Is the rate of property crime increasing in Alaska?

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Dr. Brad Myrstol, interim Justice Center Director, developed a series of graphs to help show how the rate of property crime in Alaska is impacted by a number of factors including the period of time that one is looking at, the particular crime and the place of crime.
This presentation focuses on the property crimes of larceny theft, shoplifting (which is a subcategory of larceny), burglary, and motor vehicle theft. The time period is from 1985 to 2016. The jurisdictions that we are looking at are: Anchorage, Fairbanks, Juneau, Kenai, North Slope Borough and Palmer. Each of these jurisdictions use the Uniform Crime Reports — or UCR — to report their data.

The numbers in the following graphs are UCR data obtained from “Crime in Alaska” reports published by the Department of Public Safety. We are measuring crime per 100,000 population. All population data are from the Department of Labor and Workforce Development.

Taking a look at the first graph, you will see that we are measuring the rate of larceny theft known to the police between 1985 and 2016 around Alaska. Along the horizontal axis are the years and along the vertical axis is the rate of theft per 100,000 population. You can see that there are three trend lines highlighted. In each of the graphs you’ll see in this presentation, we highlight three communities. The highlighted communities help show the variation in the rate of crime by jurisdiction and short-term trends.
Take a look at the trend line for Kenai which is in blue. In 1985, the rate of larceny crimes was a little under 4,000 per 100,000 population. In 2016, it is higher, a little over 5,000.

But if we look at the North Slope Borough’s trend line, in bright green on this graph, the rate has dropped nearly 1,000 per 100,000 people since 1985. That break in the green line represents a time period where UCR data was not collected.
Now look at Fairbanks in bright red. Over that same period, the rate of larceny theft has gone from a little over 6,000 to a little over 3,000, nearly cut in half.

For each of these communities we are looking at the change in the rate of crime from 1985 to 2016, from one point in time to another point in time, without considering the up and downs during these 30 years.

For shoplifting, Kenai again is showing an increase over the past 30 years. This time, we can see that it is not only higher than in 1985, but also that since 2011, it has steadily increased and is at the highest point during the 30 years recorded here.
In Anchorage, which you can see in red, the shoplifting rate has dropped from a high of nearly 1,500 in 1986 to around 750 in 2016.

In Palmer, the bright green line, there is a drop from the highpoint in 1989 of more than 1,500 to well under 500 in 2016.

But let’s take a slightly different perspective when analyzing the trend in crime rates for shoplifting. All three jurisdictions experienced a low point in the rate of shoplifting during the 30-year period.
For Kenai, shoplifting dropped to its lowest point in 1999, far below 500, since then it has been on an upward trajectory, growing more than 6 times.

Anchorage's low point for shoplifting occurred in 2004 at rate of about 500 and it has been going up since with a slight downward trend between 2013 and 2016.
Palmer is at its lowest point in the last 30 years and has been in a declining pattern since 2008. Looking at the growth in the rate of shoplifting from its lowest point over the last 30 years rather than the highest point, Anchorage and Kenai have been experiencing a growth in shoplifting, while Palmer is still going down. Changing the time reference, changes the perception of trends in crime rate.

For burglary we can again see the variations by jurisdiction. Kenai and Palmer both show a trending line going downward. Juneau’s, although there is a break in reporting, the trend is up sharply since 2014.
In our last graph, that shows Motor Vehicle Theft known to the police, both Fairbanks and Anchorage are showing an upward trend since 2011. But if we look at the highpoint in the rate of motor vehicle theft between 1985 and 2016 for both of these cities, the 2016 rate is still less for both. The rate of motor vehicle theft in Fairbanks in 2016 is less than half what it was in 1991. In Anchorage, the rate of motor vehicle theft is still less than the rate in 1994, but it is on a steep incline and, if the trend upward continues, may overtake the earlier rate.

Are rates of property crime increasing?

It depends on:

- **Where**...crime levels and patterns of fluctuation vary widely across jurisdictions
- **Crime type**...crime levels and patterns of fluctuation vary widely according to the crime being considered

What do these graphs tell us about property crime rates in Alaska? Is the rate of property crime increasing? That depends. That depends on the jurisdiction, the particular crime, and the time being considered. These are just three factors that can influence the trend in crime rates.
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