



Aggravated thefts

trends, offender backgrounds and sentencing patterns

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Abstract

Even though theft offences are a major crime category, the specific features of modern-day serious property crime have received relatively little recent attention in academic research. Using annual statistics on police-recorded crimes and their suspects, register data on convictions, and a random sample of court cases, this article examines recent trends and features of aggravated thefts in Finland. The analysis shows that numbers of offences have declined by one third and numbers of convictions have almost halved during 2010-2023, whereas offender backgrounds and sentencing outcomes have changed less. Somewhat surprisingly the share of foreign offenders among the convicted has declined. 70% of aggravated thefts are burglaries, a share that has likely increased as a consequence of Supreme Court rulings that increased the threshold value of very valuable property. Car thefts, on the other hand, comprise a negligible share of aggravated thefts.

Abstrakt

Även om stöldbrott är en viktig brottskategori har grova egendomsbrott fått relativt lite uppmärksamhet i den akademiska forskningen på sistone. Med hjälp av årlig statistik över polisanmälda brott och misstänkta, registeruppgifter om fällande domar och ett slumpmässigt urval av rättsfall undersöker denna artikel de senaste trenderna och dragen hos grova stöldbrott i Finland. Analysen visar att antalet brott har minskat med en tredjedel och antalet fällande domar har nästan halverats under perioden 2010-2023, medan gärningsmännens bakgrund och domarnas utfall har förändrats mindre. Något överraskande har andelen utländska gärningsmän bland de dömda minskat. 70 % av de grova stölderna är inbrott, en andel som sannolikt har ökat till följd av Högsta domstolens domar som höjde tröskelvärdet för mycket värdefull egendom. Bilstölder utgör däremot en obetydlig andel av de grova stölderna.

Key words:

aggravated theft; crime trends; register data; sentencing

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One could argue that theft offences have been on the sidelines in Nordic criminal policy discussion in recent years. A likely reason for this is that declining traditional property crime has been one of the major contributors to the so-called “crime drop” during the 21st century (Aebi – Linde 2010), whereas at the same time financially-motivated crime has taken on new forms in the cyberspace (Caneppele – Aebi 2019). This development can be seen in Finnish crime statistics as well – while theft crimes still remain the most common police-reported property crime in Finland, the number of (online) frauds has tripled in the last 15 years (Figure 1). The number of robberies has also increased in recent years.

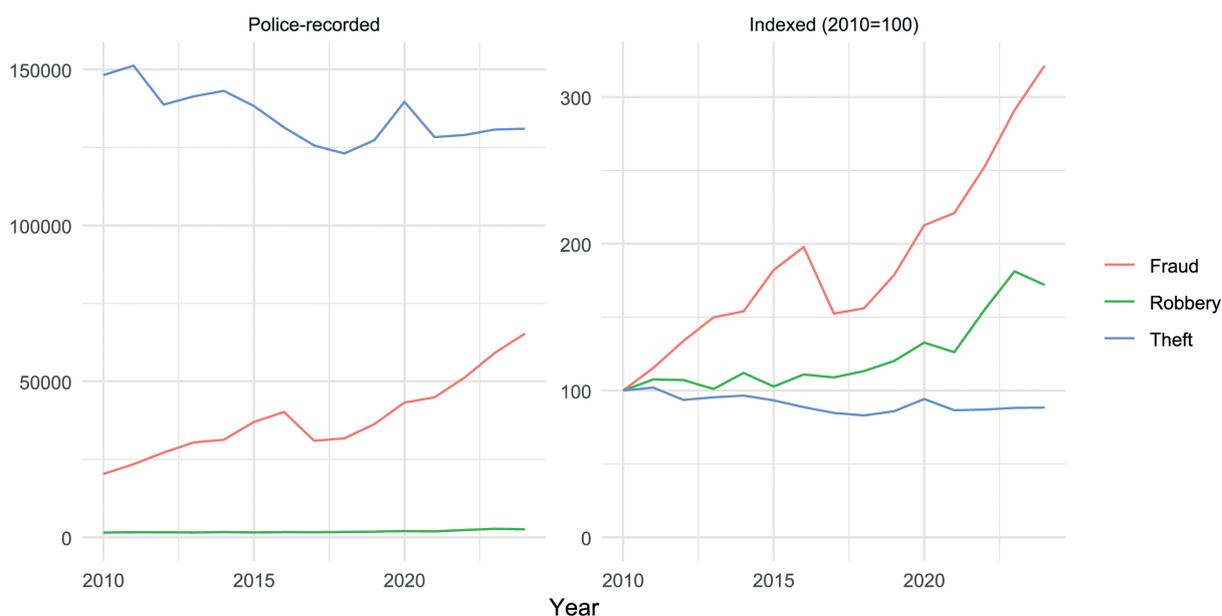


Figure 1. Trends in police-recorded thefts, robberies, and frauds in 2010-2024. Raw figures (left panel) and indexed (2010=100) trends (right panel). Source: Statistics Finland

Despite these changes in the makeup of property crime, theft crime remains an important crime category that has seen several transformations even before the cybercrime era. Prior research shows that offenders’ preferences for different items evolve over time (Quinn – Clare – Lindley – Morgan 2022; Clare – Quinn – Brown – Morgan – Sullivan 2024), and Clarke’s (1999)



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“CRAVED”¹ framework (Clarke 1999) has proven useful in understanding target choice (Smith 2018; Smith – Clarke 2018), a topic that has also been extensively studied in the context of domestic burglary (Vandeviver – Bernasco 2020). A systematic review on the relationship between the price of goods on the legal market and their theft rates indicates that the strength of this relationship depends on product type (Quinn – Clare – Lindley – Morgan 2023).

Important international trends in property crime include declining rates of vehicle theft and domestic burglaries. Engine immobilizers and related technologies that have made vehicle thefts more difficult to commit are a major reason for this (Ours – Vollaard 2014), and improved security (“security hypothesis”, see Farrell – Tseloni – Mailley – Tilley 2011) has been offered as a key explanation for declining rates of burglary witnessed in several countries (Tseloni – Farrell – Thompson – Evans – Tilley 2017). Both of these trends are clear in 21st century Finland, as well. Combined value of stolen property appears to have decreased fairly remarkably in the UK (Shaw – Morgan – Mineva – Hoare – Stevenson 2015). The transition away from cash, the “ultimate hot product” (Clarke 1999), to credit cards and other forms of digital payment is another important development modifying the opportunity structure for property crime.

Prior research shows that while infrequent in numbers, high-loss incidents make up a considerable proportion of total value of stolen goods (Shaw – Morgan – Mineva – Hoare – Stevenson 2015). Finnish research, however, is particularly scarce on the more serious end of the theft offences that cause the greatest harm. In Finnish criminal code these belong to the category of aggravated theft. The characteristics of typical aggravated thefts have not been empirically analyzed, and we know surprisingly little about these offences. The typical case has been defined as breaking into a commercial building during nighttime and stealing valuable property with an aim to sell it onwards (Tolvanen – Kallio 2023, p. 524). Another often-discussed form of aggravated theft is the “hit-and-run” burglary, committed as a series of domestic burglaries (SS 401/2019 rd, p. 1-2) where foreign citizens enter the country for a short period to break into pre-specified targets and leave the country shortly after. This suggests a higher degree of professionalism and planning in at least in a subset of aggravated thefts. Unfortunately, the aggregate statistics on both police-reported crimes and convictions do not provide much detail about these offences, making it difficult to get a complete picture of these crimes and their change over time.

This article examines the characteristics of serious property crime in Finland using multiple datasets, focusing mainly on developments after 2010. We start the article by describing the relevant provisions in the Finnish

1. According to Clarke (1999) “hot products” for thieves are concealable, removable, available, valuable, enjoyable and disposable.

criminal code, focusing particularly on the aggravating criteria in theft. We then present selected key statistics from publicly available sources on developments in police-recorded aggravated thefts. In the second part of the analysis, we present results from register data on all convictions including at least one aggravated theft in 2010-2023 and additionally examine a sample of court cases from 2017-2022 where the main offence in the conviction was an aggravated theft. We end the article by discussing the possible causes of the observed trends and explore avenues for further investigation of serious property crime.

1.1. *Finnish criminal code*

Aggravated theft is defined in Chapter 28, Section 2 of the Finnish criminal code. These provisions have remained unchanged since 1991. The minimum penalty for aggravated theft is four months of imprisonment, with four years being the maximum. To qualify as an aggravated theft, the offence needs to fulfill at least one of the specific criteria, on top of which theft needs to be considered aggravated when assessed as a whole. This means that a theft offence is not automatically sentenced as aggravated if one of the criteria is fulfilled, and the court needs to e.g. assess the factors and circumstances leading to the offence. At the same time, the clearer a single aggravating criteria is fulfilled, the lesser is the importance of the joint assessment (Kallio – Aaltonen – Erkkilä 2025). Similarly, if multiple aggravating criteria are fulfilled in the same offence, the higher the likelihood of the offence being considered aggravated as a whole is (HD 2013:57)

The aggravating criteria are:

- 1) the property stolen is very valuable,
- 2) the stealing causes particularly significant damage to the victim of the offence, taking into consideration the victim's circumstances,
- 3) the perpetrator takes advantage of the helplessness or distress of the victim of the offence,
- 4) in order to carry out the act, the perpetrator or an accomplice equips himself or herself with a firearm, explosives, or another similar dangerous instrument, or
- 5) the perpetrator breaks into an occupied residence

In sentencing, the value of stolen property is determined on the basis of its sales value in the legal market. Legislation does not specify the threshold of "very valuable" property, but according to Supreme Court precedents, the current threshold is somewhere between 16,000-18,000 € (Tolvanen – Kallio 2023, p. 524). In 2006, the threshold was much lower, around 5000 € (Tolvanen 2006, p. 479), but recent Supreme Court practice has harmonized the value across aggravated forms of property crime (e.g. aggravated fraud), which resulted in a higher threshold of applying this criteria for theft (Tolvanen – Kallio 2023, p. 524). The second criteria makes it possible to also consider



stolen property of lesser sales value in case the loss of the property can be considered particularly detrimental to the victim (Lehtonen – Vikatmaa 1977, p. 27). The third criteria also considers the victim, particularly situations where the theft victim is unable to resist the theft and is particularly vulnerable (Tolvanen – Kallio 2023, p. 525). In practice these cases typically include elderly or disabled/seriously ill persons or young children as victims (Heinonen 1972, p. 477-478; RP 66/1988 rd, p. 37).

While there are separate provisions in Finnish criminal code for robbery and aggravated robbery that include the threat or use of violence, carrying dangerous instruments is also listed as an aggravating criteria for theft, as such preparation increases the risk of high damage to persons or property (Lehtonen – Vikatmaa 1977, s. 32-33; RP 66/1988 rd, s. 38). If the weapons are used in the commission of the act, the crime should, as a general rule, be considered an aggravated robbery instead (Tolvanen – Kallio 2023, s. 526). The final aggravating criteria is breaking into a dwelling that is presently in active use. The criteria is not applied e.g. when a summer cottage is broken into during the winter season, or if the offender breaks into a storage room or a separate sauna building (Tolvanen – Kallio 2023, s. 526). This is a narrower definition than the one in invasion of domestic premises (Chapter 24, Section 1 and 11, see Friberg – Jareborg 2012, p. 149; Kallio – Erkkilä – Aaltonen 2025, p. 206).

2. Data

We use publicly available data on police-recorded aggravated thefts between 2010-2023 from Statistics Finland, including both crime trends and sociodemographic backgrounds of suspected offenders. The temporal coverage of these databases varies somewhat, but we focus mainly on developments starting in 2010. We also use conviction-level register data on all convictions in district courts from the same period, including all convictions where the offender was convicted of at least one count of aggravated theft. This data enables a more detailed analysis of the convictions than the corresponding publicly available conviction statistics. As the analyses are mainly based on complete data rather than a random sample, we do not present confidence intervals or related measures.

In addition to the quantitative data, we present results from an initial random sample of 500 convictions from district courts and courts of appeal from 2017-2022 on cases where the main offence was an aggravated theft. Sampling was done based on a list of all convictions fulfilling our selection criteria provided to us by the Legal Register Centre, who then also delivered us the conviction documents for the sampled cases. After excluding cases that did not belong to the sampling frame (e.g. offender not ultimately convicted of aggravated theft), we were left with 446 convictions (289 district

court, 157 courts of appeal). In this analysis, we are primarily interested in the district court cases, and mainly in the case characteristics that are not directly observable from aggregate statistics or register data.

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3. Results

3.1. Police-recorded crimes and suspects' sociodemographic background

Figure 2 and Table 1 presents selected statistics on police-recorded aggravated thefts. The figure shows that the number of reported crimes peaked in 2014, and has declined since. The table shows the numbers for the years 2010 and 2023 only, and the average of years 2010-2023. The number of police-recorded aggravated thefts has declined by about one third during 2010-2023, with particularly low rates after the Covid-19 pandemic (2021-2023). The number of solved crimes has declined in a similar way, thus keeping the ratio of solved vs. reported crimes fairly stable. Statistics Finland also reports the average length of police investigation. In line with other reports suggesting increasing case processing times throughout the criminal justice system, police investigations of aggravated thefts take an increasingly long time to complete.

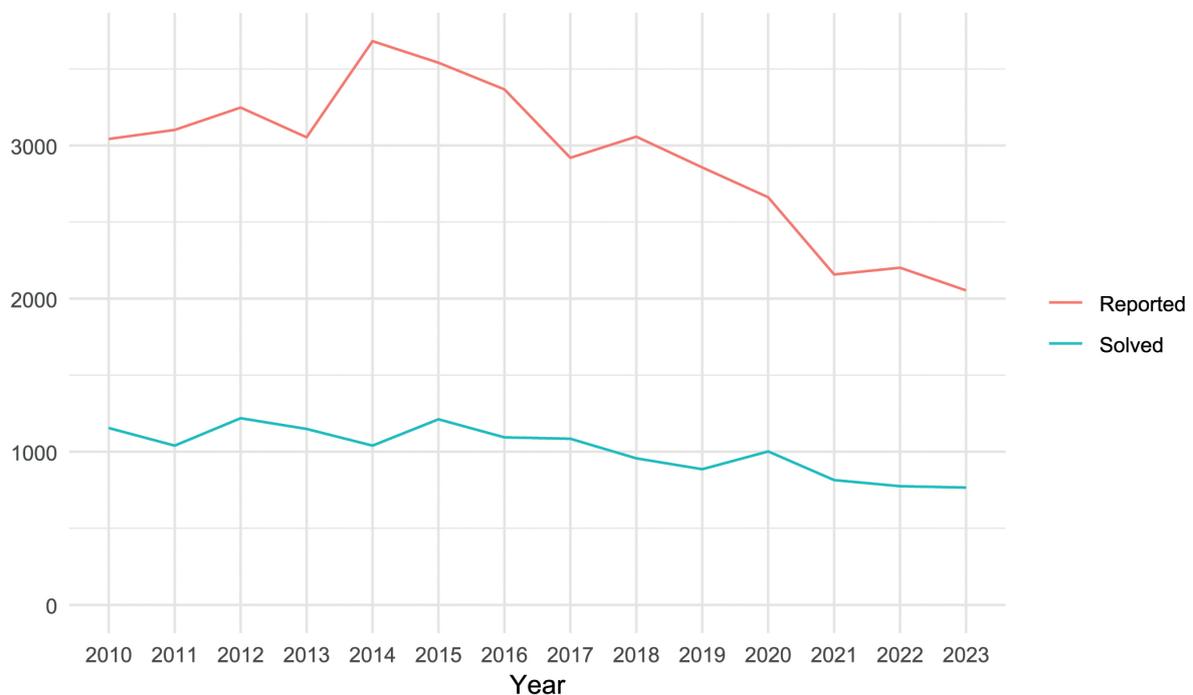


Figure 2. Police-reported and solved aggravated thefts 2010-2023. Source: Statistics Finland.



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The numbers of suspects are based on solved crimes only, and relatedly, several background measures are only available for individuals residing in Finland. Around 90% of suspects are men, but they are not particularly young, as only around 5% of the suspects were under 18 years old at the time of the offence, and almost 48% over 30. The share of older offenders has grown over time. Looking at the offenders for whom socioeconomic background can be measured (non-foreigners, on average 70% of offenders), most offenders are either unemployed or completely outside the labor force, as on average, only around 11 percent of them have been employed in the year prior to the crime. These offenders can thus be considered a disadvantaged group even among the offender population. Around 30% of the offenders live abroad, and 35% are foreign citizens. Compared to most other crime types, these shares are fairly high and give indications of the aforementioned hit-and-run crimes making up a substantial proportion of these crimes. Their share has, however, declined in recent years, a development that might be partially explained by travel restrictions during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Table 1. Statistics on police-recorded aggravated thefts 2010-2023 (source: Statistics Finland)

	2010	2023	Average 2010-2023
Crimes			
Police-recorded crimes	3043	2031	2915
Crimes solved	1155	766	1014
Ratio solved/recorded	38 %	38 %	35 %
Case processing time (police, days)	178	273	225
Suspects			
Number of suspects	2229	1288	1844
% Men	90%	86%	89%
% Under 18 years old	6%	5%	5%
% Over 30 years old	40%	54%	48%
% Employed in the previous year	11%	17%	11%
% Unemployed or outside the labor force	69%	65%	72%
% Living abroad	36%	19%	29%
% Foreign citizen	38%	27%	35%

3.2. District court convictions

The number of convictions including at least one aggravated theft has roughly halved between 2010 and 2023, and the total number of individual offences included in all convictions is almost 60% lower at the end of our follow-up. In 2023, aggravated theft was the main offence in around 88% of convictions including aggravated thefts, and this share has remained fairly constant over time. Convictions including a single aggravated theft and no other offences are fairly rare (around ¼ of convictions), and this has not changed during our

follow-up. On average, the individuals convicted of aggravated thefts are at the same time convicted of four other crimes.

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Table 2. Statistics on convictions. Own calculations from administrative register data of Statistics Finland.

	2010	2023	Average 2010-2023
All convictions including an aggravated theft	615	324	480
Total number of aggravated thefts in all convictions	1213	517	969
Aggravated theft as the main offence	565	286	443
Aggravated theft as the sole offence	160	76	119
Average number of aggravated thefts / conviction	2.0	1.6	2
Average number of other crimes / conviction	4.4	4.0	5
% Prison sentences	47 %	50 %	52 %
Average length of prison sentence (months)	13.5	10.6	12.7
% Suspended sentence	45 %	42 %	41 %
% Community service	7 %	4 %	5 %
Time from crime to conviction (months)	12.4	25.0	17.0

While causes of changes in sentencing outcomes cannot be thoroughly analyzed with the available data, some aggregate statistics can be presented. The proportion of offenders sentenced to prison has remained fairly constant at around 50%, and community service is used quite rarely as a sanction for aggravated thefts. The average length of prison terms has, however, declined slightly over time, from 13.5 months to 10.6 months. Conviction data confirms the finding of increasing case processing times seen before at the pre-trial investigation stage. Counting from the date of the first crime in the conviction to the conviction date, the duration has roughly doubled in the 14-year window. In 2010, it took slightly over a year to reach a conviction, whereas in 2023 it took over two years. This can be partly attributed to the pandemic, but case processing times were on the increase already before 2020.

Figure 3 shows trends in conviction patterns among offenders with and without Finnish personal identification number (PIN). We assume that the latter group mainly consists of mobile criminal offenders who should mainly comprise the “hit-and-run” offender group. As indicated by the police statistics, the number of aggravated thefts has been declining in both groups between 2010 and 2023. While trends are similar, there is a stark difference in the makeup of the convictions, as domestic offenders are, on average, convicted of 1.4 aggravated thefts in a single conviction, whereas the average among foreign offenders is 4.3. In contrast, the foreign offenders are typically convicted of fewer other offences (2.6) in comparison to offenders residing in Finland (5.9). Aggravated theft is almost always the main offence among foreign convicts (97%). These patterns



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are consistent with the notion of hit-and-run offences making up a substantial proportion of convictions for the foreign offenders.

Somewhat surprisingly, the case processing times of cases with foreign offenders are shorter (9 vs. 18 months), and foreign offenders are also convicted to imprisonment less often (41% vs. 55%). Although we cannot confirm it with available data, the first finding might be explained by the need to keep the suspects in pre-trial custody. The abrupt decline and sharp increase in case processing times in 2020-2021 observed in cases including foreign offenders is most likely explained by delays and travel restrictions during the pandemic. The causes of differences in sentencing between these two groups are more difficult to analyze, and we already saw that the crime mix in the convictions is rather different on average. Despite this, it seems likely that criminal history is a key explanation for the higher rate of imprisonment in the domestic group.

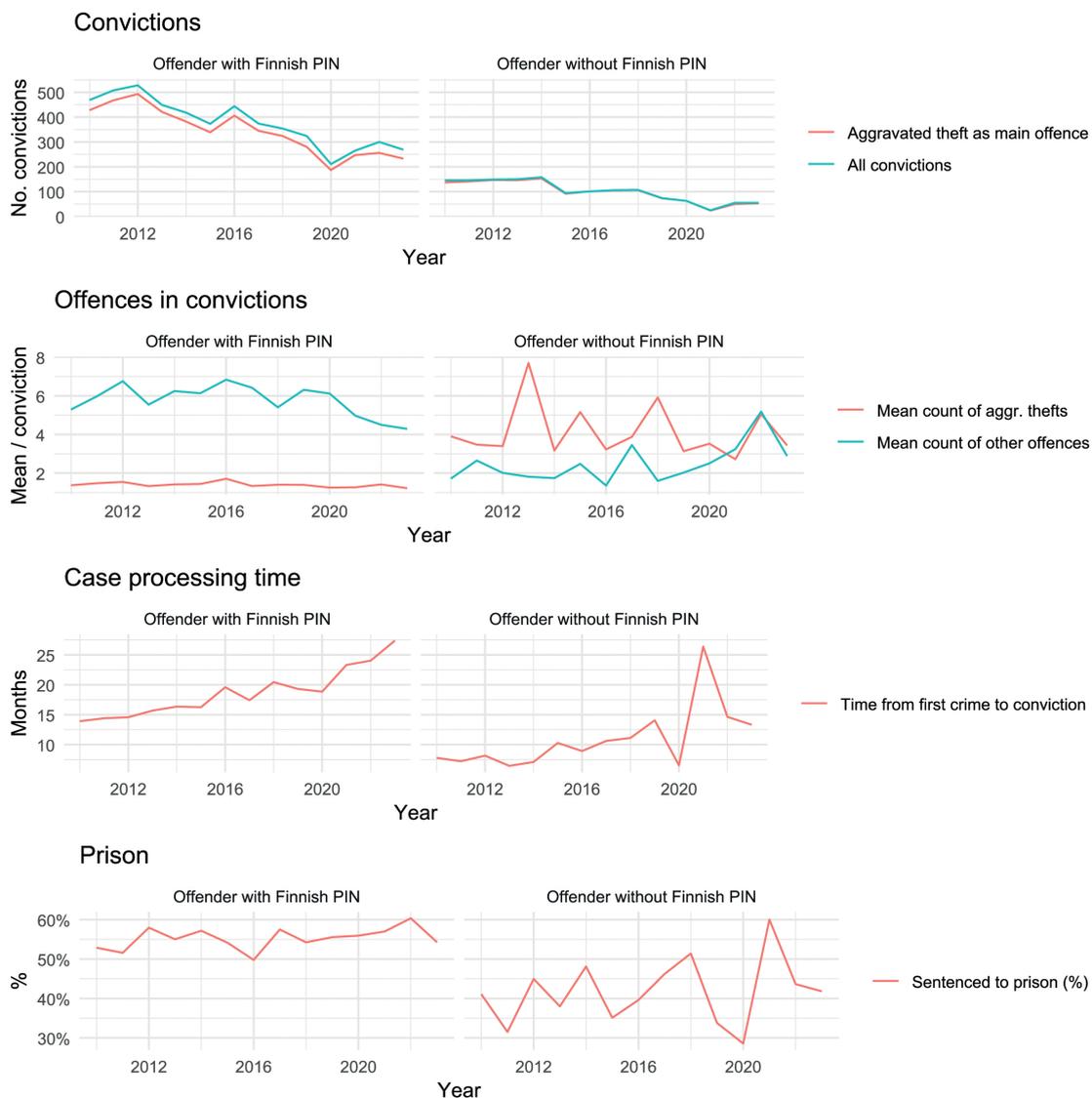


Figure 3. Convictions for aggravated thefts in 2010-2023 among offenders with and without a Finnish PIN. Own calculations from Statistics Finland data.



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Finally, looking at our sample of 289 district court convictions for aggravated theft, an overwhelming majority of these convictions, 70%, included a theft from a house or an apartment. The small number (3%) of thefts from summer cottages or villas indicates that these crimes rarely qualify as an aggravated theft. A smaller but still substantial share of crimes (16%) were thefts from construction yards, warehouses, and industrial buildings. 8% of convictions included a theft from a shop. A motor vehicle theft was included in 9% of convictions for aggravated theft. Interestingly, this category of offences included several thefts of all-terrain vehicles and motorboat engines, but only few car thefts.

Table 3. Theft location/target in convictions for aggravated theft 2017-2022. Proportion (%) of convictions (n=289). A single conviction can include multiple targets.

	n	%
House/Apartment	201	70 %
Summer Cottage/Villa	8	3 %
Shop	23	8 %
Industrial Building/Storage	47	16 %
Motor Vehicle	26	9 %
Other	9	3 %
Convictions	289	

4. Discussion

The aim of this article was to provide new empirical evidence on developments and patterns of aggravated theft in Finland. The first key result of the analysis is that the number of both police-recorded and convicted aggravated thefts has decreased since 2010. Suspects' backgrounds have remained fairly similar, offenders being mainly male, non-employed persons, but somewhat older on average than previously. The number of foreign offenders convicted of aggravated theft expectedly declined in the pandemic years, but more surprisingly their share was already on the decline before. Even though sentences for aggravated thefts often include auxiliary offences, aggravated theft is typically the most serious offence in the conviction. There are no major changes in the sanction type distribution, but prison sentences for aggravated thefts have become shorter in the most recent years. One likely explanation for this is that both the average number of aggravated thefts and other offences in these convictions has decreased. The findings also show that case processing times have become much longer than before.

The declining number of burglaries is likely to be the main driver of declining rates of aggravated theft. Despite this, burglaries are still by far the most common crime category, followed by theft from commercial and industrial locations. The rarity of car thefts likely mirrors the overall decline in car thefts,



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combined with the difficulty of stealing newer and more expensive cars (Ours – Vollaard 2014). Due to new Supreme Court rulings setting the threshold of very valuable property higher than before, older cars hardly reach the market value threshold of 16,000-18,000 euros. Car thefts are thus most likely sentenced as thefts (Chapter 28, Section 1) or as (aggravated) unauthorized uses (Chapter 28, Sections 7-8). The change introduced by the Supreme Court rulings probably also explains why burglaries now dominate this crime category: as thefts of less valuable property no longer qualify as aggravated offences, we are left with crimes that fulfill one of the four other aggravating criteria. Unfortunately the public conviction statistics do not include information about which aggravating criteria have been applied, leaving this conclusion yet somewhat uncertain.

All available evidence suggests that at the present thefts are rarely convicted as aggravated due to exceptionally expensive property being stolen. All conviction documents do not include precise information about the value of the stolen property, but a separate analysis of aggravated theft cases in courts of appeal (Kallio – Erkkilä – Aaltonen 2025) shows that in burglary cases the aggravating criteria of very valuable property is applied in only around 10% of cases. However, even in cases where property value does not reach the threshold, it may yet play a role in the overall assessment of offence severity (Kallio – Erkkilä – Aaltonen 2025, p. 208-209).

The decline in theft crimes in the early part of the 21st century appears to be over, and numbers of police-recorded offences have slightly increased since 2018 (Statistics Finland 2025). Much of this increase seems to be driven by shoplifting, where thefts of food products, alcohol and tobacco are becoming more common in police-recorded crimes. Theft of these items are unlikely to affect the numbers of aggravated forms of theft, and the typical provision in a shoplifting case is petty theft (Chapter 28, Section 3). Interestingly, the Supreme Court has in a recent ruling (HD 2023:32) taken the position that repeated cases of shoplifting should be considered as thefts instead. Such repeat offending is not likely to be rare, as a small minority commits the majority of all thefts (Pitkänen – Aaltonen – Suonpää – Heiskanen – Martikainen 2025). We may thus see a development where shoplifting cases continue to increase, and they are more often prosecuted and sentenced as thefts. This could cause a substantial shift in crime statistics and also affect the sentencing practice for theft offences as a whole.

A natural next step in the analysis of serious property crime would be to examine the increasing forms of crime, that is cybercrime generally and aggravated frauds more specifically. Statistics on police-recorded crimes also show that robberies in private places have been on the increase, and thus a comparison of these offences with domestic burglaries could inform us on whether the numbers of burglaries including threat or use of violence have increased. Changes in victim characteristics should also be analyzed in more detail. A potentially ageing and increasingly vulnerable profile of victims



could lead to aggravating criteria 2 and 3 being applied more frequently (Karkkulainen – Kallio – Wihuri 2025) in future, further altering the make-up aggravated thefts as crime category.

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HD 2013:57

HD 2023:32