As Weather Warms Up, So Do Opportunities for Crime

After being stuck inside all winter, many people anxiously await the arrival of the warm spring season weather. But, there are some who dread the potential increase in crimes caused by rising temperatures.

Tracy Siska, executive director at the Chicago Justice Project, says there is a correlation between rising temperatures and violent crimes.

“Violence increases, especially street violence, muggings, assaults, battery,” Siska says. “Across the boards most crimes increase.”

Siska speculates that the spike in crime may be due to the increase in the number of interactions that people have with one another during the warmer months. Warmer weather can bring together potential wrongdoers, victims, and belongings all in the same place.

Roger Humber, director of the Criminal Justice department at South University — Montgomery agrees that warmer temperatures alone may not be to blame for an increase in crime. Like Siska, he says the rise in social interactions may be a factor.

“A factor may be the heat, or it may just be that we are all active more during this time,” he says, adding that people may experience a form of heat aggravation in warm weather that causes them to lose their temper more easily.

Examining Factors Behind Crime Increase

Although many law enforcement departments across the country report increases in crime during warm weather months, the University of Chicago Crime Lab says there is no clear causal explanation for the pattern that is consistently applicable across different urban settings.

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“For example, it could be that it’s not the weather, but the academic summer break that leads to a spike in violent crime,” a Crime Lab representative says. “Juveniles are the most likely to commit crime, in general, so it seems almost obvious that crime may peak during summer months when students are off from school with idle hands.”

Chicago received a great deal of media attention during the spring and summer 2010 months, due to a rash of violent crimes in the city’s South Side area.

Siska says the level of violence during this time period wasn’t necessarily greater than usual, but the press put more emphasis on it than they have in the past.

The Crime Lab representative says statistics have shown that homicides in Los Angeles, which has warm temperatures most of the year, are the highest during July and August, but are almost as high during December and January as well.

“So despite the fact that juveniles contribute to a large portion of violent crime, there is nothing special about summer that causes an increase in offending in Los Angeles,” says the Crime Lab. “This could suggest that the relationship between homicide and summer in Chicago is due to temperature, rather than the fact that students are on summer break.”

The Crime Lab representative adds that these statistics could also simply mean that Los Angeles has found a better way to decrease the homicides that occur during the summer months than is used in Chicago.

“Adding to the tenuousness of the summer-break murder-spike theory in Chicago is the fact that the majority of school-age homicide victims in Chicago are actually not enrolled in school, making summer break no different a time of year for these individuals than when school is in session, aside from weather of course,” the Crime Lab representative says. “That is unless the addition of school children to the mix of individuals out and about in a given neighborhood
Somehow exacerbates pre-existing tension, which is again, hard to measure."

Regardless of the reason behind the violence, Humber says that law enforcement should provide extra resources in areas with the highest amounts of crime.

"Additional patrols in high-risk areas, shortening response time to calls for service during times when criminal activity is most pronounced may help," Humber says.

Siska believes that for the most part, there is adequate police coverage even in the areas of Chicago with the highest crime rates. He says that although some police officers could be transferred from areas with lower crime rates to the areas that see the most crime, it wouldn’t necessarily lower crime in the city.

"There’s a difference between prevention and displacement," Siska says. "It changes who was victimized."

Siska says that for the past 50 years, Chicago has been saying they were going to find a way to end the violence in the city and they haven’t, so something else needs to be done to stop it.

**Seasonal Safety**

Sergeant Dave Jacobson, of the Oak Park Police Department, in Oak Park, Illinois, says he has occasionally seen an increase in crimes that could be attributed to warmer weather, for example property crimes such as bike thefts and auto break-ins.

"With warmer weather, people tend to start bringing out and leaving out valuables, such as bicycles, lawn furniture, etc," Jacobson says. "This creates more opportunities for would-be criminals to commit theft."

"You also might see more fights between teenagers as they start to spend more time hanging out outside," Jacobson adds.

Although the spring can be a dangerous time in major cities, people are advised to always take safety precautions.

"Always be aware of your surroundings; when possible avoid unfamiliar or potentially unsafe situations; don’t leave valuables outside where they can easily be stolen; and never hesitate to call 911 if you observe anything suspicious," Jacobson advises.