

Article

Overview of bicycle theft: England and Wales

A summary of the long-term trends in bicycle theft, including demographic and nature of crime data.

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Release date:
20 July 2017

Next release:
To be announced

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1 . Introduction

This article is intended to provide information on long-term trends alongside additional data on the characteristics of victims and nature of crime. It may not include the most recent published data, which can be found in the latest quarterly [Crime in England and Wales](#) release.

2 . How is bicycle theft defined and measured?

A person commits bicycle theft if, without consent of the owner or other lawful authority, they take a pedal cycle for their own or another's use, or ride a pedal cycle knowing it to have been taken without such authority.

Bicycle theft is included in both the Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW) and police recorded crime series. The CSEW covers thefts of bicycles belonging to the respondent or any other member of the household.

This category does not include every bicycle theft, as some may be stolen during the course of another offence (for example, burglary). Where this is the case, the offence will not be recorded as bicycle theft but as the more serious crime type. Therefore, where a bicycle is stolen as part of another offence it would be classified by the police and in the CSEW as:

- burglary – when the bicycle is stolen from inside a house by someone who was trespassing; if a bicycle is stolen from a connected garage or non-connected garage or outhouse and no attempt was made to steal anything else then this is classified as bicycle theft
- theft from a dwelling – when the bicycle is stolen from inside a house by someone who was not trespassing
- theft from a vehicle – if the bicycle is one of a number of things stolen from a vehicle
- theft of a vehicle – if the bicycle was in or on the vehicle when the vehicle was stolen

Further discussion on the strengths and limitations of the two main sources is available in the “Which source provides the better measure?” section.

3 . What are the long-term trends in bicycle theft?

The Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW) has collected information on crimes, including bicycle theft, experienced by respondents in a consistent manner since the survey first ran in 1981 and thus estimates are directly comparable across the history of the survey.

Care should be taken with regard to historical police recorded crime data, as changes to recording practices following the introduction of the new Home Office Counting Rules (HOCR) in April 1998 and the National Crime Recording Standard (NCRS) in April 2002 typically resulted in an increase in the number of crimes recorded. Additionally, it is possible that improvements in compliance with the NCRS since the year ending March 2014 onwards has led to increases in the proportion of reports of incidents being recorded by the police as crimes, though it is not possible to quantify the scale of this.

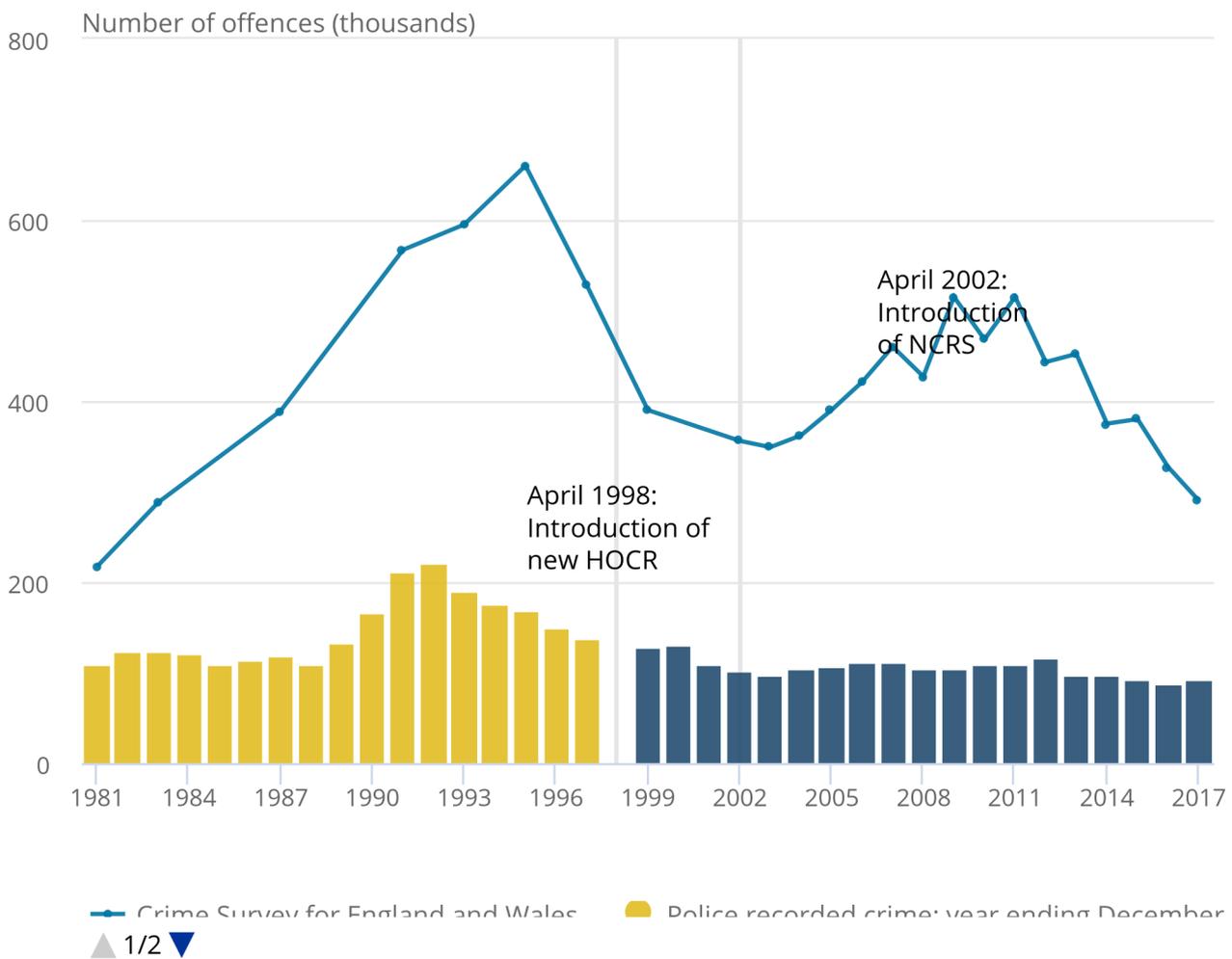
The trends in bicycle theft as measured by the CSEW and police recorded crime are broadly similar.

Bicycle theft is a relatively low-volume offence, accounting for around 2% of all police recorded crime in England and Wales and accounting for around 5% of all crime covered by the CSEW¹.

In the 1980s and early 1990s, CSEW bicycle theft rose (peaking at 660,000² incidents in the year to December 1995) before declining until around the early 2000s. This was followed by a general upward trend, between the year ending March 2003 and the year ending March 2011 with some year-on-year fluctuation. This follows a different trend to total CSEW crime, which since peaking in 1995 showed marked falls until the survey year ending March 2005. Since the year ending March 2012, the trend in bicycle theft has been on a general decline.

Figure 1: Trends in Crime Survey for England and Wales and police recorded bicycle theft, year ending December 1981 to year ending March 2017

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Source: Crime Survey for England and Wales, Office for National Statistics and Police recorded crime

Source: Crime Survey for England and Wales, Office for National Statistics and Police recorded crime, Home Office

Notes:

1. Police recorded crime data are not designated as National Statistics.
2. Police recorded crime data prior to the year ending March 1999 are based on the old Home Office Counting Rules (HOCR); data for the year ending March 1999 to the year ending March 2002 (inclusive) are based on the new HOCR but prior to the introduction of the National Crime Recording Standard (NCRS); data from the year ending March 2003 onwards are based on the new HOCR and NCRS.
3. CSEW data on this chart refer to different time periods: a) 1981 to 1999 refer to crimes experienced in the calendar year (January to December) b) from year ending March 2002 onwards the estimates relate to crimes experienced in the 12 months before interview, based on interviews carried out in that financial year (April to March).
4. CSEW data relate to households.

In recent survey years, around 2 in 100 bicycle-owning households have been victims of bicycle theft in the previous 12 months; this compares with around 6 in 100 households in the year ending December 1995, meaning that bicycle-owning households are around a third as likely now to be a victim of bicycle theft than at the peak in 1995.

CSEW data on bicycle theft are also available for children aged 10 to 15. In the survey year ending March 2017, there were an estimated 26,000³ incidents of bicycle theft where the property stolen belonged to a child respondent. Given the small sample size for the 10- to 15-year-old element of the CSEW, estimates can greatly fluctuate over time and as a result trends can be difficult to interpret. Detailed data are published in [Appendix tables A9, A10, A11 and A12](#) alongside the quarterly [Crime in England and Wales](#) release.

The numbers of police recorded bicycle thefts stayed relatively flat during the early 1980s, but rose steadily during the late 1980s and early 1990s (peaking at 222,000 incidents in the year to December 1992) before steadily decreasing. Following the introduction of the NCRS in April 2002, police recorded bicycle theft stayed relatively flat between the year ending March 2003 and the year ending March 2012, but there was a general downward trend between the years ending March 2012 and March 2016, similar to the pattern seen in the survey. Between the year ending March 2016 and the year ending March 2017 there was a 9% increase in bicycle theft recorded by the police; however, it is too early to conclude whether this represents a change in the longer-term trend. The latest level remains 58% lower than in the year ending December 1992 when recorded bicycle theft was at its peak. Latest figures and trends are available in the most recent quarterly [Crime in England and Wales](#) release.

There is limited evidence on what has been driving these trends specifically for bicycle theft; however, these falls are consistent with the downward trends seen in other theft offences. Information on various theories that have been put forward to explain these falls is available in the [Focus on: Property Crime](#) release.

Notes for: What are the long-term trends in bicycle theft?

1. This figure excludes fraud and computer misuse, the CSEW started measuring these offences in October 2015. Including fraud and computer misuse, bicycle theft offences accounted for 3% of all CSEW crime covered by the survey in the year ending March 2017.
2. The 95% confidence interval around this estimate is [581,000 to 738,000]. Any sample survey may produce estimates that differ from the figures that would have been obtained if the whole population had been interviewed. The confidence interval provides a range of values around an estimate (also referred to as the margin of error of the estimate). Section 8.1 of the [User Guide to Crime Statistics for England and Wales](#) has more information about confidence intervals and statistical significance.
3. The 95% confidence interval around this estimate is [14,000 to 37,000].

4 . Which groups in society are most likely to be victims of bicycle theft?

Across years there have been some consistent themes in the Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW) data; some demographic groups have been shown to be more likely to be victims of bicycle theft. Bicycle-owning households:

- where the household reference person¹ was a full-time student have tended to have higher victimisation rates than households where the household reference person was in other occupations
- where the household reference person was a younger adult (16 to 34) have been more likely to be victims than households where the household reference person was an older adult (35 and over)
- with incomes less than £10,000 have been more likely to be victims than respondents in households on incomes over £10,000
- living in areas of high incivility² have been more likely to be victims than those living in areas of low incivility
- living in flats or maisonettes have been more likely to be victims than those living in houses
- in urban areas have been more likely to be victims than households in rural areas

Notes for: Which groups in society are most likely to be victims of bicycle theft?

1. The household reference person is the member of the household in whose name the accommodation is owned or rented, or is otherwise responsible for the accommodation. Where this responsibility is joint within the household, this is the person with the highest income. If incomes are equal, then this is the oldest person.
2. This term is used in the CSEW to describe a measure based on the interviewer's assessment of the level of (a) vandalism, graffiti and deliberate damage to property; (b) rubbish and litter; and (c) homes in poor condition in the area.

5 . What is known about the nature and circumstances of bicycle theft?

The Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW) [Nature of Crime](#) tables provide further information about the circumstances surrounding incidents of bicycle theft over the last decade, including:

- in around 40% of bicycle thefts the bicycle was locked by a chain, cable, shackle, D lock or similar¹
- bicycle thefts were most likely to occur in a semi-private location nearby the victim's home; this includes outside areas on the premises and garages around but not connected to the home
- around 70% of bicycle thefts took place during the week (equivalent to around 16% per weekday) and around 30% took place during the weekend (equivalent to around 12% per weekend day)

Further information about the nature of bicycle theft and the victims is currently restricted to the CSEW; limited data are currently available on the circumstances surrounding offences in the main recorded crime collection. It is anticipated that in the future we may be able to provide further information about crime incidents recorded by the police as more detailed data sources become available centrally.

Notes for: What is known about the nature and circumstances of bicycle theft?

1. If the bicycle was in a locked garage, shed or similar but not actually secured by a lock this is counted as not being locked.

6 . Which source provides the better measure of bicycle theft?

The Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW) has collected information on crimes, including bicycle theft experienced by respondents, in a consistent manner since the survey first ran in 1981. It captures incidents that are not reported to the police and is not affected by changes in police recording practices, and is therefore a more reliable measure of long-term trends than police recorded crime.

However, the survey will not capture crimes against businesses, or offences committed against people not resident in households (for example, students living in halls of residence). While estimates at the national level (England and Wales) are of good quality, lower-level geography estimates are not robust.

Additionally, with bicycle theft being a low-volume offence in the CSEW, estimates are prone to greater fluctuation than estimates for other, more frequently occurring, offence types. Thus, police recorded crime can often be a better guide to short-term trends in bicycle theft than the CSEW.

Police recorded crime data have a wider population coverage, including crimes committed against people not resident in private households (such as students living in halls of residence) if reported to and recorded by the police. Lower- level geography data (police force and community safety partnership areas) are also available.

The police recorded crime data do not include offences that do not come to the attention of the police or are not recorded by them. Also, due to changes in recording practices introduced in 1998 and 2002, it is not possible to directly compare police recorded crime data for any period prior to the year ending March 2003 with subsequent years.

Additionally, there are currently concerns about the quality of crime recording; crimes may not be recorded consistently across police forces and so the true level of recorded crime may be understated. Following an [assessment of crime statistics](#) by the UK Statistics Authority, published in January 2014, the statistics based on police recorded crime data have been found not to meet the required standard for designation as [National Statistics](#).

Since the UK Statistics Authority assessment decision, Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary (HMIC) has undertaken an inspection of the integrity of police recorded crime. The [Crime-recording: making the victim count](#) report, published by HMIC found that an estimated 19% of all offences that should have been recorded as a crime were not. The audits looked specifically at violence against the person, sexual offences, robbery, burglary, criminal damage and a residual category of other offences (excluding fraud). It is therefore not possible to provide an under-recording rate for bicycle theft as these offences would be classified under other offences.

The renewed focus on the quality of crime recording means that caution is needed when interpreting statistics on police recorded crime. While we know that it is possible that improvements in compliance with the National Crime Recording Standard (NCRS) may have led to increases in the number of crimes recorded by the police, it is not possible to quantify the scale of this, or assess how this effect varied between different police forces.

Therefore, the CSEW provides a better measure of national medium- and longer-term trends in bicycle theft; although police recorded crime provides a source of subnational data on bicycle theft and can provide a better indication of emerging trends.

7 . Where can more information on bicycle theft be found?

Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW)

[Crime in England and Wales](#) (quarterly publication) – the preferred source for latest trends:

- [Appendix tables](#) A1, A2, A3 and A8 include data on numbers of incidents, incidence rates, prevalence rates and number of victims for the complete survey time series (starting from the year ending December 1981)
- [Quarterly table](#) QT2 includes data on numbers of incidents in the previous 3 survey years, broken down by quarter of interview
- Open data tables ([Household Crime – Incidence](#) and [Household Crime – Prevalence](#)) include data broken down by demographic information
- [Annual trend and demographic tables](#) D5, D6, D7 and D8 include data on repeat victimisation and incidents reported to the police – note: only published alongside “Year ending March” releases
- [Annual supplementary table](#) S14 includes data on victim satisfaction with police handling of incidents – note: only published alongside “Year ending March” releases

[Focus on: Property Crime](#) (annual publication; latest edition published in November 2016) – the preferred source for more detailed analysis, including victim characteristics and details regarding the circumstances of offences:

- commentary in overview chapter on time series trends and more detailed findings from the latest financial year
- [Appendix table](#) 4 includes data on victim household demographics
- [Nature of crime tables](#) 5.1 to 5.6 include data about the circumstances surrounding the incident, including time, location, cost of bicycle(s) stolen and more

Police recorded crime

[Crime in England and Wales](#) (quarterly publication):

- [Appendix table](#) A4 includes data on numbers of incidents since the year ending March 2003, following the introduction of the National Crime Recording Standard (NCRS) in April 2002; this is the earliest time period for which the data are directly comparable
- [Quarterly table](#) QT1 includes data on numbers of incidents in the previous 2 years, broken down by quarter
- [Police force area tables](#) P1, P2 and P3 include data on numbers of incidents and rates per 1,000 population in the latest 12-month period and percentage changes with the previous 12-month period, broken down at police force area level
- [Police force area open data](#) include a time series of numbers of incidents back to the year ending March 2003 by police force area
- [Community safety partnership open data](#) include a time series of numbers of incidents back to the year ending March 2003 by community safety partnership

[Focus on: Property Crime](#) (annual publication; latest edition published in November 2016):

- commentary in overview chapter on time-series trends and more detailed findings from the latest financial year

8 . What other sources of information on bicycle theft are available?

Crime outcomes (Home Office)

The Home Office publishes data on the outcomes of crimes recorded by the 43 territorial police forces in England and Wales, plus the British Transport Police. The latest publication is available from the Home Office [Crime outcomes in England and Wales statistics](#) web pages.

Sentencing data (Ministry of Justice)

The Ministry of Justice (MoJ) publish data on prosecutions and convictions and sentencing; the latest Criminal Justice Statistics Quarterly (CJSQ) publication is available from the MoJ [Criminal justice statistics](#) web pages.

However, it is not possible to separately identify bicycle theft from within “Theft offences” in their headline data.

MoJ publish data tools on prosecutions and convictions and sentencing at an offence level breakdown (so bicycle thefts are separately identifiable); these are available in the year ending December [CJSQ](#) releases.

Scotland

Crime statistics for Scotland are collected and published separately.

Recorded crime statistics for Scotland are not directly comparable with those in England and Wales. The recorded crime statistics for Scotland are collected on the basis of the Scottish Crime Recording Standard, introduced in 2004, which like its counterpart in England and Wales, aims to give consistency in crime recording. The main principles of the Scottish Crime Recording Standard are similar to the National Crime Recording Standard for England and Wales with regard to when a crime should be recorded; however, there are differences between the respective counting rules.

Differences in legislation and common law also have to be taken into account when comparing the crime statistics for Scotland with England and Wales.

The Scottish Crime and Justice Survey (SCJS), however, does follow a similar format to the Crime Survey for England and Wales, having a shared antecedence in the British Crime Survey (whose sample during some rounds of the survey in the 1980s covered Scotland, south of the Caledonian Canal). So, while there are differences in the crimes or offence classifications to reflect the differing legal systems, the data are broadly comparable.

Police recorded crime and SCJS data are published by the [Scottish Government](#).

Northern Ireland

Crime statistics for Northern Ireland are collected and published separately.

The legal system in Northern Ireland is based on that of England and Wales; the Police Service for Northern Ireland (PSNI) has the same notifiable offence list for recorded crime as used in England and Wales. In addition, the PSNI has adopted the National Crime Recording Standard (NCRS) and Home Office Counting Rules for recorded crime that applies in England and Wales. Therefore there is broad comparability between the recorded crime statistics in Northern Ireland and England and Wales.

The Northern Ireland Crime Survey (NICS) also closely mirrors the format and content of the Crime Survey for England and Wales, using a very similar methodology with continuous interviewing and a face-to-face interview with a nationally representative sample of adults (16 years and over), using a similar set of questions. Therefore, results from the two surveys are broadly comparable.

Police recorded crime data are published by the [PSNI](#) and NICS data are published by the [Department of Justice \(Northern Ireland\)](#).

9 . Annex: Legal definitions

The basic definition of theft is laid out in section 1 of the Theft Act 1968:

[1] A person is guilty of theft if he dishonestly appropriates property belonging to another with the intention of permanently depriving the other of it; and “thief” and “steal” shall be construed accordingly.

[2] It is immaterial whether the appropriation is made with a view to gain, or is made for the thief’s own benefit.

The offence of taking or riding a pedal cycle without authority is laid out in section 12, subsection 5 of the Theft Act 1968:

[5] ... a person who, without having the consent of the owner or other lawful authority, takes a pedal cycle for his own or another's use, or rides a pedal cycle knowing it to have been taken without such authority, shall on summary conviction be liable to a fine not exceeding level 3 on the standard scale.