

Socioeconomic Factors and Policy Improvements: A Case Study of Smash-and-Grab Robbery in California

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ABSTRACT

Smash-and-grab robberies, characterized by groups of individuals breaking into stores, stealing goods, and quickly fleeing, have become a significant issue in California. This study examines the increase in these crimes and explores the underlying socioeconomic and legal factors contributing to their rise. In particular, it focuses on the impact of California's Proposition 47, which reclassified certain offenses to reduce prison overcrowding but may have inadvertently led to an increase in property crimes. This paper also proposes a two-pronged approach to address smash-and-grab robberies: strengthening immediate law enforcement measures, such as foot patrols and technological integration, while addressing long-term social inequalities through improved education and financial support for marginalized communities. The findings emphasize the need for targeted law enforcement strategies and caution policymakers to carefully evaluate the effects of legal reforms like Proposition 47. Ultimately, proactive policies and robust enforcement can help reduce smash-and-grab incidents and create a safer business environment throughout California.

Introduction

Smash-and-grab robberies usually involve a group of people quickly breaking into a store, smashing glass or damaging doors and windows, swiftly stealing goods, and then fleeing. This type of crime causes significant financial losses for business owners, increases operational costs, may lead to customer loss, and even forces some stores to close. It also negatively impacts the overall safety and business environment of the community. According to the *Los Angeles Times*, "At the Home Depot in Lakewood on Friday, approximately eight people entered the store shortly before 8 p.m. and stole roughly \$400 worth of hammers, sledgehammers and crowbars, according to the sheriff's department" (López & Reyes, 2021). This highlights that even commonly seen stores are being impacted by smash-and-grab robberies. The reason for studying smash-and-grab robberies is that they intersect with social issues and public policy, particularly in the context of homelessness, where crime within homeless populations can be both a cause and consequence of broader social and economic challenges.

One argument is that the implementation of California's Proposition 47 correlates with a noticeable increase in smash-and-grab robberies across the state. California's Proposition 47, passed in 2014, reclassified certain nonviolent offenses from felonies to misdemeanors to reduce prison overcrowding.

Numerous reports and videos have appeared in both news media and on social media platforms, highlighting the plight of these owners. As mentioned in *The Impact of Proposition 47 on Crime and Recidivism*, "After Prop 47, the monthly property crime rate jumped up somewhat and ranged between 220 and 230 property crimes per 100,000 residents from December 2014 to January 2016. This increase represents a statistically significant departure from pre-reform levels" (Bird et al., 2018, p. 10).

Literature Review

The existing papers either focus solely on the causality or on the solutions. In this paper, I will address this gap by integrating both perspectives by discussing arguments within current literature and proposing innovative points by combining those arguments together.

According to data from the Federal Bureau of Investigation's Crime Data Explorer, in 2020, there were 2,265,464 property crime offenders in California (FBI Crime Data Explorer, n.d.). Among them, 978,759 were White, making up 43%, and 547,136 were African American, accounting for 24%. Additionally, there were 126,895 Hispanic offenders. At first glance, these numbers suggest a higher crime rate among Whites. However, when considering the overall population in California, the results tell a different story. According to the 2020 data from the United States Census Bureau, 61.6% of the population identified as White alone, 12.4% as Black alone, 18.7% as Hispanic, 6% as Asian alone, 1.1% as American Indian and Alaska Native alone, 0.2% as Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander alone, 8.4% as Some Other Race alone, and 10.2% as Two or More Races (America Counts Staff, 2021). Based on these figures, the property crime rate for Whites is approximately 6%, for African Americans about 24.5%, and for Hispanics around 0.8%. The crime rate among African Americans in property crimes is clearly higher.

There comes the question why African Americans' crime rate is significantly higher than others. Firstly, from a historical perspective, due to past racial segregation and other policies, Black people have long faced unequal treatment in various aspects of life. According to the article "Racial Disparities Persist in Many U.S. Jails," it is mentioned that "historically, segregation and 'redlining' have effectively isolated Black people in underinvested areas and contributed to structural disadvantages, including concentrated poverty and poor outcomes in education, nutrition, mental and physical health, and employment" (Wertheimer, 2023, p. 8).

Secondly, from an economic standpoint, the income of Black individuals is significantly lower than that of White individuals. According to the article *Less Than Equal: Racial Disparities in Wealth Accumulation*, it is mentioned that "In 2010, the average income for Whites was twice that of Blacks and Hispanics (\$89,000 versus \$46,000), meaning that for every \$2.00 Whites earned, Blacks and Hispanics earned \$1.00" (McKernan et al., 2013, p. 1). Another article also supports, "The racial wealth gap grows sharply with age. Early in wealth-building years (when adults are in their 30s), white families have 3.5 to 4 times the wealth of families of color. Over the life cycle, these initial racial differences grow in both absolute and relative terms" (McKernan et al., 2013, p. 1).

Methodology

I will conduct research from two aspects: foot patrol and education. Foot patrol can help alleviate the current situation, while education serves a preventative role, indirectly reducing crime in the future. Compared to other articles that often only identify problems or offer a single solution, I will integrate both aspects in my paper.

The first solution to addressing smash-and-grab robberies is to increase foot patrol. A joint experiment conducted by Temple University and the Philadelphia Police Patrol concluded that "violent crime hotspots that were recipients of foot patrol officers for up to 90 hours per week had a reduction in violence of 90 offenses (with a net effect of 53 offenses once displacement is considered), outperforming equivalent control areas by 23 percent" (Ratcliffe et al., 2011, p. 18). Therefore, it can be concluded that increasing foot patrol can reduce crime rates. Moreover, the benefits of foot patrol are not limited to this alone. According to the research, foot patrol also has the following advantages: "Foot patrol facilitates relationship-building between officers and the community," "Foot patrol enhances the enforcement and problem-solving capability of law enforcement," and "Foot patrol is rewarding and psychologically beneficial for the officers involved" (Cowell & Kringen, 2016, p. 4). Thus, we can conclude that foot patrol strengthens the connection between the police and the community, improving residents' trust and satisfaction with law enforcement. In California's diverse communities, this direct interaction is especially important, as it helps build positive relationships between the police and the public, reducing misunderstandings and conflicts. At the same

time, foot patrols can provide more targeted services, such as community education and crime prevention activities, thereby enhancing the overall sense of security within the community. In conclusion, foot patrol can reduce crime both directly and indirectly.

Beyond human forces, some new technologies have also emerged to improve the police forces. For example, the rapid development and widespread application of AI (artificial intelligence) technology has already been integrated into the daily work of police forces in some countries. According to a report from the website POLICE1, “In Chihuahua, Mexico, a massive tower pulls in feeds from thousands of cameras, biometric sensors, license plate readers, drones, and other sensors from infrastructure throughout the region” and “Dubai Police exhibited self-driving patrol cars with 360-degree cameras, license plate readers, an onboard drone, and facial recognition technology that will patrol residential neighborhoods” (Goldenberg & Gips, 2024). The development of modern technology provides additional support for foot patrols, such as portable communication devices, real-time data analysis, and GPS tracking. These technologies can help foot patrol officers collect information and allocate resources more efficiently. In technology-advanced regions like California, they can offer strong support for the implementation of foot patrols.

Increasing foot patrol will also result in more police personnel to cover the same area. This could significantly increase the overall law enforcement budget in California, a state well-known for high labor costs. Therefore, a detailed cost-benefit analysis is necessary to determine the economic feasibility of foot patrols. Moreover, California has a diverse geographic environment, ranging from urban to rural areas and plains to mountainous regions. Foot patrols are more feasible in densely populated urban areas, as officers can respond to incidents more quickly. However, in sparsely populated or geographically complex areas, the efficiency and effectiveness of foot patrols may diminish, making it necessary to combine mobile patrols or other technological solutions. AI technology addresses this issue well; using unmanned patrol cars and AI technologies in sparsely populated or more dangerous areas can significantly reduce budgets and minimize the risk of officer injuries.

How to prevent this smash-and-grab phenomenon has always been a challenge, but fundamentally, the solution lies into education. In the article *Advancing racial equity in US pre-K–12 education*, it is mentioned that “Research suggests that attending a high-quality pre-K program can close as much as 50 percent of the racial achievement gap” and “Moreover, the positive effects of pre-K are often larger for students of color, particularly those from low-income households” (Bryant et al., 2023, p. 8). By receiving high-quality education, the educational disparities among people of color can be reduced, increasing their future employment rates and indirectly reducing crime rates.

This has been further strengthened in the article *The Effect of Education on Crime: Evidence from Prison Inmates, Arrests, and Self-Reports*, it is mentioned that “One extra year of schooling results in a 0.10 percentage point reduction in the probability of incarceration for whites, and a 0.37 percentage point reduction for blacks” (Lochner & Moretti, 2004, p. 6). This demonstrates that education can directly lower crime rates, with an even more significant impact on Black individuals. In California, where the crime rate among Black individuals is higher, actively improving their access to education could lead to significant positive effects.

Why do African Americans need better education? Economic issues have long been a significant barrier to students entering school, with minority groups being disproportionately affected. In the article *Exploring the Effects of Tuition Increases on Racial/Ethnic Diversity at Public Colleges and Universities*, it is mentioned that “Analyzed at the mean for all non-selective public institutions (approximately \$5,340 tuition/fees and Diversity Index of 40.1), a \$1,000 increase in tuition and fees would lead to a drop in campus racial/ethnic diversity of 2.6%” (Allen & Wolniak, 2019, p. 35).

Within the article *Keeping College Affordable for California Students*, it offers a solution that the government can help improve education in colored people. “Expanding financial aid to cover more costs could be especially helpful in improving completion and transfer at community colleges, which serve a large share of lower-income students as well as many older, first-generation, and underrepresented students of color” (Cook & Jackson, 2021, p. 10). This could include free cafeterias, free textbooks, and free commuting options. By helping older, first-generation, and underrepresented students of color better integrate into campus life, they, in turn, can influence their families and

encourage and support the next generation to attend college. This approach raises the overall educational level of society rather than relying solely on the elite class.

Simply increasing financial aid is not enough; it is also necessary to raise awareness about scholarships and grants so that more people in need can learn about these opportunities. As mentioned in the article, “The state and its educational institutions should work together to make students aware of their financial aid options and make it easier for them to apply” (Cook & Jackson, 2021, p. 3). Only by making it easier for those in need to understand and apply for these aids will they become more meaningful.

Results

The analysis focuses on how changes in California's legal landscape are related to increased smash-and-grab robberies. This includes examining the impact of Proposition 47, which was designed to reduce prison overcrowding but may have unintentionally contributed to a rise in property crimes. According to data from the Federal Bureau of Investigation's Crime Data Explorer, in 2020, there were 2,265,464 property crime offenders in California (FBI Crime Data Explorer, n.d.). The property crime rate for Whites is approximately 6%, for African Americans about 24.5%, and for Hispanics around 0.8%. These numbers highlight the significant impact of Proposition 47 on property crimes, especially considering the disproportionate crime rate among different racial groups.

The critical challenge is finding a way to lessen the burden on the criminal justice system while ensuring that businesses and communities are adequately protected. The findings highlight the urgent need for targeted law enforcement strategies, such as foot patrols and technological interventions, to address this emerging crime trend. The mentioned measures of strengthening foot patrols and introducing AI technology are forms of control over the current situation. Meanwhile, policymakers cannot ignore the importance of enhancing the enforcement of educational policies in low-income African American communities. It can serve as a preventive approach to reduce future crime rate effectively.

Discussion

Recent policy changes in California, such as raising the threshold for felony property crimes from \$400 to \$950 (Couzens & Judicial Council's Criminal Justice Services, 2016), have impacted the prosecution and deterrence of theft. More and more people are concerned that this could encourage small-scale thefts, including zero-dollar purchases and smash-and-grab robberies. Smash-and-grab incidents remain frequent among retailers in urban areas of California, with many business owners expressing strong dissatisfaction with the perceived lack of law enforcement. The increase in the felony prosecution threshold may unintentionally signal that petty thefts under \$950 will not be taken seriously, fostering repeated low-level criminal behavior. As a result, many businesses face frequent robberies, which increase operational costs and even threaten their long-term survival.

A significant limitation of this study is the availability of specific data on smash-and-grab robberies. Current statistics classify these incidents under broader categories based on the definitions of property crime and larceny theft. By definition, property crime involves offenses where someone steals, damages, or destroys someone else's property, while larceny theft refers to the unlawful taking of someone's property. Smash-and-grab robberies can be considered a smaller subset of these categories, but extracting precise data for this specific crime remains difficult.

Conclusion

The increase in smash-and-grab robberies is a complex issue involving social, economic, and legal factors. To address this, we need a two-pronged approach. First, we should strengthen immediate law enforcement measures, such as increasing foot patrols and using technology. Second, we must address long-term socioeconomic inequalities through

better education and financial support for vulnerable communities. Policymakers must carefully assess legal reforms, like Proposition 47, to ensure they do not unintentionally encourage more crime. Proactive policies and strong law enforcement can reduce smash-and-grab robberies and create a safer business environment statewide.

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