only 26 percent in 1999. Between 1998 and 1999, overall property crime victimization rates fell 9 percent,

from 217 to 198 per 1,000 households. Motor vehicle theft victimization accounted for most of the reported crime, followed by burglary and theft. The 1998-1999 decline is largely due to drops in burglary and theft (BJS 2001).

Arrest data from the FBI (2001) show similar trends in property crime for the time period between 1980 and 1999. They also exhibit some important variations within the twenty-year period that run counter to the victimization data. For instance, the rate of property crime arrests in the United States has decreased about 27 percent between 1980 (5,353 per 100,000) and 1999 (3,742 per 100,000). However, there was a four year increase between 1988 and 1991. The same pattern holds for both larceny and motor vehicle theft decline over the twenty-year time span, with about a six-year increase between 1985 and 1991. Arrests for, larceny theft have dropped 20 percent between 1980 (3,167 per 100,000) and 1999 (2,551 per 100,000), but between 1985 and 1991, there was an upward trend in the offense until it began to drop again in 1992. Arrests for motor vehicle theft shows the exact same pattern. Between 1980 and 1999, arrests for motor vehicle theft dropped 36 percent from 502 arrests per 100,000 to 421 per 100,000. This downward trend was interrupted by a six-year increase between 1985 and 1991. Unlike the others, burglary arrests have declined steadily since 1980. For example, the FBI reported a 38 percent drop between 1980 (1,684 per 100,000) and 1999 (771 per 100,000).

The differences between arrest and victimization data on property crime warrant some interpretation that is useful for students of crime and justice. Criminologists warn that data collected on crime can capture only a portion of the crime that truly exists. The disparity between arrest and victimization statistics should not necessarily be interpreted as a direct fluctuation in the amount of crime that actually occurs in society. Changing police enforcement policies or individual-level biases in self-reporting might also affect arrest and victimization rates.

### *Victims*,

The decrease in property crime victimization has not affected all citizens equally. Some groups continue to be at higher risk than others. For instance, property crime victimization rates have fallen most dramatically for whites. Blacks still experience a higher level of property crime victimization than other racial and ethnic groups. There was no change in the property crime victimization rate in black households between 1998 and 1999 (248 and 249 per 1,000 respectively); however was a significant drop for whites, from 212.6 per 1,000 households in 1998 to 190 in 1999 (Rennison 2000; BJS 2001).

Extremely poor households (those earning under \$7,500 per year) and those among the highest categories (\$75,000 per year or more) reported the highest property crime victimization rates (220 per 1,000) in 1999. People in the West reported the higher victimization rates in both 1998 and 1999 than those living in the North, South, or East. Those residing living in urban areas reported higher victimization rates than those in the suburbs or in rural areas, and those who rent a place to live reported much higher property crime victimization rates than did homeowners.

### *Offenders*

Arrest rates for property crime are also not equally distributed across groups. In general and with minor exceptions, adult males who live in the city report higher property crime arrest rates than any other group. One interesting anomaly is the adult versus adolescent trend between 1990 and 1999. While adults were arrested much more often than adolescents for burglary and larceny-theft, adolescents were arrested more often for motor vehicle theft and arson. In fact, the property crime rate decreased **less** for adolescents between 1990 and 1999 (23 percent) than for adults (31 percent), largely because of an increase in arson arrests of juveniles (FBI 2001).

It is also true that male arrests of all ages generally outpace those of females. In 1999, 630,540 males were arrested for a property crime while only 268,401 females were. There are at least three important qualifications to make about this pattern of male dominance in property crime arrests. First, the male-female gap in arrests is closer for index-one property crimes than for any other type of crime index-one crime and most index-two crimes, even drug abuse violations. Second, the rate of decrease in index-one property crime arrests between 1990 and 1999 is lower for females (13 percent) than males (30 percent), signifying either a change in increased offending patterns for females or, more likely, changes in law enforcement policies. Third, arrest rates for index-two property crimes, (such as fraud, forgery, and embezzlement) show women gaining ground on men between 1990 and 1999, reaching parity for embezzlement (FBI 2001).

In a fashion similar to the victimization data described above, arrest rates for property crime are higher in the city (842,045 in 1999) than in the suburbs (298,822 in 1999) or rural areas (48,266 in 1999). The overall rate of decline in arrests was similar

for each of the three different locales: 9 percent for the city, 9 percent for the suburbs, and 8 percent for rural counties. There were no notable exceptions to this pattern when breaking property crime arrests into the four index-one categories (FBI 2001).

## **EXPLANATIONS AND CRIME CONTROL POLICIES.**

Explanations and theories regarding how property crime fluctuates in a given society or why individuals commit specific ones have changed significantly over time. Early discussions of all crime argued the causes were located in the physiology or psychopathology of individuals. By the 1950s, however, major events such as the Great Depression helped shift attention to social factors as the profile of the property offender changed. Although numerous biologically based theories are prominent today, the property crime debate has continued to center on social factors. Two of the leading sociological explanations for property crime in society today are poverty and inequality and drug use and abuse.

### *Poverty and Inequality*

The leading theories of crime (differential association, social conflict, social disorganization, and strain) have attempted to understand property crime by focusing on the prevalence and nature of poverty and inequality among individuals in a given social context. These often-competing paradigms share an underlying premise: The poor possess and have access to fewer goods and services in society than those better off financially. Since crimes against property are often a needs-based response to economic deprivation or a protest against it. (vandalism, for example), fluctuations in poverty, unemployment, and inequality affect property crime. Research by Lester (1995) and Neustrom and Notion (1995) found a positive relationship between property crime and unemployment. Hannon and DeFronzo (1998) added evidence of a linkage between welfare and property crime. Monetary assistance and welfare participation rates, they found, are negatively associated with all property crimes.

Research emanating from these numerous theories has not, however, found unequivocal support for the relationship between crime and poverty or inequality. Studies in the late twentieth century have concluded that the poverty-property crime relationship does not hold the same across all social conditions.

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For instance, at the macro level, Bennett and Basiotas (1991) concluded the relationship between status inequality and property crime **varied** by the level of democracy and inequality in a country. Neapolitan (1994) discovered a similar relationship by type of geographic *area*. The poverty-property crime relationship was, he found, strongest in urban areas with high population concentration, moderate in smaller or less crowded locations (such as suburbs), and had little to no effect in rural or small towns.

*See also* ARMED ROBBERY; *ART THEFT* AND FRAUD; ARSON; BURGLARY, CAR JACKING [??DIANA: CARJACKING?]; CYBERCRIME; DIGITAL CRIME. DRUG TRAFFICKING; FENCING FRAUD; GRAFFITI; IDENTITY THEFT, ILLICIT *ANTIQUITIES*; MONEY LAUNDERING; RECREATIONAL LAW ENFORCEMENT., POVERTY; SECURITIES FRAUD; SECURITY MANAGEMENT; SHOPLIFTING, SMUGGLING; SOCIAL CLASS; THEFT

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### *Drug Use and Drug Abuse Policies*

Another modern explanation for property crime is its close association with drug use and abuse. The rationale is that drug users commit property crimes in order to finance the purchase of drugs. The relationship between drug use and property can be easily illustrated by reviewing the profile on today's correctional-population. Data from the Arrestee Drug Abuse Monitoring program (ADAM 1998) show that a significant portion of property crime arrestees test positive for an illicit drug. "Boosting," a street term used for shoplifting, is one of the most common ways that male and female drug abusers support their habits (Rosenbaum and Murphy 1990; Ettore 1992; ADAM 1998). Careers in shoplifting often begin in early adulthood, around the time drug abuse sets in, and continue throughout the drug career, which typically varies by type of drug. Items stolen include everything from clothes and shoes to hair dryers and VCRs. Goods stolen are sold in the underground economy for a fraction of their retail value and monies obtained are typically spent on drugs such as heroin and crack cocaine.

### **SUMMARY**

The paragraphs above have reviewed what is officially meant by the term property crime, how prevalent it is in the United States patterns common among both victims and offenders and a few reasons for its occurrence. While property crime may not be one of the most glamorous or urgent crimes, its persistence over time suggests that it is a fundamental part of U.S. history.

-Tammy L. Anderson

