

## **Package theft in a pandemic**

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### **The problem**

*Package Theft* refers to stealing a package after it has been left unattended (often on a porch) by a commercial delivery organization. This type of offence has only recently been recognised (see Hicks, Stickle, & Harms, in press). Nevertheless, it has gained significant attention in social media posts and news reports, which have colloquially referred to the crime as *porch piracy* and offenders as *porch pirates*.

### **What we know about package theft and how we know it**

Very little is known about package theft as few, if any, police agencies keep separate statistics on incidents. Survey data in the United States find that between 18% and 36% of households have been victims of porch piracy, and around 50% know of an acquaintance or family member who has been a victim. One study estimated there were 90,000 stolen, mis-delivered or missing packages each day in New York City alone. Further, this crime can be very costly, as the value of items being shipped has been steadily increasing.

Motivations for committing package theft have not been empirically assessed, but potential explanations for engaging in this offence include offender perceptions of financial or material gain and the possibility that some offenders act on impulses that pertain to thrill-seeking behaviour. It is also assumed to be low risk.

Currently, there is only one available study on offender behaviour of porch pirates; it used YouTube videos of the crime to examine the thefts, revealing important information about how porch pirates operate. Porch pirates often worked in groups, with one person serving as the driver or lookout as the other stole the packages. The two most important points that the study illuminated were that packages were visible from the roadway and packages were often stolen from residences near the road. This suggests a) that many offenders are opportunistic and rely heavily on visual cues on how easily a package can be taken and b) that offenders do not travel far from main roads to commit a theft. Moreover, packages with visible brand names or images on the box were stolen frequently and were typically of medium size. This indicates that porch pirates can expect unbranded packages to contain less attractive items and that less cumbersome packages are preferred because they are easier to carry and less conspicuous.

There appeared to be a dichotomy between, leisurely and hurried offenders. While some porch pirates took time to leisurely walk or drive very slowly through neighbourhoods before trespassing and stealing packages, others would effect thefts as rapidly as possible, often walking in a hurried manner or driving quickly during the process. It is evident that package theft requires little skill and can be completed quickly. This makes both prevention and law enforcement tricky.

Online retail consumers are more likely than ever to have their purchases shipped directly to their homes, a trend that is likely to continue. Retailers have seen a 30% increase in such shipments since 2012. Package theft is likely to grow in tandem with this trend. The exposure to this type of crime is linked directly with opportunity: the longer a package is left unattended outside a residence, the more opportunity a thief has to steal it.

### **What we think might happen in the COVID-19 pandemic**

In the short run, there will likely be an increase in package thefts during the COVID-19 crisis. Several factors will combine to influence the rise in thefts.

1. During quarantine (both government-ordered or self-imposed), there will be a substantial increase in home deliveries of a wide assortment of products, which will result in more opportunities for theft.
2. Due to this sudden shift in consumer behaviour, delivery services overwhelmed with demand may reduce hiring standards, forego background investigations, or have reduced capacity to respond to suspected internal thefts, which may lead to an increase in employee theft of packages.
3. While there is an increase in persons at home during quarantine, this may not increase capable guardianship where daily routine activities are interrupted and packages left unattended for more extended periods or forgotten altogether. For example:
  - a. The routine of collecting packages when returning home from school or work may be altered.
  - b. Residents working from home, caring for children not at school, or immersed in media of different kinds to pass the time, may not retrieve packages quickly.
  - c. Concern over potential contamination from mail and packages may result in some people deliberately delaying recovery of packages for hours or even days.

Long term, it is likely that consumers will continue to have packages delivered to their home either due to convenience or concern over continued threats of the virus. Therefore, after the initial increase due to the COVID-19 related issues, it is likely that package theft will continue to increase as more packages are delivered.

### Some ideas in response

#### Residents:

1. Remove packages left unattended as soon as possible
2. Conceal packages delivered in a container outside the home
3. Collect packages from store or parcel lockers
4. Deter porch pirates by installing cameras or alarms

#### Delivery Services:

1. Notify residents of delivery through electronic notification, knocking or ringing a bell
2. Conceal packages from the view of those who may pass by the home
3. Align residential delivery times to coincide with times when residents are likely to be home

#### Police:

1. Respond to, investigate, and track instances of package theft
2. Engage neighbourhood watch groups

### Relevant resources

Stickle, B., Hicks, M., Stickle, A., & Hutchinson, Z. (2019). Porch Pirates: Examining Unattended Package Theft Through Crime Script Analysis. *Criminal Justice Studies* 33(2), 79-95. Available here:

<https://doi.org/10.1080/1478601X.2019.1709780>

Hicks, M., Stickle, B., Harms, J. (2021). Assessing the Fear of Package Theft. *American Journal of Criminal Justice*. DOI <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12103-020-09600-x> open access link <https://rdcu.be/cenr2>

Stickle, B. (2020) Porch Piracy: Here's What we Learned After Watching Hours of YouTube Videos Showing Packages being Pilfered from Homes. *The Conversation*. Available [here](#)

*This is one of a series of short, speculative papers developed by the UCL Jill Dando Institute during the current pandemic. It is edited by Nick Tilley and Gloria Laycock and published by University College London. The raison d'être of the series is fully described at: <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/jill-dando-institute/research/covid-19-special-papers>*