

Are Shoplifters, Rioters, And Looters All the Same? – An Overview of Washington State’s Legal Distinctions



Although many of the protests related to George Floyd’s death have been peaceful, there have also been cases of looting and rioting across America. For instance, at the end of May, there was a significant clash in Downtown [Seattle](#).

Given these recent events, many Americans are curious about how laws apply to looters, shoplifters, and rioters. For the best advice in your case, we always recommend getting in touch with a professional attorney. However, we’ll share a few crucial details in this post to better understand the Evergreen State’s theft, looting, and rioting policies.

Theft vs. Robbery vs. Looting: What Are the Differences?

When we're discussing issues of theft, please keep in mind that not all situations can be treated the same. In fact, there are many different classifications for theft that vary on a case-by-case basis and every state has their own regulations.

For example, under [Washington State Law](#), there are three degrees of theft and two degrees of robbery. The main difference between theft and robbery is that robbery involves violence or the threat of violence—hence, robbery cases often carry more severe punishments.

In terms of petty shoplifting, most cases fall under Third Degree Theft, which involves stolen items valued at \$750 or less. Third Degree Theft is technically considered a “gross misdemeanor.”

Second Degree Theft involves stolen items worth between \$750 – \$5,000 and is considered a class C felony. Those charged with First Degree Theft, however, face a class B felony for stealing items over \$5,000.

Although looting can be a form of theft or robbery, the defining feature is that it takes place during a state of emergency (e.g., a hurricane or a riot). Unfortunately, many opportunists take advantage of these chaotic situations to steal whatever they can.

In most cases, [looters](#) can only be brought to justice if police catch them in the act. The degree of penalties looters could face depends on various factors like what they stole and whether they used physical force.

Could Property Owners Use Self-Defense Against Looters?

If you are a business owner, then you might be wondering whether you could defend your property from looters. Technically, you could use physical [force](#) only if you have a strong suspicion someone is about to injure you. Deadly force should be reserved for extreme cases when your life is threatened.

Having said that, legal experts strongly recommend putting preventative measures into place rather than resorting to vigilante-style violence. Consider investing in storm windows, hi-tech security systems, or reinforced doors to reduce the chances of your property getting vandalized. You should also take plenty of pictures of your property to share with insurance agents and lawyers.

How Are “Riots” Defined?

A riot is often classified under the label “criminal mischief.” To be charged with this offense, at least three people must be caught threatening violence, harming other people, or defacing property.

There are two different degrees of penalties associated with rioting. In the more severe case—listed as a class C felony—the perpetrator is caught with a deadly weapon. All other instances of criminal mischief are treated as gross misdemeanors. Again, each state has its own laws pertaining to classifying and penalizing criminal behavior.

Know Your Rights and Keep a Level

Head

In these unprecedented times, even the best people are quick to react defensively when they feel as though their safety or property is being jeopardized. It is more important than ever to keep a level head and understand what you legally can and cannot do.