



# The Effects of Changing State Theft Penalties

Increased felony thresholds have not resulted in higher property crime or larceny rates

# Policy change

- States are raising the value of stolen money/goods above which offenses can be charged as felonies

## Rationale

- Ensure value-based penalties take inflation into account
  - E.g., threshold of \$1,000 established in 1985 is equivalent to more than twice that much in 2015 dollars
- Prioritize costly prison beds for more serious crime

## Question

- Will higher cutoff points embolden criminals and cause crime, particularly larceny, to rise?

# Example of Eroding Felony Theft Standard



# Study

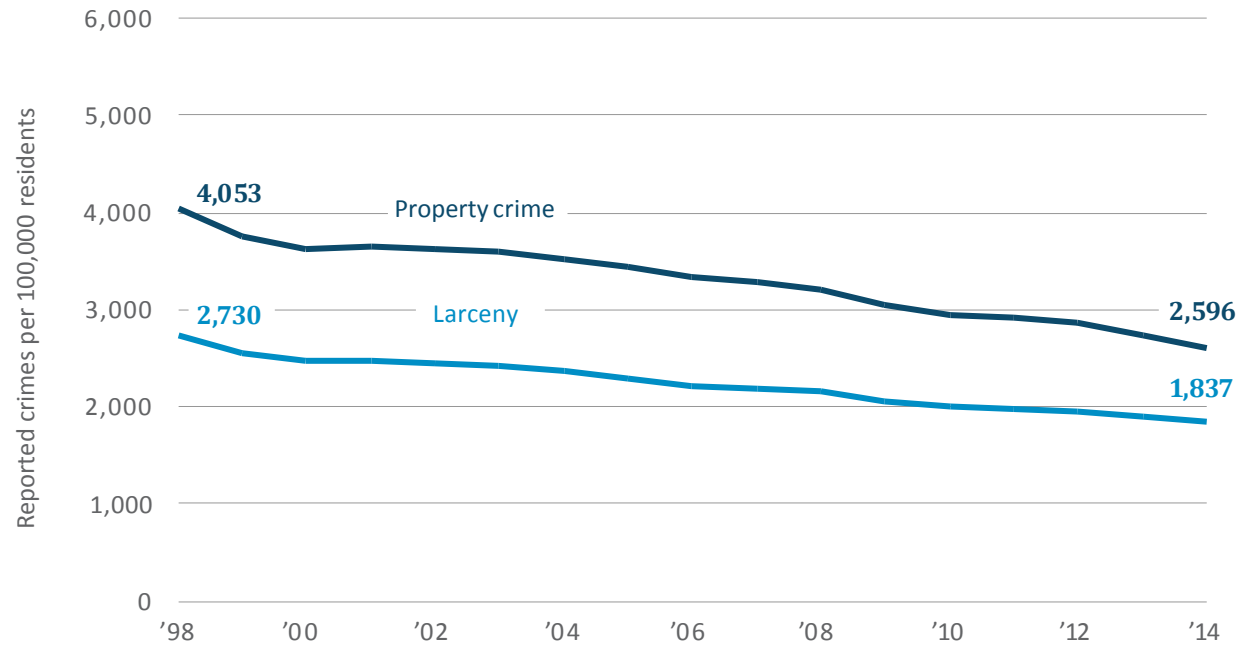
Pew examined crime trends in the 23 states that raised their threshold between 2001 and 2011

Results of 3 analyses:

1. Looking just at those 23 states, pre-post analysis found no impact on overall property crime or larceny rates.
2. Comparing with states that did *not* change theft laws (27), those 23 states that increased their thresholds reported roughly the same average decrease in crime.
3. Looking across all states, the amount of a state's felony theft threshold—whether it is \$500, \$1,000, \$2,000, or more—is not correlated with its property crime and larceny rates.

## U.S. Property Crime and Larceny Rates Have Fallen by a Third

Improved policing and anticrime technology cited among reasons for decline

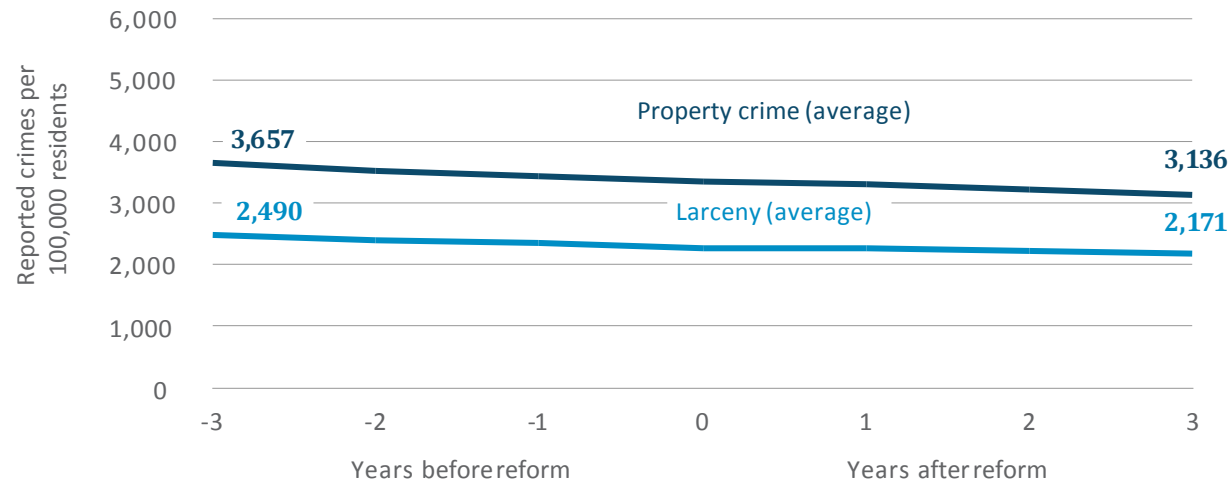


Source: Federal Bureau of Investigation, *Crime in the United States* series, 1998-2014

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## Increases in Felony Theft Thresholds Had No Effect on Property Crime, Larceny Rates

Crime decline continued in states that raised monetary limits between 2001 and 2011



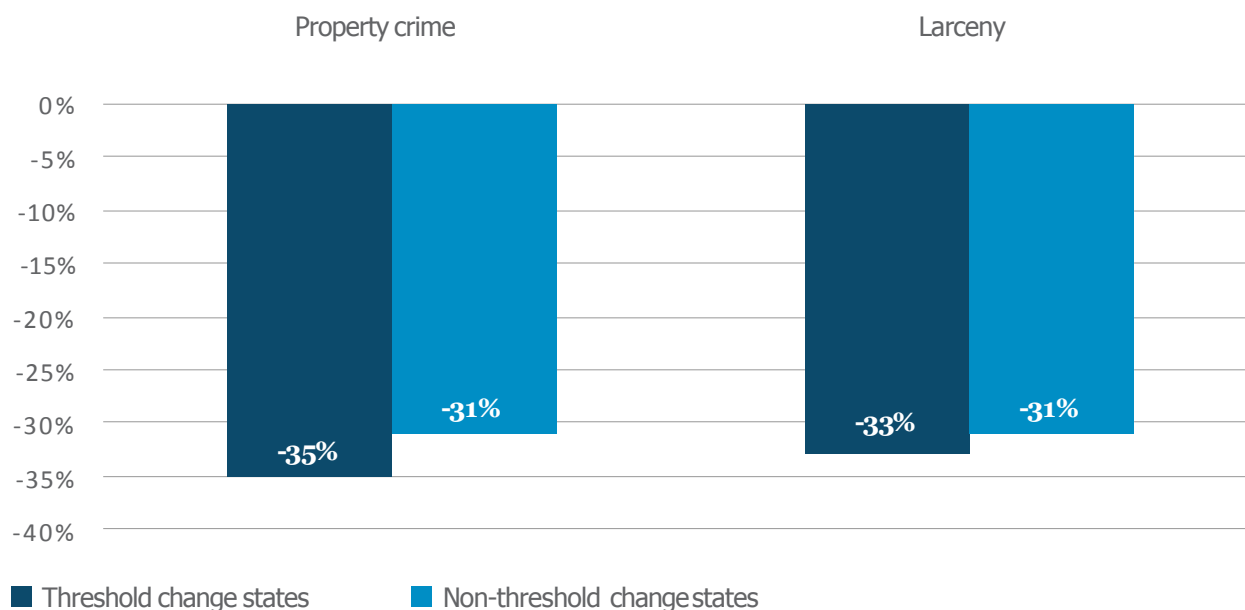
Notes: Pew used a panel fixed-effects approach to determine whether increases in state felony theft thresholds had an effect on property crime and larceny rates. The analysis found no statistically significant relationship using the standard threshold of 0.05. See the methodological notes for more information about this analysis.

Source: Pew's analysis of data from the Federal Bureau of Investigation, *Crime in the United States* series, 1998-2014.

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## States That Raised Felony Theft Thresholds Between 2001 and 2011 Had Crime Declines Similar to Those That Did Not

All states reported sharp decreases in property crime, larceny rates



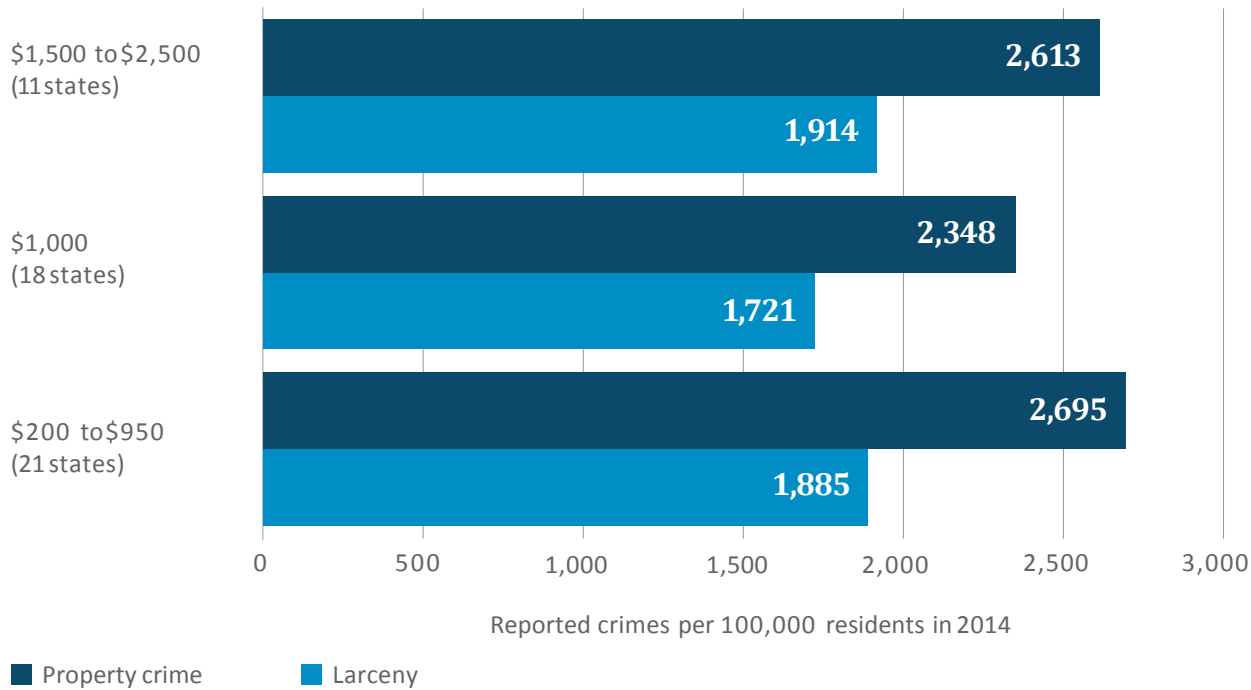
Notes: Pew evaluated data from 1998 to 2014 to allow for a sufficient before-and-after analysis of all state threshold changes between 2001 and 2011. Pew used a panel random-effects approach to measure changes in property crime and larceny rates and compare states that raised their felony theft thresholds with those that did not. The analysis found no statistically significant relationship between the two groups of states using the standard threshold of 0.05. See the methodological notes for more information about this analysis.

Source: Pew's analysis of data from the Federal Bureau of Investigation, *Crime in the United States* series, 1998-2014

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# Felony Theft Values Are Unrelated to Property Crime and Larceny Rates

States report similar crime rates regardless of thresholds



Notes: Pew conducted a linear correlation test to determine whether property crime and larceny rates in 2014 were higher in states with higher felony theft thresholds. The analysis included no control variables and found no statistically significant correlation using the standard threshold of 0.05.

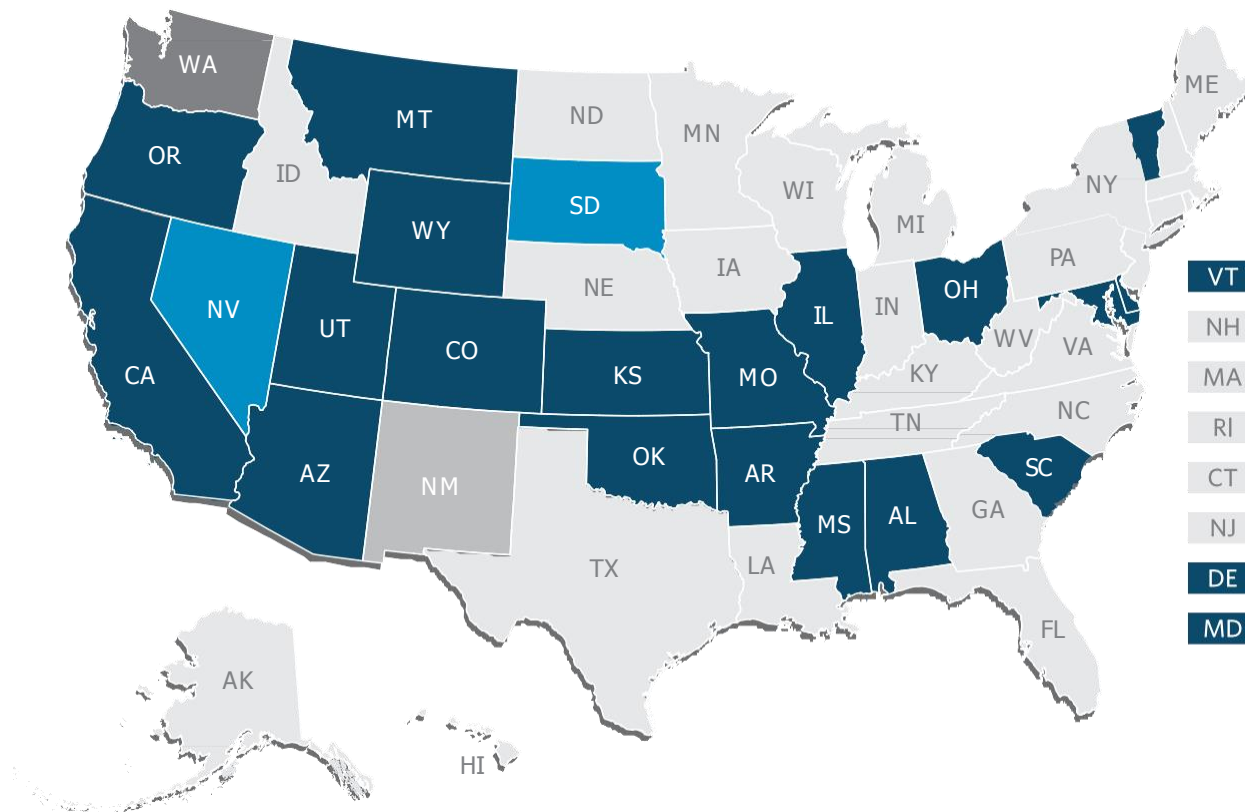
Source: Pew's analysis of data from the Federal Bureau of Investigation, *Crime in the United States*, 2014

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# Property Crime and Larceny Rates Fell in 19 of 23 States That Raised Their Felony Thresholds Between 2001 and 2011

Four states had increases in one or both rates



Legend:

- No threshold change
- Decreases in property crime and larceny rates (19 states)
- Increases in property crime and larceny rates (NV, SD)
- Increase in property crime rate, decrease in larceny rate (WA)
- Decrease in property crime rate, increase in larceny rate (NM)

Source: Federal Bureau of Investigation, *Crime in the United States* series, 1998-2014

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## Innovative example

- Alaska's SB91 (Sec. 11.46.982) automatically updates the threshold every 5 years (via required report of the Alaska Judicial Council).

## Scaling penalties beyond felony threshold

- Not just about misdemeanor/felony threshold: also about scaling for felony class thresholds (e.g., where Class C becomes Class B becomes Class A)

## Discussion

- Research
- Policy
- Politics