



HIGHLIGHTS

- Theft rates in the District of Columbia were higher than national rates for most of the last 50 years.
- Theft rates in the DC dropped sharply beginning in the mid-1990s but increased in the mid-2000s.
- Theft hot spots were clustered in the center of the city, near popular retail and business districts.
- Thefts dropped significantly in the Dupont Circle and Downtown neighborhoods between 2000 and 2009.

Brief

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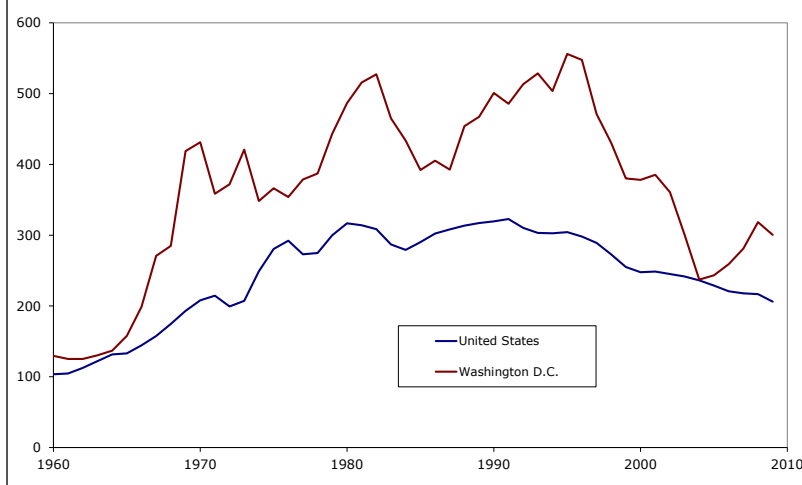
Theft in the District of Columbia Patterns and Trends, 2000-2009

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This brief is the eighth in a series describing the changes in crime patterns in the District of Columbia over the last decade. This series will report on statistics for all major categories of crime. The nonpartisan Urban Institute publishes studies, reports, and books on timely topics worthy of public consideration. The views expressed are those of the authors and should not be attributed to the Urban Institute, its trustees, or its funders.

Rates of theft/larceny per 10,000 residents in the United States and in Washington, D.C., were low and comparable in the early to mid-1960s, and both rates started rising in the late 1960s. Nationally, the change in rates was slow and steady, with rates climbing from the 1960s through the early 1990s, when the national rate hit 322 thefts per 10,000 residents. The national rate then began a slow decline, to a low of just over 200 thefts per 10,000 people in 2009. Rates in Washington, D.C., however, rose much more quickly beginning in the late 1960s, peaking three times over the study period, with dramatic lows between those peaks. Thefts reached their highest rate at 556 thefts per 10,000 residents in the mid-1990s but then dropped steeply through the mid-2000s, when

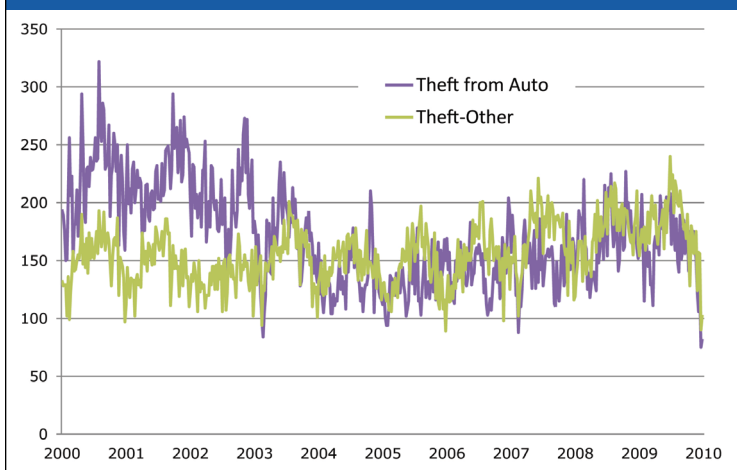
Figure 1. Larceny-Theft Rates per 10,000, 1960–2009



What's in a 'Theft'?

This brief looks at two types of theft, as classified by the Metropolitan Police Department: theft from auto and theft-other. It does not include theft of a motor vehicle—that theft category is analyzed in a separate [brief](#). The theft from auto category includes theft of all items from a motor vehicle, but does not include motor vehicle parts or accessories. The theft-other category includes shoplifting and theft from vending machines, two common methods of theft. The two theft categories examined here are combined into a “larceny-theft” category in the Uniform Crime Report data used in figure 1.

Figure 2. Citywide Weekly Theft Counts, 2000–2009



rates briefly reached the national level of 237 thefts per 10,000 residents.

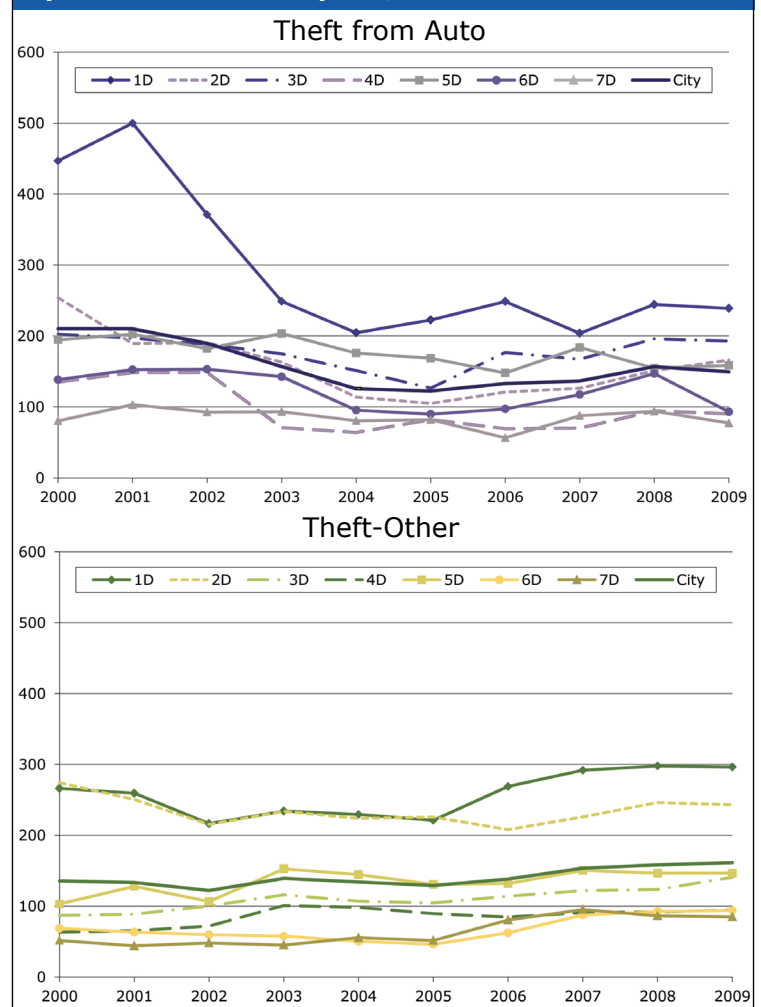
Theft Counts, 2000–2009

Figure 2 provides the weekly count of both types of theft (theft from auto and theft-other) in Washington, D.C., over the period 2000–2009. Apart from displaying similar seasonal trends (more thefts in summer, fewer in winter), the two types of theft follow different patterns for the first half of the study period. Counts of theft from auto were higher than other thefts in the first half of the period, but by 2005, the volume of each type of theft leveled out near 150 per week. Beginning in 2005, however, counts of both types of theft experienced significant—and large—increases every year. Over the period 2005–2009, thefts from auto increased by 22 percent, or 308 thefts per year. Theft-other counts increased by approximately 25 percent, or 368 thefts per year.

Thefts by District

Rates of thefts from auto at the police district level were higher than rates for other thefts. For both types of thefts, the First, Second, and Fifth Police Districts (1D, 2D, and 5D) had the highest theft rates, departing from other crimes that tended to be higher in the Sixth and Seventh Police Districts (6D, 7D) (see the DCPI briefs on other types of crime). The theft pattern is likely because those districts include popular shopping areas including Gallery Place and Metro Center; business districts on Connecticut Ave., K St., and Foggy Bottom; and universities including George Washington, Georgetown, and American

Figure 3. Theft Rates per 10,000 residents By Police District and Citywide, 2000–2009



Universities. These places have increased pedestrian and vehicle traffic, which can attract possible offenders because of the number of opportunities for theft, including shoplifting.

The Geography of Theft

Because the geographic patterns of the two crimes were very similar, thefts from auto and other thefts were mapped together in figure 4. Hot spots were found near the borders of the First, Second, and Third Police Districts (1D, 2D, and 3D). No other hot spots in the city were as strong as that centrally located hotspot, and the geographic pattern showed little change from 2000 to 2009. The center of the hot spot in 2D cooled slightly over the study period, and the hot spot appeared to spread out into 3D. This coincides with the increase in retail outlets in 3D that occurred late in the study period, and the significant rate increase in thefts

in 3D of 44 percent over the 2005–2009 period (see figure 3) supports the findings from the map.

Hot Spots in the Central Business District

Because the theft hot spot in the downtown area straddled the borders of three police districts, we chose to look in depth at specific neighborhoods rather than an entire police district.¹ Figure 5 provides a map of the hot spots in these areas in 2000 and 2009, indicating that the hottest theft areas in 2000 were centered in the Dupont Circle neighborhood, but that by 2009, the hot spot had cooled considerably. By 2009, a hot spot had appeared in the Columbia Heights area.

There was a great deal of variation in the change each neighborhood cluster experienced over time. Three clusters saw no significant change, two experienced significant

increases, and three experienced significant decreases in thefts.

Figure 6 reveals that the Dupont Circle and Downtown neighborhoods had the highest counts of theft and dropped sharply in the first half of the study period. While retail activity increased in the downtown area over the study period—the MCI Center (now the Verizon Center) opened in 1997, leading the way for significant commercial growth in the area through the 2000–2009 period—the number of thefts actually decreased by 51 percent from 2000 to 2005. Thefts climbed significantly from 2005 to 2009 by over 35 percent. Over the entire study period, however, thefts in both neighborhoods dropped significantly, by about a third.

The data presented in this brief cannot determine why thefts dropped so significantly in the Dupont Circle and Downtown neighborhoods, especially when nearby areas experienced increases. Did the increasing number of upscale retailers in the areas attract individuals more likely to act as guardians, preventing crime? Did police presence in these areas increase? Did development change the physical characteristics of the area (e.g., additional lighting, security

¹We used the city’s neighborhood cluster boundaries to define a geographic area to examine in more depth, selecting eight clusters (there are 39 clusters in D.C.): Columbia Heights/Mt. Pleasant, Pleasant Plains, Park View; Downtown, Chinatown, Penn Quarter, Mount Vernon Square, North Capitol Street; Dupont Circle, Connecticut Avenue, K Street; Georgetown, Burleith/Hillandale; Howard University, Le Droit Park, Cardozo/Shaw; Kalorama Heights, Adams Morgan, Lanier Heights; Shaw/Logan Circle; and West End, Foggy Bottom, George Washington University.

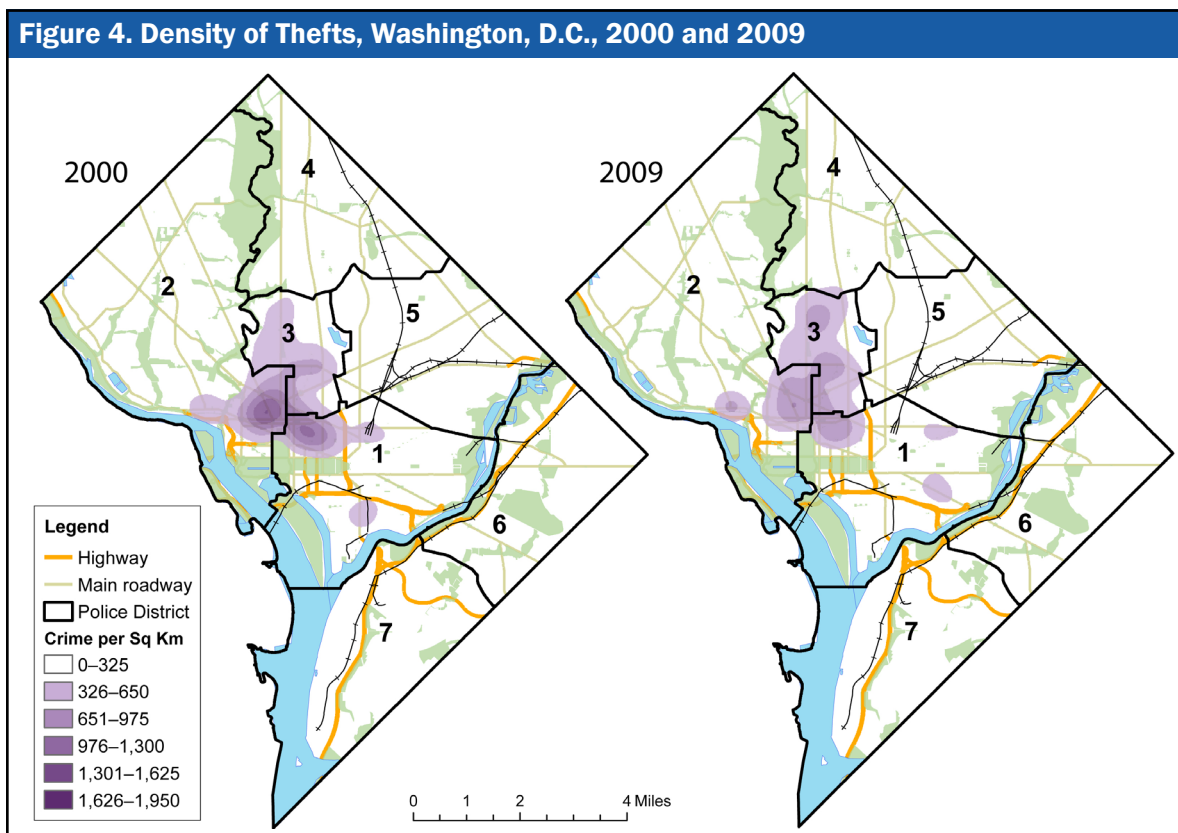
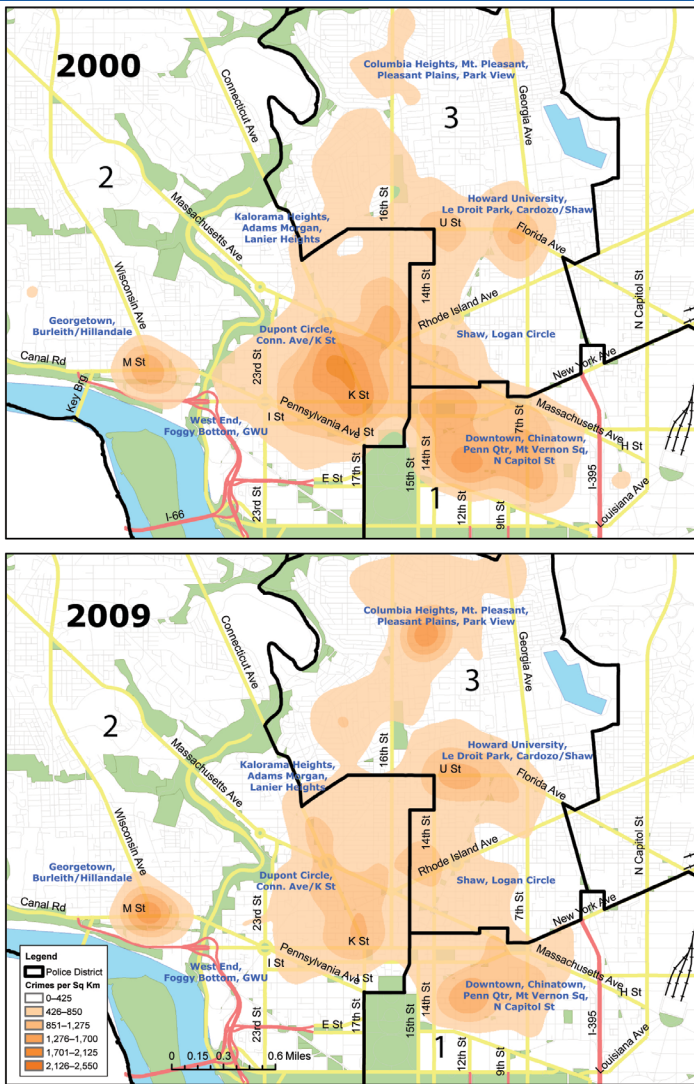


Figure 5. Theft Density in the Central City, 2000 and 2009



cameras), making thefts more difficult or risky? The answer is likely a combination of such factors, but more definitive conclusions would require further investigation.

Summary

After the mid-1960s, theft rates in Washington, D.C., were higher and more volatile than rates for the nation as a whole. Since then, rates in Washington, D.C., have dropped but remained higher than the national level in 2009. And, weekly theft counts increased significantly from 2005 to 2009 by approximately 25 percent. Thefts clustered in the central city areas, where business and retail activity is common. A hot spot was found in the Dupont Circle neighborhood in 2000, but by 2009, thefts clustered strongly in Columbia Heights. A drop in thefts in two popular center-city neighborhoods also raised questions about what caused those drops.

Figure 6. Count of Thefts in Central City Neighborhoods, 2000-2009

