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International Summaries

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From Great Britain

The Prevention of Shop Theft: An Approach Through Crime Analysis

Crime analysis guides the selection of the right combination of preventive options to deter crime in a specific store.

By Paul Ekblom

Introduction

Shoplifting* in Great Britain is judged by the Association for the Prevention of Theft in Shops (APTS) to account for the loss of goods worth one billion pounds per year (the March 1987 currency exchange rate for the British pound is \$1.61 per pound).

Larger stores have traditionally dealt with shoplifting by employing store detectives to arrest and deter offenders. The effectiveness of this policy as a means of controlling crime has yet to be fully assessed, but it clearly carries public costs. Such costs are incurred in the administration of the criminal justice system since handling shoplifters occupies much police time and contributes significantly to the workload of the courts and probation service.

Not only are there costs to the public, but also considerable costs to the stores themselves in maintaining the store detectives and other security staff.

Summarized from *The Prevention of Shop Theft: An Approach Through Crime Analysis*, by Paul Ekblom, with permission of Home Office Crime Prevention Unit, 50 Queen Anne's Gate, London, SW1H 9AT, England. © British Crown Copyright. NCJ 103949. Summary published March 1987.

*The term "shoplifting" is to some extent a euphemism for shop theft; the two words are used here interchangeably.

The public and private costs of the stores' reactive approach to shop theft, together with the constraint on its impact on crime, suggest that an alternative approach is needed. At first sight preventive measures seem to have the potential to bypass the constraints on current practice without raising the number of offenders to be processed. Store managers find it hard to choose from the many preventive techniques available. Information on the extent and location of thefts in their store, and the methods used by the thieves, is central to such choice. In many stores the information exists but is not collated, remaining in the minds of store detectives, in the records they keep of incidents, and sometimes in the stock control system. One method for collating this information for use in generating preventive options is crime analysis, the first of several stages in the preventive process.

The preventive process

The preventive process aims to obtain a clear picture of the nature of the crime problem, highlight preventive options, and once these are implemented, check on their impact.

Crime analysis: defining the problem

Crime in a town, a street, or a store often occurs in patterns, with particular "trouble-

spots" clearly distinguishable from a background of more "random" offending.

Choice of strategy: deciding what to do

Identifying criminal opportunities is followed by devising strategies to block them. For shoplifting, strategies can be devised under the familiar headings of store and display design, sales methods and technology, alarms, store detective deployment, and involvement of other staff in surveillance.

Implementation: putting the plans into practice

Crime prevention is often only a secondary consideration of store management, especially where increasing customer flow and sales appears a better way of raising profits than does decreasing the losses. Preventive initiatives are most likely to appeal to management if they are attached to sales-oriented changes—such as computerization of stock control, or the kind of major revision of store layout and furnishing that takes place every few years.

Evaluation: is it working?

Evaluation involves a hard-headed look at the impact on crime of the measures adopted, the financial and other costs, benefits and side-effects, and identification of difficulties.

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To assess the contribution of crime analysis to preventing shop theft, a case study was conducted. The study sought first to see whether crime analysis can generate sensible preventive options for store management; second, whether the options implemented are cost-effective. This report describes the results of the crime analysis and the recommendations to management it generated.

HMV: a case study

During 1984, the London Metropolitan Police became concerned that the Oxford Street branch of HMV, a national chain of music shops, was referring increasing numbers of young shoplifters to them. By 1985, the problem had grown: in the first 2 months, of 1,074 arrests handled by the Shoplifting Unit at Marylebone Police Station, 420 (39 percent) came from the Oxford Street store, which was just one of the extremely large stores in one of London's premier shopping areas.

Cassettes account for the bulk of the store's sales. It also sells records, videotapes, and various accessories. At the time of the study it also sold computers and computer tapes. It has four sales floors, connected by stairs and elevators, and two entrances onto the same street, only one of which is normally in use, permanently supervised by a uniformed security guard. The store employs some 80 sales staff, six uniformed security guards, and five plainclothes store detectives. Its security systems include closed circuit television (CCTV) and an alarm system on the more valuable goods, such as videotapes. It has a daily sales turnover valued at 60-70,000 pounds.

There are three reasons for this store's comparatively high rate of arrests. First, a relatively large number of store detectives are employed in what is a fairly compact store. Second, cassettes are the quintessential target for theft: they are light, easily pocketable, attractive to the young, and have a relatively high unit value. Third, the store's sales method involves leaving tapes and records in their containers in so-called "live displays," rather than in the more traditional "master-bag" system, in which only the containers are available for shoppers to examine or take to the cash desk, where sales staff reunite them with their contents.

The case for prevention at HMV: limitations on store detective impact

Approximately 20,000 customers enter the store on a busy day, and assuming that one in every hundred will steal something, there are possibly 200 offenders scattered among the legitimate customers, faced by four store detectives on duty at any one time. Since each detective on average catches about one shoplifter per day, the detectives are obviously missing a lot of thieves in spite of their having a higher rate of arrests than many other stores. In practical terms it is not feasible to increase the arrest rate by hiring more detectives, as HMV would need to employ nearly 17 times the present number, working at peak efficiency, to have the capacity to catch and process all 200 offenders. The problems associated with such a strategy are obvious and suggest that management might more thoroughly explore preventive strategies.

Crime analysis: defining the crime problem at HMV

Defining the problem begins with crime analysis. The ideal source of data for crime analysis is a detailed stock control system. The one HMV uses unfortunately shed little light on the precise whereabouts of theft losses, so effort was focused on the store detectives' records. An expanded record sheet was developed in cooperation with the detectives covering not only location of incidents but a range of other information including methods of theft and descriptions of the offenders caught.

Location of goods taken

The store detectives' records show that crime at HMV is strongly clustered. Of some 40 sections of the store, offenders most frequently stole from three: rock and pop (31 percent), computers (28 percent) and soul and disco (14 percent)—altogether accounting for 73 percent of incidents. When the total value of the stolen goods is considered, the computer section represented 36 percent of the grand total. It appears to be the most worthwhile target for prevention, although rock and pop and soul and disco are also prominent.

Type of property taken

Cassettes were the most popular stolen goods. Music cassettes (56 percent) and

computer cassettes (22 percent) accounted for 78 percent of the total number of items stolen and recovered over the study period—and due to the higher unit value of other goods (especially videotapes)—a slightly smaller proportion of the total value. Videotapes, LP's, single records, and accessories were stolen in smaller quantities.

The offenders

Some 52 percent of offenders were aged 13 to 16 (the peak age at this store); 9 percent were younger; 30 percent were aged 17 to 24; and 9 percent were 25 and over. As well as being the province of the young, shoplifting at HMV is also predominantly a male offense (91 percent of those arrested). These statistics are clearly contrary to the popular stereotype of the shoplifter as a middle-aged woman.

More than 90 percent of the juveniles arrested were first offenders in terms of criminal/police cautioning records. This provides further grounds for seeking to replace the traditional reactive approach with crime preventive measures.

Methods of stealing

Some 89 percent of offenders arrested had simply concealed the goods, hoping to walk out undetected. Another 7 percent were attempting a price swap, peeling off the label from a high-value cassette and replacing it with one of lower value. The place of concealment most commonly reported was the pocket (34 percent). The next was in a bag (29 percent, with nearly half of these in an HMV bag). Another 22 percent of offenders concealed items in clothing; 10 percent hid them in other places, such as beneath hats, within magazines, or in a Walkman personal stereo. Ten percent did not conceal the goods.

Significantly, while concealment was the principal method of theft, store detectives rarely spotted it without prior suspicion of the individual in question. Less than one in five of the cues that made the detectives suspicious of customers related to the act of concealment itself or to related signs, such as bulging clothing. Table 1 lists some factors that made store detectives suspicious.

Table 1: Factors that made store detectives suspicious*

Preparatory behavior of offender		Concealment	
Looking about (including "eyes")	131	Saw act of concealment	16
Looking at camera	4	Saw removal of tape from box or unwrapping of box	4
Looking at cashiers	2	Holding goods close to body/clothing	10
Heard planning to steal	2	Large or open bag	4
Looked at same area of shelf for long time	3	Picked off price label	3
Choosing goods very quickly	2	Goods openly exposed	2
Replacing goods on wrong shelf	2	Other	6
Walking holding cassettes	7		
Walking a long time/suspiciously	4		
Walking holding cassette separately from case	3		
Other	3		
		Total	45
Total	163	Wrong people/wrong place	
		Juvenile(s) in particular section/"messaging about"/breakdancing	12
		Other	5
		Total	17
		Security systems	
		Tape seal on HMV bag broken/bag open	4
		Alarm activated	1
		Other	3
		Total	8
		Grand Total	265
Nervousness			
Nervous (including "sweating immensely")	16		
Kept dropping cassettes	1		
Total	17		
Shopper out of place			
With goods in wrong section/on wrong floor	9		
On stairs/in elevator with goods	5		
Approaching stairs with cassette in hand	1		
Total	15		

*The figures relate to elements mentioned by store detectives on the record sheet—more than one element may have been cited in a given incident.

Identifying preventive options

The most obvious strategy to prevent shop theft at HMV would be to abandon the "live display" system—but management is reluctant to do this because it would reduce sales and require more staff and floor space. The crime analysis exercise suggests some alternative preventive approaches which are less likely to jeopardize profit. Most of the options flow directly from the research; a few are more speculative.

Cassettes are the obvious target for theft prevention, and many of the preventive measures described below could be concentrated in the store's three key sections for greater economy and impact. Sales considerations permitting, the sections could be brought together into one high security area.

Preventing concealment. As one means of coping with concealment, "bag parks" were recommended in the report of the Home Office Standing Committee on Crime Prevention in 1973; however, 10 years later a followup report states that few British stores have implemented the idea. With cassettes so easy to conceal there is a chance that the use of a bag park would simply mean that cassettes would disappear into pockets instead. However, putting better seals on HMV bags containing legitimate purchases would prevent some theft.

Layout. To complement making the act of concealment more conspicuous, store layout and design can be altered to improve surveillance by store staff. Reducing the possibilities for hiding property while at or near the display shelves might involve repositioning the

shelves and display cases to improve visibility for staff; reducing the height of the display cases; incorporating see-through sections in the display cases; or elevating the cashier counters, which would have no impact on selling space.

Aids to surveillance. An important principle in design for surveillance is to ensure that the arrangements give the advantage to the staff rather than to potential shoplifters. CCTV offers considerable advantage in this respect. However, while CCTV was already in use in the store, it is significant that none of the offenders arrested in the study period was caught with the use of CCTV. The number of thefts the cameras deterred, however, remains unknown.

Alarms. Once successfully concealed, stolen goods can be detected by electronic alarms that respond to tags. Their scope is large and increasing as technology advances. The actual economic preventive value of alarms now available depends upon several factors. The first is the ease with which they can be defeated by peeling tags off or by "electronic countermeasures" (which in some cases can be simple to use and make). Second is the dependence of the alarms' effectiveness on the location of sensors.

The number of "professional" thieves who escape the store detectives' attention at HMV is unknown, but the shoplifters actually caught are predominantly young and inexperienced. Under these circumstances, installing elaborate systems in a misdirected effort to cope with the greater skills and nerve of professional thieves would not be cost-effective. Equipment that heightens a young offender's sense of risk may be of particular value, and this could be exploited by clearly publicizing the existing alarm system.

Deterrence—*influencing the decision to steal*

Introducing many of the preventive measures just described could very easily increase arrests. But this is not what is intended; a general strategy of deterring offenders by raising arrest levels is neither desirable on public cost grounds, nor is it feasible for the store to pursue as standard practice.

More generally, deterrence does have a place in a preventive context as long as

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the measures used to dissuade people from stealing rather than catch them once they have stolen. As a general principle, the decision to steal seems to depend less on the degree of punishment than on the perceived risk of being caught. One way of raising perceived risk is by prominently posting notices warning that store detectives and physical security systems are in operation.

Store detectives pose little risk to shoplifters because the detectives are intentionally invisible in plain clothes. So while employing *some* store detectives (and publicizing the fact) may deter, it is reasonable to argue that beyond a certain minimum, increasing the numbers of detectives will have no effect on the offenders' sense of risk. Risk could be heightened by increasing the proportion of security staff in uniform.

Summary of preventive options

For greater cost-effectiveness, many of the measures suggested below should be targeted on the three key areas in the store studied: computers, rock and pop, and soul and disco. The aim of the measures proposed is to physically block the act of concealment, and heighten the would-be shoplifter's sense of risk, thereby reducing the numbers arrested.

Layout and design

- Raise the checkout areas, lower the height of display cases or make them partially see-through, and improve lines of sight.
- Reduce crowding, particularly at lines and around the computer display area, by increasing space between the displays and installing line barriers, for example.
- Bring the key target areas into one high security zone.

Security systems

In general, security systems should be able to cope with young and amateur offenders.

- Reposition CCTV cameras close to the key target areas.
- Extend the alarm marker system to include the tape floor.

- Encase each cassette in the three key areas with a large plastic grip, removable at the sales desk and reusable.

- Distinguish legitimate shoppers buying goods from offenders wandering around waiting for a suitable moment to conceal booty, by supplying, and encouraging the use of, supermarket-type baskets.

- Color-code price labels, with codes for different floors and different sections.

- Improve the sealing of HMV bags containing legitimate purchases.

Security staff

Deploy *uniformed* security guards on each floor; they can provide a constant and visible presence which may deter the young and inexperienced offender. Security mirrors and store layout and design should be reviewed to ensure the guards can see all parts of the floor more easily.

Deterrent publicity

- The deterrent value of the various security measures might be enhanced by including mention of their presence in posters.

- The deterrent value of store detectives may bear little relation to the numbers on duty, but can perhaps be enhanced by putting up notices warning shoppers that detectives are in action.

- The various notices might be more effective if they include representations of the typical offenders (juvenile males) being arrested at the store.

General management issues

- Management should systematically obtain and analyze information from store detectives in order to monitor and update preventive strategies.

- In designing their computerized stock control system, management should ensure that it operates at a sufficient level of detail to identify sections (consistent with those used by store detectives and other staff in their incident records), and wherever possible distinguish between theft by shoppers or staff, damage, and delivery shortage.

- The analysis of constraints on store detectives' capacity suggests that stores like HMV could usefully consider moving

away, on a trial basis, from the current fairly rigid policy of referring shoplifters to the police, and consider adopting a more flexible policy which could involve formal cautioning of offenders by store staff, or preemptive warning to customers behaving suspiciously. These approaches would be less costly to the store and to the public.

Overall conclusions

The contribution of crime analysis in this exercise was not so much in originating the preventive ideas themselves but in assembling the right information to guide selection of the preventive options most suitable for this store, and especially in identifying where preventive efforts should be focused.

The case study confirmed in detail what many suspected, namely that the traditional "spot arrest and refer to police" model of controlling shoplifting is inadequate to the task, at least in the circumstances of the store studied here. Detectives at HMV probably face many more offenders than they could catch and process, and attempts to increase the arrest rate by hiring more detectives would be impossibly expensive to the store, apart from crowding the local police facilities. While the case for the alternative preventive approach is not yet proven, the research strongly suggests it is worthwhile exploring.

Subject to certain limitations and cross-checking, store detectives can usefully assist management decisionmaking through crime analysis, identify weaknesses in security, and suggest preventive measures on the basis of their experience. They are one of a number of resources which management can and should use in a selective, deliberate, and integrated manner to reduce crime.

As this report goes to press, a number of its recommendations have been implemented by HMV. Uniformed security guards have replaced some of the store detectives, and a "sticky label" alarm system is now in operation covering the entire audio cassette floor. The computer cassette section has closed, in part due to its popularity with thieves. The impact of these measures on crime will be kept under review.