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Understanding and Controlling Retail Theft

Diana Nelson and Santina Perrone

Shoplifting is widespread in retail establishments, yet accurate data on its extent are not available. Most retail theft is established by audit rather than witnessed, hence it is not clear whether the theft is perpetrated by customers, staff or suppliers.

A 2-3 per cent loss of sales to shoplifting can amount to about 25 per cent loss in profit. For some smaller establishments or those on otherwise tight margins, retail theft not only affects their productivity and competitiveness, but also threatens their economic existence. The costs of this crime are not merely confined to the "front line". Consumers become the victims, subsidising losses through elevated prices. Ultimately, society as a whole suffers when business viability becomes vulnerable.

Despite the significant problems posed by shop theft, there has been little systematic research into the issue in Australia. But it is only when we are armed with accurate information that we can look at effective preventive measures, which aim to minimise the extent of this crime.

Adam Graycar
Director

Ever since the 17th Century commercial revolution, which had a dramatic impact on urban retailing, people have been aware of the susceptibility of retailers to shoplifting. Its incidence appears to have skyrocketed since the 1950s, accompanying the movement from service to self-service stores necessitated by rapidly rising labour costs (Durston 1996). Although the increase in shop theft may be explained largely by the increased opportunities, it has perhaps been exacerbated by the growth of consumerism and "shopping" as a pastime.

Whilst shoplifting represents the most common indictable crime (Farrington 1999), and is a major problem for retailers, it is rarely regarded as a serious crime. Some argue that the term shoplifting is a euphemism which has historically served to trivialise the incident in the minds of offenders and society generally, and hence there is a preference for the adoption of terms such as shop-stealing or shop theft (Home Office 1998). Henceforth, we shall use the latter term interchangeably with retail theft to describe theft by customers from shops through the wrongful taking of merchandise, without paying for the goods, or without paying the full price. The unique aspect differentiating shop theft from other forms of theft, is a contextual one: the crime is perpetrated against stores and it occurs during operational hours (Krasnovsky and Lane 1998). A commonly held view is that as an offence committed against inanimate objects, stealing from shops is a "victimless crime". It is this process of pseudo-criminalisation which is said to foster a culture of permissibility or tolerance, which in turn acts to perpetuate the activity (Warr 1989, Farrington 1999).

The Extent of Shop Thieving

Although it is technically classified as a property crime, the consequences of shop thieving are both real and human. It is estimated

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that retail theft amounts to a loss to retailers of approximately 2-3 per cent of their sales. When this is calculated as a percentage of profit it becomes nearly 25 per cent (Shapland 1995).

Judging by overseas research, retail theft is a significant problem. It has been suggested that somewhere between \$US8-10 billion were lost in 1996 by retailers in the United States (Hollinger et al. 1997, Ryan 1997). In the United Kingdom "known shoplifting incidents" were found to total an average of 4,164,000 incidents with a loss of £656 million per year over the five-year period 1992-97 (Farrington 1999).

However, a lack of detailed data makes it difficult to calculate the true costs. Unfortunately, official statistics simply aggregate all shop stealing, thereby making it impossible to identify the proportion of stock "shrinkage" attributable to customer theft. "Shrinkage" is the term used to represent the shortages in stock/inventory, attributable to theft by customers, by employees, vendor fraud and clerical error, rather than losses as a result of burglary, robbery, arson damage and vandalism (Seider 1996). A 1994 National Survey of Retail Crime and Security in Britain, based on a cross-section of retailers responsible for 25 per cent of UK retail sales, found that these retailers experienced an average shrinkage rate of 1.62 per cent. Of this, customers were thought to be responsible for 43 per cent, staff theft for 30 per cent, suppliers 10 per cent and administrative error 17 per cent.

There are no statistical portrayals of the national landscape of retail theft in Australia. According to Bill Healey, Executive Director of the Retail Traders Association of NSW, the cost to retailers in NSW was around \$700 million per year (*Security Australia* 1996). In a recent report prepared for the Crime Prevention Unit of the South Australia Attorney-General's Department (1998), it was found that the majority of

retailers surveyed were unaware of crimes being perpetrated against them, although nearly 40 per cent of the retailers surveyed knew of incidents of shop theft that had occurred against their business in the last 12 months. Only 2.5 per cent of retail theft was witnessed, the remainder being established by audit. "This means that retailers have great difficulty in establishing when, who and how thefts occur in their stores" (Centre for Retail Research 1999).

The Costs of Retail Theft

Smaller businesses were found to suffer higher average rates of shrinkage than large firms. In fact, the collapse of many small businesses may be due to the inability to identify shrinkage and stem its tide. Larger retailers are in a better position to withstand financial losses. For example, Coles Myer Ltd has over 1700 retail outlets and in the 1994-95 financial year had sales of almost \$17 billion (Challinger 1996). Large chain stores with high volumes usually have a central security department which deals with crime at all outlets and are able to justify the expense of about \$US11,000 for the installation of electronic article surveillance (EAS) which has been found to be successful in reducing shrinkage (Burrow & Speed 1996, DiLorenzo & Clarke 1996).

The loss of goodwill also adds to the costs to the retailer. Customers dissatisfied because desirable items are no longer available for purchase and because of a lack of service while staff are absent to deal with offenders, take their custom elsewhere. While large retail stores might employ detectives to deal with going to court, for the small retailer, going to court may mean closing the shop in order to be able to attend (Canton 1987).

The increased competition between businesses which forces profit margins to be kept low has meant that there are fewer ways of absorbing or passing on losses

from retail theft. However, there is a reluctance on the part of retailers to spend money on gathering data on losses, even though electronic recording of stock movement and sales has made it much easier to determine how stock is "lost". Without investing in the tools to collect this data it is difficult to demonstrate the value of doing so. Small retailers, in particular, seem to need to be convinced of the value of being able to analyse where stock losses occur (Hope 1991).

However, it is society as a whole that ultimately shoulders the financial burden associated with this illegal activity. This comes in the form of increased prices to cover the business owners' expenses associated with pursuing retail theft incidents through the courts and with the installation of security systems or other measures to reduce its recurrence. Taxpayers are also required to fund the law enforcement costs associated with dealing with this crime (*Security Australia* 1996).

Limitation of Statistics

The recorded crime statistics relate to offenders apprehended and processed through the system, and based on self-report surveys and following studies it seems that only a small proportion of shop theft is detected. According to Williams, Forst and Hamilton (1987) the typical offender engages in approximately 95 offences prior to apprehension. Although other methods of data collection, such as surveys of retailers, store apprehension data, observational studies and self-report surveys, can usefully add to the picture drawn by official statistics, each method contains its own biases. For example, self-report surveys usually target young people, and little consistency was found in the results. These surveys suggested that somewhere between one in 40 and one in 250 incidents resulted in a conviction (Farrington 1999). Farrington (1999) highlights the inadequacies

of the available statistics by pointing out that according to police data there are about 111,000 recorded incidents of shop theft each year in the United Kingdom but using all available data this figure could be as high as 17 million.

It is therefore risky to draw conclusions based on such data. For example, an apparent downward trend may simply reflect an increasing reluctance on the part of the business community to report detected offenders or may reflect an increasing tendency by some districts to divert offenders away from prosecution towards unrecorded cautions. In 1986, for example, the Crown Prosecution Service issued guidelines to British police discouraging them from formally proceeding against very young and very old offenders, particularly in instances where the value of the items stolen was quite small (Farrington 1999). Moreover, a seeming surge in official rates may be accounted for by a groundswell of support for official reporting or for a change in police policy which supports the formal processing of referred offenders.

Why the Offence may not be Reported

It was found that less than one-half of apprehended shop thieves were referred to police (Centre for Retail Research) despite many stores displaying signs warning that shop thieves will be prosecuted (Burrows 1988). Although store policies differ markedly from business to business, generally, businesses were more interested in recovering the stolen property and avoiding adverse publicity. Retailers were much more likely to report an incident if it involved the loss of an expensive item. Reasons for not proceeding officially with apprehension included: the assumption by security staff that it was a first-time offence (30%); the offender admitted to the theft and agreed to return or pay for the items stolen, or when the goods were

considered to be indispensable (20%). Other reasons stemmed largely from a wish not to stigmatise the offender (Ocqueteau and Pottier 1996). Managers also often believed that little action would be taken by the police (Williams et al. 1987).

Items Stolen

Most popular stolen items in the United States and the United Kingdom are tobacco products (particularly cigarettes), health and beauty products (including analgesics, possibly because they are used in the manufacture of illicit drugs), recorded music and videos, and apparel ranging from athletic shoes to children's clothing, with a preference for "designer labels" (Hayes 1997, Clarke 1999). Within these categories the items most frequently stolen tend to be expensive and in high demand by offenders and by the store's honest shoppers. Men's clothing and household furnishings—judging from items in the possession of those apprehended for shop theft—were found to be less frequently stolen. Clarke developed the acronym CRAVED to summarise the factors which make items attractive to thieves: "concealable, removable, available, valuable, enjoyable and disposable" (1999, p. vi). However, items confiscated from offenders are not necessarily representative of all items stolen. Those recorded as stolen may reflect the areas which are more closely guarded by in-store security.

A useful basis on which to analyse incidents of shop theft is the routine activities theory developed by Cohen and Felson (1979). This suggests that the decisions people (both potential offenders and potential guardians) make as they go about their daily routine in effect create or reduce the opportunities for the commission of a crime. The theory proposes that for a crime to occur, a motivated offender needs to happen across a likely target over which there is little guardianship (Hayes 1997). The

move towards self-service stores (which provide likely targets) with fewer shop assistants (guardians) has created a conducive environment for motivated offenders. The competitive nature of the retail market means that businesses have to decide whether customer accessibility to goods (which is believed to increase sales) and the labour cost savings associated with fewer staff on shop floors, outweigh the costs of losses through customer theft.

Ways of Shop Stealing

There are numerous ways by which shop theft can be effected, apart from the "grab and run" or the concealing of goods either on the person or in bags, babies' prams and so on, which are the most common methods. Shops are also defrauded by:

- removal of packaging which is then discarded within the store (Apart from giving the appearance of being "used", this may also remove any electronic tagging which could set off an alarm);
- the switching of a price tag for one of a lesser value;
- refund fraud—the stealing of items which are then returned for a cash refund.

Who is the "typical" Shop Thief?

There are inherent biases built into the apprehension process when attempting to identify the "typical" shop thief. Hence, the data may reveal more about the sorts of offenders targeted by store security, than provide an accurate profile of all offenders. Store detectives may consciously or unconsciously look for individuals fitting a particular physical profile or may be present only at certain times favoured by certain types of shop thieves. Electronic surveillance may provide a less skewed picture than store personnel but may fail to detect seasoned professionals who have devised sophisticated techniques of overcoming the

watchful eye of technology (Hayes 1997). The decision on whether or not to proceed with official intervention is very much an arbitrary one, for example a little old lady or priest is more likely to attract a sympathetic response than would a punk youth with an “attitude”. This may mean that for a “respectable” few, the risks of conviction are much smaller. Two women who assist stores in reducing shop theft losses, partly through posing as shop thieves themselves, warn against “overlooking the middle aged, well dressed women” (Williams n.d., p. 12). Data indicate that retail theft is most prevalent amongst adolescent youth—but they may just be more likely to arouse suspicion, and therefore to be apprehended. Research based on both official statistics and self-report studies, however, consistently confirms that individuals below age 20 are the most common offenders. There is little evidence from apprehension data or self-report surveys to support the view that the elderly are responsible for a large amount of retail theft (see Klemke 1992). Studies found that the number of people engaged in retail theft and the frequency with which they offended decreased with age (Klemke 1992, Farrington 1999).

Young people face all sorts of challenges and emotions during the maturation process, and this may well be a contributory factor for the prevalence of shop theft amongst this age group. A study on teenage offenders suggested that teens who had a close relationship with their parents were more able to withstand peer pressure to steal from shops (Forney, Crutsinger and Arnold 1996). This highlights the relevance of socialisation programs and awareness-raising campaigns which emphasise the anti-social nature of retail theft, to bring about a changed approach to this crime. Hayes (1997) suggests that certain items (such as condoms) may be stolen simply because the offender is too embarrassed to purchase them

legitimately. This suggests that a socialisation campaign which eliminates the embarrassment from purchasing “personal items” may be effective in reducing this type of theft.

Shop stealing has historically been regarded as a crime which is predominantly engaged in by women, and many earlier studies found that the majority of apprehended offenders were female (Klemke 1992). However, more recent studies indicate that males engage in shop theft in greater numbers than females (Kallis and Vanier 1985, Sarasalo et al. 1998, Farrington 1999). Based on police and court records from the United Kingdom, Farrington (1999) found that in 1996, 70,437 males were officially recorded as offenders compared with 40,565 females. This finding was supported in self-report surveys (Farrington 1999).

Research indicates a high percentage of unemployment amongst apprehended offenders; this includes youth, housewives and old-age pensioners (Sarasalo et al. 1998). Lamontagne et al. (1996) in their study based on Canadian municipal court records from 1986 to 1991 found that 57.3 per cent of the subjects were unemployed.

Just as those who steal from shops cannot be classified as having distinctive characteristics, the methods used and frequency with which individuals undertake the activity covers a broad range. Richard Moore (1984) surveyed 300 convicted offenders who can be categorised as shown in Table 1. While this provides a useful basis for examining the characteristics of shop thieves, one must be cautious about drawing generalisations from this small sample, especially as the study is based on convicted offenders.

What Motivates the Shop Thief?

Although it is generally agreed that there are two categories of shop thieves—those that steal for rational reasons and those that do so for non-rational reasons—

these groups are not as clearly defined as popularly perceived. There is no way to estimate with any degree of certainty the proportion of individuals who steal from shops for psychiatric or other pathological reasons, or for the excitement/complying with peer pressure compared with those that steal because of lack of money, being too embarrassed to purchase an item, or being prohibited from purchasing items such as cigarettes and alcohol if under-age (Hayes 1997). Only a small number (less than 5%) of people apprehended for shop theft could clinically be described as kleptomaniacs; however, depression and feeling outcast from society seemed to be significant contributory factors in this crime (Krasnovsky and Lane 1998). Geason and Wilson (1992) suggest that thieving from shops is very often related to a combination of both economic and emotional stress factors.

In a study comparing diagnosed kleptomaniacs with “other” shop thieves, Sarasalo, Bergman and Toth (1997) found that many offenders exhibited similar characteristics to those that identify kleptomaniacs, such as, achieving a sense of elation following the theft and discarding items. They suggest that the medical treatment provided to diagnosed kleptomaniacs may also be effective in reducing shop stealing by other offenders.

The Australian Institute of Criminology is presently collating data on drug use by arrestees in several sites around Australia under its Drug Use Monitoring in Australia (DUMA) project (see Makkai and Feather 1999). This information may provide useful information on the relation between drug dependency and shop theft.

Controlling Shop Theft

Various methods of making it more difficult to steal goods have been adopted. These range from relatively simple display practices such as putting fewer items on display or placing stickers on

Table 1: *Categories of Offender*

Category of Shop Thief	Frequency	Motivation	Response when apprehended	Percentage
Impulse	Often only once or twice	Not planned	Exhibited shock, shame and guilt	15.4
Occasional	3 to 10 times in last year	Enjoyed the challenge	Admitted guilt but downplayed the seriousness of the act	15.0
Episodic	Periodic episodes	Exhibited emotional and psychological problems	Compliant; usually requires treatment to alter behaviour	1.7
Amateur	Regular (often weekly)	Economically rewarding	Admitted guilt but usually downplayed previous acts	56.4
Semi-professional	Frequently (at least once a week)	Took more expensive items; only type who did so for resale purposes	Likely to have a "prepared story"; and to claim unfair treatment if the story is rejected	11.7

Source: Moore 1984, cited in Klemke 1992.

packages, to sophisticated electronic surveillance mechanisms. In the United States, Save Mart uses display racks which limit the number of items that can be grabbed at one time. They also place stickers on items which indicate that the item came from Save Mart—this reduces the resale options for the goods (Weinstein 1998). Items which are attractive as targets, such as CDs or other small valuable items, are secured by displaying only the empty packaging or placing them within glass cabinets. Improved surveillance by natural means (lower display racks, convex mirrors and wider aisles) and by electronic means (closed circuit security cameras) all contribute to making theft more difficult. The use of video surveillance technology has been used to maximum effect by linking the CCTV system to event alarms. When an alarm sounds, the camera automatically targets the specific area, providing the store with visual documentation and allowing it to monitor alarm response time. Results were said to be about a 21 per cent decrease in shop theft in 1998 compared to the previous year (*Chain Store Age* 1999).

Technology constantly allows new ways of tagging stock to inhibit shop theft. The use of ink tags which damage clothing with ink stains if not removed by the correct device has the advantage of being non-electronic, thus reducing its cost and the need for maintenance. Ink tags have been found to be far more effective than the use of detection tags which the more sophisticated offenders have learnt to overcome. When ink tags were adopted in four stores in a US

study, shortage rates were reduced by more than 40 per cent to 2.4 per cent of sales (though the latter figure includes shortages covered by employee theft and administrative error as well as shop theft) (DiLonardo and Clarke 1996). There has also been a move towards "source tagging" in which tags are embedded in the article or its packaging as part of the manufacturing process (Seider 1996). There is, of course, the danger that reliance on security devices may generate a sense of complacency, which may leave businesses more vulnerable to the more professional offenders who work out ways of overcoming whatever obstacles are placed before them. As Hayes (1996, p. 57) emphasises "[T]echnological controls are effective. But ... security managers would do well to take advantage of a broader methodology which incorporates the value of a well-trained floor staff. Technology works best when reinforced by motivated people and supported by community standards." The possibilities of random, unpredictable behaviour which store personnel can provide make them most effective in interfering with shop thieves' strategies. As pointed out by Williams (n.d.) stores can build a reputation for effectiveness against shop theft which makes them less likely to become targets.

Conclusion

For retailers, shop theft is really only a problem when it is detected; otherwise it can only be recorded as shrinkage (Shapland 1995). It seems that many retailers prefer not to measure losses

caused by shop theft. However, if such data were available retail business owners would take steps to curb these losses rather than addressing the issue through increased prices. While retailers do not look more closely at the losses resulting from goods being readily displayed, they will continue to have to incorporate the cost of shop theft in their pricing structure. This has more impact on small retailers than large ones, who have a greater range over which to spread these costs.

The benefits of taking preventive measures against retail theft need to be emphasised by sound data on the costs involved and the savings accrued. At present we simply do not have enough knowledge about retail theft in Australia. We require a national information system on shop theft to provide more reliable data about patterns and trends. The Australian Institute of Criminology is presently conducting a survey with the Council of Small Business Organisations of Australia to elicit additional data on the incidence and impact of crime on the small business sector. As the impact of crime on small businesses differs from large businesses, the approaches of each may need to be different. Evaluation of crime prevention measures used by stores and the approaches adopted by police and the courts is also necessary.

Retail thieving can be viewed as a crime or as a disorder. Some engage in the activity simply because it is anti-social and presents an exciting challenge. Others do so for need or profit. For a smaller number, the

motivation lies in their psychological processes which compel the taking of goods without any rational explanation. Because there is no clear distinction between these types of offenders, further research could assist in prescribing when a medical treatment or other diversionary approach would be appropriate or when the criminal justice process is more suitable. As Farrington (1999) points out, we need to establish whether there are a large number of offenders or whether a small number of people is committing a large number of offences. The available data does not provide this information.

Retail theft cannot be stopped simply by increasing security and enhancing stock protection on the shop floor. We must also develop a self-sanctioning community conscience, by disseminating facts about the extent of business victimisation, and publicising both direct and indirect costs of this activity. There is a need to shape community perceptions and attitudes by circulating an "anti-retail-theft" message that alters the socialisation process which makes this type of theft an acceptable activity to some. Retailers cannot be expected to do this alone. It is also in the Government's interests to reduce this crime because of its effects on society as a whole.

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