

Shoplifters on shop theft: implications for retailers

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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Martin Gill

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Shop theft in perspective

There is now a growing body of literature about shop theft, it is one of the most commonly researched offences. But to conclude from this work that prevention methods are advanced, much less that they are working would be a mistake. As will be shown from a study of offenders, they generally recognise that security is commonplace but it does not stop them stealing and most claim that they are caught infrequently. Retail experts clearly believe they understand shop theft, evidenced by stores' on-going investment in a range of security measures (which do not differ a great deal world-wide), yet shop thieves argue that stealing is easy. So how can this be?

The research discussed in this report aims to address this point by focusing on offenders' perspectives. It seeks to understand and interpret shop thieves' views on their stealing and their approach to dealing with a range of measures designed to stop them. In the next section the study is outlined in more detail, here by way of introduction, key issues within the array of work that has been undertaken are summarised.

There are a number of reviews of shop theft research,¹ as there are of the effectiveness of different security measures,² although there is relatively little research which assesses the offenders' perspective and uses that analysis to improve crime prevention.³ This is surprising because shop theft is damaging:

'Shoplifting creates tremendous loss and disruption for retailers, while affecting all citizens by reducing product availability, increasing the cost of goods, and creating violence in stores'.⁴

... for every \$100 lost to shoplifting, 20 additional \$100 sales must be made to simply break-even financially.⁵

Moreover, shop theft often marks the start of a criminal career and so there is good reason for society, and not just retailers to tackle stealing.

One offender stated that his mother had taught him to steal at the age of seven. Initially, under her instruction, he stole from his father and thereafter he felt that it was acceptable to steal from anyone. This offender stated that in his 30 years of stealing, he committed an average of 100 to 200 thefts per year, yet he had only been arrested for shop theft seven times. He claimed that his shop thefts only the 'tip of the iceberg' and he admitted that in addition to stealing from shops he had stolen cars; sold drugs; and committed robbery, arson and burglaries. Indeed, four of the 17 Canadian interviewees had never been caught shoplifting despite amassing 40 years of shoplifting experience.

1 See for example, Farrington, D. (1999) Measuring, Explaining and Preventing Shoplifting: A Review of British Research. *Security Journal*, 12, 1, pp. 9-27. Hayes, R. and Cordone, C. (2006) Shoptheft. In Gill, M. (ed) *The Handbook of Security*. Palgrave, Macmillan: London

2 See for example chapters 1-20 in Gill, M. (2006) (ed) *The Handbook of Security*. Palgrave, Macmillan: London.

3 But see, Gill, M., Bilby, C. and Turbin, V. (1999) Retail Security: Understanding What Deters Shop Thieves. *Journal of Security Administration*. 22, 1, pp 29-40; Hayes, R. (1997) Shop Theft: An Analysis of Apprehended Shoplifters. *Security Journal*, 7, 1, 11-14.; Hayes, R. (1999) Shop Theft: An Analysis of Shoplifter Perceptions and Situational Factors. *Security Journal*, 12, 2, 7-118 and Farrington, D.P., Bowen, S., Buckle, A., Burns-Howell, T., Burrows, J., and Speed, M. (1993) An Experiment on the Prevention of Shoplifting. In R.V. Clarke (ed.), *Crime Prevention Studies*, Vol. 1. Monsey, NY: Willow Tree Press.

4 Hayes, R. and Cordone, opp cite, p 322.

5 Christman, J.H., Sennewald, C.A (2006) *Shoplifting: Managing the Problem*. ASIS International: New Jersey.

Shop theft in perspective

This is all the more the case because there is a growing body of evidence that offenders, and this includes shop thieves, view security measures as weak impediments⁶ and are 'experts at controlling or minimising risks'⁷. And this is especially the case for expert shoplifters⁸ – as opposed to novices – who being more skilled face less risk. Although, inevitably, new measures pose a threat, 'shoplifters readily adjust their strategies to overcome them'⁹. In earlier years this included adjusting clothing to secrete stolen goods, or by, for example, using 'booster boxes' which is a wrapped package that contains a gap through which stolen articles may be secreted (methods still used today).¹⁰

As time passed by retailers turned to technology to combat stealing although here again it seems that shoplifters were able to circumvent systems. For example, Murphy's research is over twenty years old, but he found that some stores that had tried CCTV later removed cameras because they were 'useless' and difficult to make effective use of. And that shoplifters managed to get around the threat posed by tags by simply removing them from items.¹¹ Perhaps there has not been much progress in the intervening years?

Although it may seem somewhat unpalatable that despite longstanding retail efforts shop thieves still find stealing easy, this should perhaps not be viewed as surprising. In a recent review of evidence based crime prevention strategies, the authors highlighted the important difference between opinion and fact:

'Many people may be of the opinion that hiring more police for example, will yield a reduction in crime rates. However, an examination of the empirical research evidence on the subject reveals that this is not the case ... there are scores of other crime and justice examples where opinion and fact do not agree. Use of opinion instead of fact to guide crime policy is likely to lead to programmes that do not work ... or divert policy attention away from the important priorities of the day'.¹²

And so of course the same may be said of retail security, which has been subjected to very little independent evaluation. Indeed, it would be difficult to argue that current security practice generally, as well as retail security specifically, is predicated on a body of knowledge derived from scientific enquiry. The fact of the matter is that few studies have been undertaken and what has been done is not systematically made available to decision makers at the sharp end of practice.

To that extent this report hopes to make a small contribution to filling the knowledge vacuum. It does so by looking at how shop thieves in different countries make decisions at the scene and examines how they are able to recognise, circumvent or negate the effects of security measures in place. It seeks to present the views of the shoplifter based on understanding their perceptions and experiences.¹³ The findings suggest that there is ample scope for making things more difficult for thieves, not by investing more, but by making what already exists much more effective.

6 Gill, M., Bilby, C. and Turbin, V. (1999) Retail Security: Understanding What Deters Shop Thieves. *Journal of Security Administration*. 22, 1, pp 29-40.

7 Carroll, J. and Weaver, F. (1986) Shoplifters' Perceptions of Crime Opportunities: A process Tracing Study. In Cornish, D. and Clarke, R. (eds) *The Reasoning Criminal*. New York: Springer-Verlag.

8 And for that matter fences, see Klockars, C. (1975) *The Professional Fence*. Tavistock Publications: London.

9 Ibid, p 34.

10 Mary Owen Cameron (1964) *The Booster and the Snitch*. The Free Press: London

11 Murphy, D. (1986) *Customers and Thieves*. Gower: Aldershot

12 See, Welsh, B. and Farrington, D. (2006) Conclusions and Directions from Evidence-Based Crime Prevention. In Welsh, B. and Farrington, D (eds) *Preventing Crime: What Works for Children, Offenders, Victims and Places*. Springer: Netherlands.

13 This paper does not attempt to deal with the issue of motivations, other than in the sense that the opportunities presented by retailers create and maintain a desire to take goods that are readily available. Motivations would be a worthwhile topic (see Murphy, op cite) to cover but it is beyond the scope of this paper.

Introducing the study

This report reviews findings from five studies that focused on understanding shop thieves' perspectives on shop theft. They were undertaken in different countries, namely, Brazil, Canada, the UK, Spain and the USA, by separate research teams at different times. Four of the studies were supervised by myself and colleagues at PRCl, and the American study by Read Hayes. Although they were all concerned with understanding the shop thieves' perspectives they all had a slightly different focus which reflected local interest in the topic.

They all employed similar methodologies in that the studies involved interviewing shop thieves as they recreated their offences and highlighted how they were able to circumvent security. In the UK this was undertaken with offenders as they were filmed, at least fifteen in all. In Brazil, Canada and Spain, 30 shop thieves were interviewed and some of these were then filmed recreating offences and/or talking about their thefts on camera at the crime scene. That is over 100 thieves, and in a much larger study in the US where in separate phases of research, data on over 1700 thieves were collected and analysed, twenty were interviewed and five were taken to crime scenes and filmed discussing their offending. Some of the clips from the footage have been included on a DVD at the end of the report.

It is important to stress that the five studies were individual pieces of work commissioned and undertaken at different times but all in the period 2003-2006.¹⁴ Outlined below are the specific objectives that guided the studies in each country.

Brazil

- To investigate shoplifters' attitudes and behaviour when stealing
- To highlight methods and techniques used by shoplifters
- To report on the rationale used by shoplifters to justify offending

Canada

- To understand the motivations of offenders
- To establish any links between thieves and illicit goods network
- To determine offenders' perspectives on the effectiveness of different types of security measures used to protect Fast Moving Consumer Goods (FMCG) and the techniques used to defeat them

Spain

- To understand the motivations of offenders
- To establish any links between thieves and illicit goods network
- To determine offenders' perspectives on retail security measures and the threats they posed to them

UK

- To develop a decision tree that represents offenders' thinking when stealing
- To evaluate offenders' perspectives on the risks and opportunities the retail environment presents
- To understand the benefits and limitations of different security measures

US

- To understand how and why shoplifters steal certain items
- To understand why they select certain stores and times
- To assess the likely impact of protection efforts¹⁵

¹⁴ Although some of the initial work in the US discussed in Appendix A began in the mid 1990s.

¹⁵ This is summarised from a range of studies undertaken in US, see Appendix A for more details.

Introducing the study

So while there is overlap, there are also clear differences. This report is aimed at summarising some of the key learning that evolved from the studies. It is clearly not intended to represent a 'world view' of shop thieves and attempts to reflect on the studies in this way should be resisted. For one thing, the studies were undertaken in only five countries, and there is no claim that the thieves interviewed are 'representative' of all thieves. Such a claim would be difficult anyway since nowhere is there good data on the total population of thieves from which to draw a sample (see Appendix A for discussion of the methodologies and an explanation of the samples).

Perhaps the best claim that can be made is that the studies used an innovative methodology. They sought data directly from offenders and did so in one-to-one interviews and by working with them at crime scenes in some cases recreating offences. This facilitated in-depth discussions about the techniques they used, the reason for specific behaviours and enabled researchers to better understand the attitudes they developed both towards their offending and the measures designed to stop them being successful.

This report begins by considering the decision to offend, focusing initially on thieves' attitudes to shop theft, and moving on to consider the process by which offenders make decisions focusing specifically at six different stages, namely, 'choosing the store' followed by 'entering the store', 'locating the product', 'concealing the product', 'leaving the store' and 'disposing of the goods'. This is followed by assessing thieves attitudes to different security measures, particularly the most common and expensive namely, tags, CCTV and uniformed security officers and the report then moves on to consider 'what works' according to the thieves' account.

One interviewee who was an experienced shop thief, discovered what he considered a great opportunity for removing merchandise from the store. He was employed by a retailer as a temporary labourer. He was working late one night with one other long term employee when the latter had to leave to deal with another issue in the store. The interviewee was told to keep working. As soon as he was alone he unlocked the back door and placed several boxes full of expensive merchandise outside, they contained in excess of a thousand dollars worth of merchandise. This took him less than 10 minutes. He subsequently re-locked the back door and went back to work. When the shift was over, he returned with his car and loaded up the merchandise. This example illustrates the overlap between customer and staff theft.

Findings

The decision to offend

It has long been recognised that understanding the decision to offend is rarely easy, offending decisions, like many other types, are fairly complex. Clarke¹⁶ has highlighted the difference between the initial decision to offend, which will sometimes (although not always) be made away from the place where the crime is committed, and the decision to commit the offence that is made at the scene. Ekblom¹⁷ has referred to these same set of decisions in terms of being 'distal' and 'proximal'. Often the initial decision to offend and the event decision will occur at the same time; that is offenders will see an opportunity and that opportunity will trigger the decision to offend. And so the logic goes, but for that opportunity the crime would never have taken place.

This is why opportunity reduction is such a vital strategy in good security practice; crime can be prevented by taking away the opportunity. In retailing the open display of goods is clearly attractive to thieves, but a very necessary part of marketing and sales techniques. Customers need to see the goods and be able to inspect them as they weigh up relevant factors in deciding whether to buy or not, the problem here is that what is good for sales is also good for thieves.

Retailers have had to put in place a range of security measures designed to counter the threat posed by thieves but at the same time do not impede (too) negatively on the buying decision. This includes staff training, product placement, designing the environment to make it less conducive to crime,¹⁸ implementing measures such as CCTV, tags and alarms, property marking methods, security officers and store detectives. Surprisingly, there has been very little evaluation of the success of these and what there is remains at best contradictory. The best summary of the research on effectiveness would be that while no measures work all the time, all measures probably work some of the time against some offenders and offences in some contexts, the real skill is determining which ones. Certainly retailers persist with security investment suggesting that they believe they derive some benefits.

However, attitudes towards stealing and perceptions of the value of security measures, and especially those focused on opportunity reduction, are best evaluated from the perspective of the offender, or at least the offenders' perspective needs to be considered because they are the target of it and we are aware that all too often they succeed in negating the effectiveness of security. While there are a range of studies that have assessed offenders' perspectives, and some of these have fed directly into crime prevention knowledge, they are in a minority. The advantage of this study is that rather than approach interviewees in prison instead offenders were returned to crime scenes they were familiar with, retail stores, and invited to explain their perceptions and articulate their decision-making processes 'in situ'. Moreover, because they could be filmed, their message can be presented 'first hand'.¹⁹

16 Clarke, R.V.G. (1995) Situational Crime Prevention. In Tonry, M. & Farrington, D. (eds) *Building a Safer Society: Crime and Justice - A Review of Research*, Volume 19. Chicago: University of Chicago Press

17 Ekblom, P (2000) 'The conjunction of criminal opportunity - a tool for clear, 'joined-up' thinking about community safety and crime reduction'. In Ballintyne, S., Pease, K. and McLaren, V., eds., *Secure foundations: Key issues in crime prevention, crime reduction and community safety*. London: Institute for Public Policy Research.

18 C Cordone (20) PhD thesis, has noted that:" to "Cordone, C. (2006) Opportunity makes the thief. Analysis of the physical cues that influence shoplifter perceptions of the retail interior and decision to steal. PhD. University of Florida. This study has noted that:" Please italicise "Opportunity makes the thief. Analysis of the physical cues that influence shoplifter perceptions of the retail interior and decision to steal.

19 This has been referred to as the 'videocam' research approach, or 'walkabouts'. Much has been made of the management process of 'managing by wondering around', and so too a lot can be gleaned from 'walkabouts' with offenders when there is a specific intention to learn about their perspectives on stealing.

Findings

Attitudes to shop theft

Interviewees did not appear to feel guilty about shop theft. In the Brazil sample offenders were asked how they felt after the first offence, and only four of the 30 said they felt guilty, the majority 18 (60%), said that they were happy that they had been successful. Other feelings included, fear, relief or nothing out of the ordinary. The Spanish study tackled offenders' views of retailers. It seems shoplifters generally appreciated that what they were doing was an offence but did not see it as damaging. In all, there were three types of justifications. First, they believed that stores charged higher prices and had insurance so they accepted goods would go missing, that is what made stealing easier; their main priority was sales not stopping theft. Second, they felt what they were doing was a property offence and a misdemeanour; they did not feel they were hurting anyone. Third, some of the sample had worked in retail and had been treated badly; they were not inclined to feel guilty.

Some offenders stole because they needed money urgently to support an addiction, usually drugs. Some claimed that the only reason they stole was because of the need to support a drug habit. Some offenders stated that they would occasionally steal under the influence of alcohol or drugs to 'take away the fear'. In the context of drug-related offending it is important to know which of these two apply. Certainly one of the consequences can be seriously impaired rationality. One Canadian thief claimed he had stolen eight times in one afternoon. He started off stealing an item, visited his drug dealer where he traded the product for a rock of crack cocaine, got high, went back to a supermarket and stole again, he did this eight times in all and wasn't caught. He could not even recall what he was stealing.

In the US the majority,²⁰ and in Spain all but one of the interviewees claimed that they mostly stole for personal use although over half gave the goods away as presents, and similarly in Brazil where 14 of the 30 interviewees (47%) claimed they stole for personal use and only five (17%) said that they stole to sell, the rest claimed they did both. They sold stolen products to neighbours, friends, small retailers and fences (although they were sometimes reluctant to discuss the role of the latter).

Some offenders steal to order, and know what they are going to take prior setting off for the stores. Others steal what they can lay their hands on. In Brazil, 14 of the 30 interviewees (47%) said they decided what to steal when at the scene, while 10 (33%) said that they planned their thefts, while the remainder said they did both, depending on the circumstances and on the products in question. The Brazil team concluded that the tendency was for those who plan the shop thefts to know exactly what products they wanted, and for the opportunists the choice of products is guided by what they find at the store.

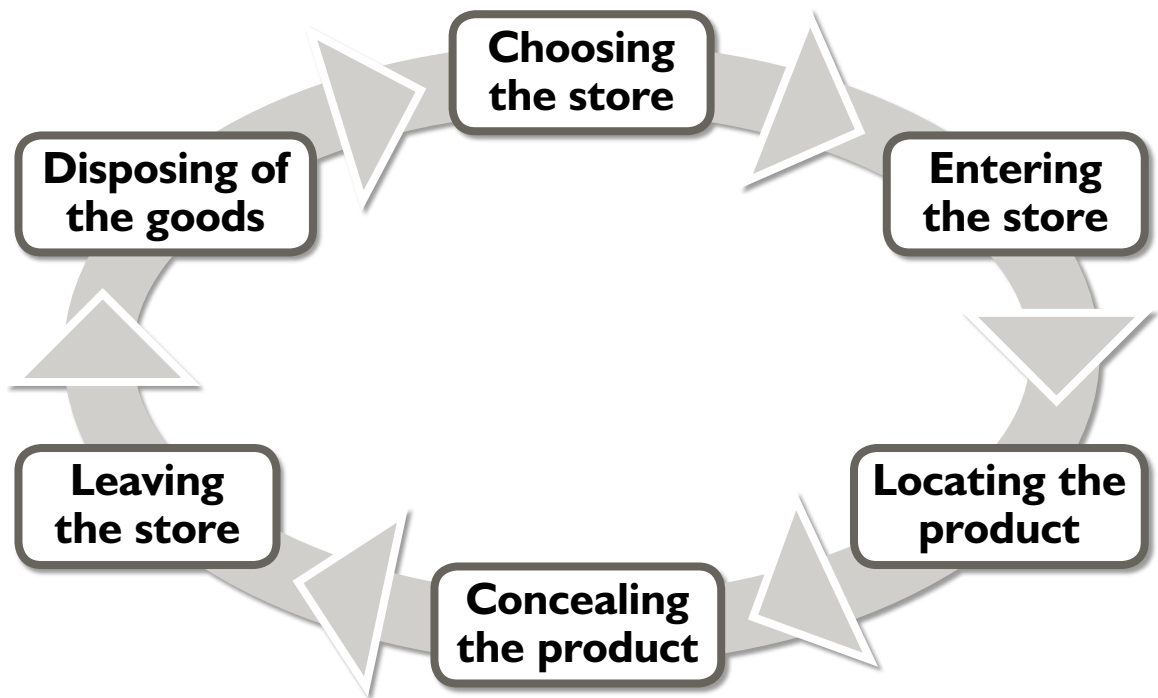
The decision stages

The research suggests that the decisions offenders make can be grouped into six conceptual phases, perhaps best seen as points where retailers can alter the decision-making judgements of offenders to encourage or force them to desist. The first involves 'choosing the store' followed by 'entering the store', 'locating the product', 'concealing the product', 'leaving the store' and 'disposing of the goods' as represented in Figure 1.

²⁰ See Hayes (1999) op cite.

Findings

Figure 1: Shop thieves' decision circle



It is important to emphasise that offenders do not methodically consider every factor or issue that may arise, and in practice few decisions of any type are made precisely this way. Typically, what offenders do is use 'limited' or 'bounded' rationality. What will be presented here are examples of the range of questions they may consider at each stage. In practice, these questions will be raised and answered fleetingly, even sub-consciously and sometimes not at all. For example, where they discover the opportunity at the scene they may take the chance to steal, having not originally entered the store with that purpose. However, the accumulated information gathered at each of these phases will lead an offender to either abort the theft or proceed to the next phase. And by understanding the different deliberations at each stage provides opportunities to influence them so that offenders choose not to commit a crime. In other words the six points in the decision circle represent areas where retailers can focus to reduce the chances of offenders deciding to steal by encouraging them to abort.

There is no single factor or group of factors that consistently cause offenders to abort. For example, many claimed instances of 'facing down' a direct challenge or even a physical search by security staff before still going on to successfully commit theft. Many shoplifters attribute success or failure to levels of confidence, so their emotional state at the time of offending can have a big impact on their rational appraisal of the environment they target.

1. Choosing the store

The choice of store is governed by a variety of factors. In the US shoplifters chose stores on the basis that they contained the products they wanted to steal. The stores chosen were typically spread over a large metro geographic area and did not usually include neighbourhood locations because thieves feared being recognised when they were close to home. Some preferred suburban stores because they were perceived as less 'hardened' than many inter-city locations. Gleaning information from across the studies revealed the following factors as being especially relevant.

Findings

Location. Although some thieves travelled to steal, most did not. It was much more common to steal locally.

Familiarity. Offenders welcomed the fact that stores that were part of national chains were arranged and designed in a similar fashion. Some liked to go back to places where they had succeeded before, although there may be long gaps between visits. In Brazil 83% chose a supermarket when they first started stealing.

Level of organisation. Stores that were disorganised were better; it was easier to blend into the background, and they were less likely to notice that products were missing.

Level of security. Perceived level of security was relevant here. Some English thieves noted that some stores developed a reputation for being 'on the ball' and it seems word gets around quickly. It was easy to make a visual inspection of the outside of the store to see for example whether there were cameras and whether guards were visible, level of lighting at night and so on and this could impact on perceptions. The presence of a police car (or worse still police on foot) was bad news. Different US shop thieves favoured large and small stores and they saw both types as having easy entrance and egress, low staff levels and inadequate security.

Type of staff. This mostly referred to the low motivation of staff who were either not interested in their work and thus provided less of a threat or were corruptible. Some US shoplifters preferred to target stores where females worked alone.

Is it busy? As noted while people posed a threat they also provided cover their activities, and they were also a distraction for camera operators and security guards as well as staff. Some thieves argued that this impacted upon their decision as to when a particular store may be targeted. In Canada, some preferred early mornings when staff were busy with getting the store ready and also they believed that loss prevention officers were scheduled to work the busy afternoons and evenings. Eight offenders stated the best time to steal was early afternoons as this was when the stores were busiest, filled with legitimate shoppers and sales clerks which effectively acted as cover. Also loss prevention officers were very busy trying to keep track of everyone. Two offenders stated they had no preferred time to steal and that times were irrelevant. Others answered that it depended upon the store and their hours of business. Research in the US found that offenders steal at all times.²¹

Escape routes. Thieves have to be able to exit the scene and so escape routes are important. Side roads, places to hide such as other shops and hotels or building with public access were an advantage. In Spain the availability of sites under construction was seen as good for this purpose too. Access to car parking nearby, and to public transport was cited by some as important. Where police could only act in certain jurisdictions it was good to know the boundaries, that way there was a point beyond which any pursuit would cease.

Negative views based on reputation. Some offenders it seems take a dim view of some stores based on experience. Some shoplifters expressed disdain towards big companies and part of the reason was that they believed they charged fairly high prices and treated staff poorly. There was at least one advantage though, it meant that staff, including security staff, were potential collaborators a point made specifically by Spanish and Brazilian thieves.

Type of goods required. Those stealing to order had to focus their thefts accordingly. Overall thieves seemed quite wide ranging in their choice of place to steal. In Spain 27 of

²¹ See Hayes (1997) op cite.

Findings

the 30 (90%) said they had stolen from drug stores, 25 (83.3%) from food and beverage, 23 (76.7%) from computer and music stores and 18 (60%) from clothing shops. Canadian thieves were eclectic too, some favoured brand name stores while other offenders sited shopping malls (because of the mass of people to hide within and vast number of stores to choose from), department stores (that was where the products were), corner stores (fast and easy to get in and out off), relatively small chains (had less security measures). One offender stayed away from one store because of the strong and multiple security measures while another offender named that same store as being easy to steal from.

2. Entering the store

Once the thief passes through the doors of the store he/she is unambiguously on enemy territory, and every move has the potential to attract unwelcome attention. According to thieves there are some important issues to consider.

Will I be seen? Offenders observed the volume of people in the store. At the extremes being too crowded engendered the fear of being spotted by a customer, too sparsely populated created a fear of being caught by security. Some noted that they conducted an initial assessment by checking the number of vehicles in the car park, and this would be supplemented by observation on entering the store. In the UK some shoplifters said that they consider customers a greater risk, mostly because they aren't concentrating on doing a job as staff are and can be more prone to heroics, and in any event, staff were only seen as a threat when they were looking and they were often busy.

Don't stand out. There was a common view that it was important to act just like any other customer, some got a trolley or a basket so that they could more easily blend in. Some Spanish thieves paid attention to the type of customer entering the store as well as the volume of people in store, it helped them to assess the risks. In Canada, looking like a thief was sometimes a concern. Some offenders took the time to have a shower, shave, put on clean and new clothing to blend in to eliminate the 'thief look'. Other offenders, particularly the young, felt that regardless of what they were wearing that their age was an identifying sign of 'being a thief' and they would be singled out by security staff or alert staff immediately upon entering a store. As a consequence, they are resigned to the fact that they will be targeted and said that generally they did nothing about making changes to their personal appearance.

Make early assessment of security. Even if one was familiar with the location of cameras it was always worth checking that they had not been moved, and finding out whether there are security guards on duty and where they were was important.

Find blind spots. Cameras and other measures were not a serious impediment if there were blind spots. Locating these was viewed as important by some.

Consider the best escape routes. Getting away is a priority for offenders, so some assessment of the exit was commonly made. As one Spanish thief noted, an effective exit from the store will be helped by planning ahead:

I'm going to grab a basket because at the checkpoints of the alarms there are cameras, two that I've seen and we are going to leave buying something – a coke, a loaf of bread, or whatever.

A good exit was one where there was not too much open space which increased the opportunity for them to be watched as they exited the store. They liked doors that opened easily. Exits in different parts of the store offered additional opportunities should anything go wrong.

Findings

A really busy store you can come in and leave unnoticed by the staff, a lot of times they don't even know that you're in there. Normally I like it when it's a little more busy in the store, a little more cover.

Canadian Shop thief

The over-riding impression from the work in all the studies is that thieves are adept at spotting and exploiting opportunities. Some Canadian thieves stated that they embarked upon pre-theft surveillance opportunities but if opportunities presented themselves then they obviously took advantage of the situation. Interestingly, while most of the offenders indicated they were 100% committed to stealing upon entering the store the successful completion of thefts ranged from 50% to 90%.

3. Locating the product

Clearly there was a difference here between those who stole to order and those who were looking for an easy opportunity. Offenders stealing 'to order' approached theft with a shopping list in much the same way legitimate shoppers do, they had an advantage in that they knew they would be able to sell the goods easily:

This drink... it will be sold. I picked this Nivea cream for myself. This dental floss, Prestobarba shaving device ... also for myself. Right? There is a toothbrush here. This is for myself, the drink is for sale.

Brazilian thief

Conversely, many will simply hunt for opportunities to steal quantities of items they know they can easily sell on. Many say that friends and neighbours are regular customers, as well as small retail outlets. Typically, what are widely referred to as Fast Moving Consumer Goods were most often noted as being good things to sell:

Razors, as long as they are a good name brand or at high demand. Gillette Mach 3's I've heard that they are really good quality.

Canadian thief

Batteries are a big seller because they all have CD players and stuff. Yeah we go for batteries but we go for the big packages.

Canadian thief

Things like these ... [electric toothbrushes]. These will sell at like dot on half price. Everyone buys these ... You're getting an electric toothbrush and they are good quality ones as well. So I'd take the whole lot of these if I could. ... I'd take the boxes, I mean there's five, ten, fifteen, twenty, twenty-five, thirty, there's sixty quid there in two racks.

English thief

There were two types of approaches to locating products. Thieves either moved directly to the product, this was more common if they were familiar with the store and its security features. Or they would have to search, this was not necessarily a disadvantage as it would give them time to assess security features. Some stated there was a maximum amount of time they would want to spend in-store, typically five to ten minutes. At the other extreme one offender stated he took his time and that he would often spend as much as 90 minutes in a particular store just browsing and would steal only when the opportunity presented itself.

Once they locate the products they examine them, often pretending to read instructions or comparing prices for example, while in fact they are studying security measures there; and they may have to peel off the tag so this would need to be assessed.

Findings

Canadian thieves were asked whether ‘product’ or ‘location’ was more important in their decision making. Of the 17 who answered the question seven stated product was the most important, six stated that location was more important and four stated they were equally important. The seven who stated that product was more important had developed strategies to manage the risks posed by security features, while the six who prioritised location were less adept at tackling security features and sought products that were less protected.

Looking for something to make a good buck, something expensive that I can sell really fast and someone would take it. The razors would be good.

Canadian thief

I like to go in and get the item as quick as possible, get it stashed away on me and get out as fast as possible but with looking really subtle.

Canadian thief

When I walk into a store I just want to grab whatever I can and just get outta there. Quick and quiet – get it done.

Canadian thief

This is the most expensive thing here on display. It’s right next to the door, and easy for me to take. I’m out of here. It’s gone.

English thief

4. Concealing the product²²

Concealing the product to be stolen is in many ways the ‘moment of truth’ for shoplifters. Up until this point they have usually behaved in a way that would be consistent with most other customers, but in concealing the product they have committed an offence. The process of concealing is also a key point at which the risk of capture increases. It is therefore worth considering the key techniques that were used to conceal the product.²³

Within ordinary clothing. This was by far the most common method of concealing stolen goods. Some used ordinary clothing to considerable effect, indeed some of the English sample in particular noted that ordinary loose clothing can work just as well and attract less attention than unseasonable coats and the like. One Spanish thief noted:

The clothes you wear should make you fit in so nobody looks at you because you wear clothes that make you look different from others around. And a jacket that closes at the bottom so that it’s like a bag inside and you can put things in it ... you don’t want to see through it either.

Within special clothing. In Brazil the majority use ‘special’ clothes, for example, large jackets and coats with internal pockets, long shirts and blouses to cover the waist, trousers with deep pockets or wide waists. Indeed, the latter means that even bulky items can be disguised, although as will be shown later packaging is often left behind.²⁴

Using the body. The body was used to create a shield behind which they could steal out of the gaze of people or cameras. One Brazilian thief secreted stolen goods under the armpit.²⁵

²² In some types of shop theft, such as grazing, the object is to eat the food before having to pay for it. In other types of theft, such as ‘grab and run’, more akin to robbery than stealing, the object is not so much to conceal the goods as to get them and get away as quickly as possible.

²³ For other examples see: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shoplifting>.

²⁴ There are various variations on this, for example, booster bloomers, booster girdles, booster cages, booster coats (see, Christman and Sennewald, op cite, p 25).

²⁵ Another example, is ‘crotching’, that is stealing something by hiding it between the legs typically under a skirt or dress.

Findings

One Canadian thief noted:

Normally when I'm just about to lift something I'll walk rather close to the aisle ... and I'll slightly turn to the side just a bit. It gives me a little bit more ... coverage. And I find it looks like my arms aren't even moving much I might just be scratching my chest or something, rubbing my chin. I'll move right close to [the aisle], kinda lean down a little like maybe I'm looking at something, and then normally I'll stand back up, let it [stolen goods] slide down and then I just keep walking.

Within specially designed packages. Carrying a package can seem quite normal. For example, carrying a box wrapped in brown paper can be in keeping with the shopping environment, but if it is empty and has a gap through which to insert stolen merchandise it becomes a way of concealing goods.

Using other implements. Some shop thieves have used an umbrella to help hide the process of stealing goods. This can be helpful in two ways, small items can be dropped into an umbrella and it can be used to help cover the act of theft, especially if partly open. Once again, on a rainy day having an umbrella is not unusual. Similarly, small items can be concealed within the pages of a book or newspaper, and people carrying these will not typically look out of place.

Using a bag. Bags were useful because they were not out of place in a store. Some thieves used 'magic bags' which deactivated alarm systems. In Canada most offenders stated they avoided backpacks which they referred to 'heat scores' because they attracted unnecessary and unwelcome attention:

I always have bags whether it be the batteries or the blades or the shampoos, or whatever I've always got carrier bags.

English thief

Most women carry a bag if you look about there's not many people that don't carry a bag.

English thief

Using a trolley or shopping basket. These too were normal within a retail environment. Thieves described how they could place goods in a trolley or basket, cover them with bigger items, take them to another part of the store where there were blind spots or no forms of surveillance and secret the smaller items. When they came back into view the basket looked the same, the bigger items remained on top, that the smaller items had been stolen was not apparent. The disadvantage of this method for some was that it meant they had to spend more time in the store. Prams and baby carriers can also be used in a similar way.

Within a container purchased legitimately. It is possible to buy something like a suitcase and hide stolen goods within it. The case is purchased as normal and the thief relies on the cashier not checking inside.

Steaming. This is where a large group of offenders act in unison to cause a distraction. Some of the group will steal but they use the fact that there are so many of them to avoid being stopped.

The art of concealing products varied. This is again an under-researched topic, but understanding how thieves steal is important because it offers another opportunity to identify a theft and prevent it.

Move quickly. Some offenders claimed that if they moved quickly it was very difficult for anyone watching to see what was happening. The disappearance of the product

Findings

from the shelf to the inside of the jacket was a quick swift movement. Some thieves steal and leave the store immediately, running as they go, some rely on their speed to avoid apprehension.

Sleight of hand. There are various ruses here. One involves handling various items on the shelf, stealing one in the process but arranging the remainder so that no-one notices that a product has been missing: As one Canadian thief noted,

Like I say pick one thing up, pick two of them up put one back and that's it. It's pretty simple.

Canadian thief

Now if I was to get these I would pick them both up [perfume]. I'd put one back. I'd get these here quickly, I'd knock that over and put one back.

English thief

Distraction. One was to appear to take a product from the shelf and drop it. In fact two are taken, one is replaced and the other is secreted for example up a sleeve or inside a jacket. Those who worked with partners sometimes claimed that partners could provide a useful distraction, locating goods in bags and then swapping bags with an accomplice such that if they were stopped they would be cleared.

Hide the stolen products under other products. Some thieves hid the goods they stole under larger products in a shopping basket or trolley. The important point here was to have larger products that could be seen hiding the smaller goods to be stolen. Thieves would then walk to a place within the store where they were not being watched and removed the smaller items. When they reappeared the shopping basket or trolley looked the same, but the smaller products had been stolen:

What we'd do is we'd have other things in the basket that we would cover them with, you know like say loaves of bread and that, and we would put them on top. There see, you can hardly see [the stolen goods] they are concealed a bit better.

English thief

Collude with insiders. Some act in collusion with staff and this can give them more time.²⁶

Blind spots. Products are taken and disguised in a perfectly normal way, but thieves operate in blind spots or otherwise believe that they cannot be seen, although this does not always work:

I'm going to take an electric toothbrush, they are also expensive ... Let's see if this one is alarmed, well look, it isn't. The bad thing is that I have a camera on top of me. Let's see if this ... will cover me. I'll go like this [slips product into pocket] – that's it. I don't think anyone has seen me. I fancy taking another one just in case since they are not alarmed and once again I'm going to duck under this again so that the camera won't see me. [swear word] that woman just saw me. I'll put it back, nothings happened but I think I'm going to look at something else.

Spanish thief

While most accepted that concealing the goods was better, some noted that was not always possible:

Its gotta be able to be concealed on your body fairly easy, so fairly small. Or if it's not really small then its gotta be really big and blatant so you gotta be carrying it over your shoulder as you go out that way.

Canadian thief

²⁶ For a study based on interviews with dishonest staff in retailing see, Duffin, M. and Gill, M (2007) *Staff Dishonesty*. Leicester: Perpetuity Consultancy.

Findings

It's smarter to conceal but it all depends on the situation. If there's like three security guards around then you're just gonna want to grab and run or not even commit the crime in the first place.

Canadian thief

Some stated they would attempt to use legitimate customers to mask concealment. Some claimed they would test EAS systems by putting a peeled off EAS tag onto an outgoing customer to see if the alarm system activated. Some offenders would move goods to a part of the store where surveillance was low prior to concealing them:

I'd put that in my trolley now because there are people about and I would walk off to a nice quieter part [an] empty aisle.

English thief

Offenders varied in the amount of goods they stole in any one trip. In Brazil, thieves describing their last theft event claimed they targeted a particular category of products, and a half of the interviewees stole only one unit although seven thieves stole more than four units.

5. Leaving the store

It has long been recognised that the escape is a vital part of an offence; there is no point in successfully obtaining goods and then getting caught with them, and in any event if they arouse suspicion it may prevent them returning to commit further thefts. The way shop thieves leave the store matters.

One thing to emphasise is that thieves like to blend into the environment of the store, they aim to look like normal shoppers and not attract any attention to themselves. Therefore, some offenders purchased goods as they exited. They claimed that this made them look normal. One English offender noted that he played with his mobile phone appearing to send a text message in order to look as casual as possible. Buying goods at the checkout also gave them time to assess any risks at the exit, some pointed out that if they kept the receipt they could always return the goods later so it did not present a cost.

Some noted that the check-out provided cover and so they were able to steal while leaving. The point they were making here was that the goods were often not positioned within line of sight of staff and therefore they were easily able to steal them. Positioning goods where they can be seen, such as at the tills, is only good advice when blind spots are eliminated. It was the view of some thieves that there was poor line of sight for staff working at the tills in some stores.

Thieves needed to be aware of their surroundings. If they felt there were being followed, or for some other reason believed they were under suspicion, they could always return the goods or, as noted above, dump them somewhere in store. As one Brazilian thief noted:

When I feel I'm being observed, then I go out, there is always a girl outside waiting for me. I go there, drop the stuff ... and if I see I can come in again I do.

The exit gates always needed to be managed and this is discussed below; some noted that having an accomplice, who could create a distraction, especially if things looked like they were going wrong, was an advantage. Some came prepared to fight their way out:

It's embarrassing to have to run or wrestle with somebody but a lot of guys think they can, a lot of guys size them up and figure 'yeah I can handle that guy, I'll do it anyway. If he catches me I'll punch him in the head'.

Canadian thief

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The main objective though was not to get caught. There were different tactics the interviewees adopted wherever they were. Some were committed to 'bluffing' or 'brassing it out'. In Spain two thirds of the sample had been arrested previously but it did not deter them. They were typically told off, the young offenders risked having their parents contacted, they might be required to pay for the goods, they could be reported to the police or this might be threatened. Most gave back the product or offered to pay for it, or they ran from the store especially if they felt the guard was aggressive.

I may purchase something [then] walk out the door just as nonchalant as can be.

Canadian thief

I'm going to a busy counter here to make a false purchase but an actual real one to try and take their attention off of me. Here I am at the counter paying for the purchase and I get the receipt back – thank you, and I grab the item and I go to walk out normal. It's always good to have the receipt because if they come out and try to stop you once you exit the store you just turn around, show the receipt and normally that'll take the attention right off you for taking any items.

Canadian thief

I'm going to see if I can find a loaf of bread in order to go out the checkout paying for it. It will be less obvious ... Where's the bread?

Spanish thief

I'd look for something cheap, say for instance that is £4.98, that'd be no skin off my nose because I'd put that in my trolley, pay for that and then in a couple of days if I didn't really want it I could bring it back, get a refund but I'd need to definitely buy something before I walked out of the shop.

English thief

This is how I'd actually walk out, something in my hand [types on mobile phone], call it a prop something to fiddle with. You're not giving away too much body language then, do you know what I mean?

English thief

6. Disposing of the goods

The most common products for theft appeared to be Fast Moving Consumer Goods (FMCGs).²⁷ The list generated by Brazilian thieves seems fairly typical: shaving devices and blades, batteries, tooth brushes, deodorants, skin creams, shampoos and conditioners, alcoholic drinks, creams and dyes for hair. These goods share the characteristic of the **CRAVED** model.²⁸ For the purposes of this topic it is the 'D' for 'disposable' that is of particular relevance. Elsewhere, this has been considered in more detail, and another acronym developed to reflect the characteristics of goods that render them easily disposable, **AT CUT PRICES**:²⁹

²⁷ From a thieves' perspective not only are these easy to sell, but within stores such items are often left relatively unprotected.

Moreover, because they are sold in large quantities there is usually a ready supply of them, and being in possession of such goods is fairly common. So if they are stopped later, after having left the store, having them about their person would not be viewed as inappropriate. Moreover, these items are easily removed for concealment in blind spots in the store.

²⁸ More recent research has focused on the attractiveness of goods, specifically in attempting to identify the characteristics of items that make them of interest to thieves. What appears to be a fairly robust description has been developed by Ron Clarke who developed the acronym, CRAVED. He suggested that goods that were vulnerable would most likely be: Concealable (small and flat), Removable (unsecured, lightweight- can be readily removed in bulk, packaging is easily removed), Available (goods typically on open display), Valuable (perceived high product and where there is an ongoing need for certain items like blades), Enjoyable (Items like DVDs that people will want to buy), and Disposable (where they are easy to convert to cash). See, Clarke, R. (1999). *Hot Products: Understanding, Anticipating and Reducing the Demand for Stolen Goods*. Police Research Series, Paper 112. London: Home Office.

²⁹ For a fuller discussion see, Gill, M. et al (2005) *The Illicit Market in Stolen Fast-Moving Consumer Goods - A Global Impact Study*. Perpetuity Research and Consultancy International. <http://www.perpetuitygroup.com/prci/publications.html#securityofficers>

Findings

Affordable (e.g. chocolates)

Transportable (e.g. toothbrushes)

Concealable (e.g. cosmetics)

Untraceable (e.g. most FMCG goods)

Tradeable (e.g. few FMCG fail this test)

Profitable (e.g. branded goods)

Reputable (e.g. Gillette razors)

Impershishable (e.g. razor blade cartridges)

Consumable (e.g. pain relievers)

Evaluable (e.g. fragrances carrying store stickers)

Shiftable (e.g. bottles of spirits)

Although thieves were not asked to evaluate these criteria *per se*, nonetheless the information gleaned from that about what they sold and why led support to the **AT CUT PRICES** framework.

Since some goods were for personal consumption disposing of them was not a problem, similarly for those who stole to order:

(Offender 1) *We always sell what we take.*

(Offender 2) *We only take things on order.*

(Offender 1) *We have a list so when we are coming in the store we just go specifically for the items we've already sold.*

(Offender 2) *There's no point stealing something unless you got rid of it.*

Canadian thieves

Some sold on to those they knew, or had a circle of people they were aware were interested in buying goods, this includes some small businesses. Others sold around bars and other places where people gathered. Some sold direct to a fence. One man in the UK had two fences that he sold too and they would typically give him half the store selling price. Few, it seems, had trouble selling goods on.³⁰ Of course, making stolen goods less easy to sell or use, by destroying them in some way (such as ink dyes on bank notes after a robbery), or by educating the public about the dangers have potential here. But thieves it seems have a ready supply of outlets.

It is easy

Right then, off I go. The security guard is there stood at the side so if I want to make a dart for the door then I'm pretty glad he's somewhere else. So here's the meat counter, seeing if there is anything decent I could take from there. Right, I'm onto the wine now. I'd take my chances with both of them boxes, you're gonna get in the same amount of trouble whether you get caught with one or two so I might as well take both of them. Here, so here I go walking up the aisle. He's not there at the door so here we go. Here I go out of the door with the wines – no ones stopping me, no ones troubling me. No alarms go off. Easy peasy!

English thief

³⁰ For a discussion of this issue, based on research, see, Gill, M. and Hemming, M (2005) Property Marking: Views from the Sharp End. Perpetuity Research and Consultancy International. <http://www.perpetuitygroup.com/prci/publications.html#marking>

Findings

Do any security measures deter?

Proving that security measures work has become something of the holy grail of the security sector, and the research evidence is at best conflicting.³¹ Generally speaking thieves did not view the security presented by stores as a serious impediment. For example:

Here there is a camera. I'm pretending that I'm looking at this and on my right is a mirror so I'm going to take this from here and I'll hide it on me in some other part of the store. Here first I look at all the CDs there are and then as if I didn't care less I look to see which ones have the security alarms. There is also a camera above me so as soon as I find one that isn't alarmed I'll take two to throw them off [one is stolen the other returned to the shelf]. Here is a woman bending over who isn't looking at me so I'll take this and go on calmly. I'll put the other one back and leave.

Spanish thief

This does not mean that security was useless; measures presented obstacles (although as will be seen, some more than others) and were risks that has to be managed. And as noted, some were caught.

Discussion with thieves in Canada revealed that some of them conducted quite detailed research into store security. Pre-theft surveillance might include taking note of EAS systems including how they were installed and identifying whether they were in proper working order. Some offenders were full time thieves who spent 40-60 hours a week conducting surveillance, stealing, and then selling the stolen merchandise. In many respects they are as dedicated to the task as loss prevention professionals.

The majority (17 of the 30, 57%) of Brazilian thieves thought that it was becoming harder to steal, and a minority easier (12 of the 30, 40%), only one person thought the risk had not changed. Those who lamented that it was becoming difficult highlighted increased security citing as a reason increases in the numbers of cameras and guards including more alert officers and plain clothed ones (e.g. store detectives), and the increased use of mirrors.³² Those who said it was getting easier highlighted their own improved skill sets and experience and felt that security levels were generally low. Certainly thieves gain confidence as they acquire skills and gain competence, and then they tend to conclude that all measures can be dealt with:

To be honest I see no difficulty to shoplift. It's very simple ... You look, the guard didn't see, you go and shoplift it ... I looked ... had a quick look ... the guard wasn't there ... I shoplifted. I looked and there was no camera... if there was it was really hidden.

Brazilian thief

It is instructive to look at thieves' perspectives on common retail security measures and assess their views on how they were tackled.³³

31 For a summary discussion see Gill, M. (2006) Introduction. In Gill, M. (ed) *The Handbook of Security*. London: Palgrave, pp8-10.

32 Mirrors have long been recognised – as far back as the nineteenth century - as a security device that had the desirable benefit of being of value to the customer and a problem to the thief: 'As with glass counters and cases, mirrors were charged with a twofold mission. While they reflected and enhanced the merchandise and the store itself, encouraging the fantasies of consumption, they simultaneously served for surveillance, reflecting the surreptitious and the illegal activities of a great many customers.' In Abelson, E. (1989) *When Ladies Go A-Thieving*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p 85. However, as will be shown, offenders can use mirrors to their advantage too.

33 In a short article it is not possible to assess thieves' views of all types of security measures, although that would be a very instructive thing to do. There are many types of technology and personnel as well as policies and procedures backed up by training. For a helpful discussion of the key options see Christman and Sennewald op cite., and Clarke, R. (2002) *Shoplifting. Problem-Oriented Guides for Police Problem-Specific Guides Series, No. 11* U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Community Oriented Policing Services.

Findings

EAS Tags

Amongst US thieves EAS was rarely mentioned as a concern. Shoplifters mainly felt that these systems are not well monitored and in most cases ignored by store staff. While many were dismissive of the deterrent effect of tags (or 'buzzers'),³⁴ some were caught because alarms were activated as they left the store and they were stopped by security staff. The least experienced may not be aware that goods had alarms and having to peel off tags deterred some from stealing large amounts. In the Canadian sample, five of the thieves were deterred when they were unable to remove the tag, they considered such goods off limits. Tags certainly disrupted some thieves as the following dialogue illustrates:

(Offender 1, male) *We look for security devices on the packages. If there stuff on the packaging you take it out of the package before you leave the store.*

(Offender 2, female) *The tags do slow you down a little.*

(Offender 1, male) *Yeah because you have to take more time taking them off right. Because if you leave one little piece on there it sets the alarm off and then if you don't you just rip the packaging there and it all comes out.*

Canadian thieves

Of course, not all items are tagged so some argued they were displaced to alternative targets. But generally they felt the threat posed by tags was fairly easily managed. In all, thieves identified the following methods for defeating tags.

1. **Destroy the tag.** This can be done by cutting it, burning it or bending it for example.
2. **Take the item out of the packaging containing the tag.** This was especially unproblematic if the item was for personal use. But removing items from packaging or damaging the packaging was likely to reduce the sale price especially if not being stolen to order.
3. **Remove the tag from the item.** Sometimes this can be carried out by peeling it off by hand and other times by using pliers or a knife. This was not always possible.
4. **Rely on finding goods that are not tagged.** As one Spanish thief recounted, 'Here I am going to take a little look at the CDs to see if they are alarmed. The truth is that they all seem to be alarmed, but not this one. This is easy ... It cost 20 Euros and I am sure to get 10 for it.'
5. **Put the tagged item into a magic bag.** There are different types, often this involves inserting an aluminium lining which effectively deactivates the alarm
6. **Deactivate the tag.** In some cases offenders claimed it was possible to use the stores' magnetic pads, the ones they used for deactivating during legitimate purchases. Other mentioned magnets or putting tags back to back to neutralise the signal.
7. **Deactivate the alarm by other means.** Sometimes thieves used a specially designed technical instrument.

³⁴ Recently published research has confirmed that EAS has proved wanting as an effective security measure; see, Hayes, R. and Blackwood, R. (2006) Evaluating the Effects of EAS on Product Sales and Loss: Results of a Large-Scale Field Experiment. *Security Journal*, 19,4, pp 262-276; Hayes, R. and Blackwood, R. (forthcoming) Evaluating EAS Effectiveness: Offender Perspectives. In Review.

Findings

- 8. Test the system first.** Some carried a tag in their pocket and walked through several times setting off the alarm - after a while they will stop searching assuming a system fault. Some claimed that they peeled off a tag and secretly attached it to customers and then watched to see what transpired.
- 9. Circumvent exit gates.** They exit around rather than through the gates or at least pass goods around gates, as one US shop thief said, 'I just lift the stuff over the antennae.'
- 10. Use alternative exits.** They pass goods over the perimeter fence to an accomplice.
- 11. Assume gates are faulty.** They walk through the gates and rely on the alarm not going off, some claimed that faults were common.
- 12. Rely on no response.** Some thieves claimed they walked through the gates aware that even if the alarm did go off no-one was there to respond.
- 13. Await store apologies.** Some walk through the gates aware that there is someone there to respond but rely on the fact that he or she will merely apologise for the alarms sounding as the alarms are always faulty. Sometimes it was possible to monitor staff to see what they did, some said those who staff the exits are often not alert.
- 14. Become immersed in the crowd.** Some thieves walk through gates aware that there is someone there but they walk through at the same time as others, ideally people in wheel chairs or people pushing prams and baby buggies, because they offer another explanation as to why the alarm may have gone off.
- 15. Avoid arrest.** Even if the thief is stopped there are still at least five options to consider, they can:
 - a) Run
 - b) have an alibi, for example, carry clothes that were not de-tagged in another store
 - c) threaten the security officer and hope he/she desists
 - d) bribe him or her (assuming that there has been no collusion organised in advance)
 - e) 'blag it' perhaps by claiming harassment or ascertain rights and hope the security officer is intimidated

Some typical comments included:

Sometimes I will go into a bathroom to check if there is a buzzer inside, if there are none I will go out and load up.

US thief

Nevertheless, here are some printer cartridges which sell well that computer stores can always buy them from you. And what's more they are not alarmed or that's what it seems. No, they are alarmed, oh no they are not, but the problem is that I have a camera behind me. Let's see if I can do it slowly, so they don't realise what's going on ... I'll take it like this so they'll see that it hasn't left my hand [stands with back to cameras and slides cartridge inside his jacket]. And then go for another walk around the store.

Spanish thief

They just peel off [back of batteries], so these ones, see what I mean? You can just pick them and they come off. They're just sticky back. It does help if you have got nails. You just peel them off. That's it, tag's off. So you're sweet to go round the shop with them now.

English thief

Findings

You know there's not going to be no security tags inside because the back of the box [Black & Decker drill] is still sealed ... I would take that off [bar code on tin of paint] ... I wouldn't have just stood here, I would have been walking and peeling it off as well.
English thief

CCTV

CCTV is certainly a major threat that needs to be managed. Work in the UK has revealed that offenders who have been caught on camera are aware of its prosecution force, but only when the image is good enough to provide a clear identification³⁵ and all too often CCTV systems are not managed very well and so their effectiveness is lessened.³⁶ The fact of the matter is that many thieves had been caught on camera and shown images that were just not good enough to support a prosecution. Some thieves admitted that they did not know where the cameras were and that presented a threat.

In Brazil CCTV was the security measure viewed as the biggest threat, and by some margin, the threat posed by EAS and security officers was much less. This was principally because cameras covered many angles, and they could not always be sure where they were or whether they were pointing at them, and the fact that a good image of them stealing was strong proof of guilt.

In Canada too CCTV was rated as the number one concern, but there all 17 offenders believed they could overcome it mirroring views expressed elsewhere that, properly tackled, the threat of CCTV could be lessened. Across the studies the thieves revealed a number of techniques.

1. **Be skilful in the art of theft.** As noted above, acting quickly, sleight of hand and distraction were all techniques that made it difficult for anyone watching to identify what was happening on camera as a theft.
2. **Check camera surveillance range.** Some thieves said that they would check to see where the camera was pointing prior to taking any goods.
3. **Use their body to conceal the theft act.** They did this by keeping their body between the camera and the goods.
4. **Find blind spots.** Sometimes columns, banners, high shelves and other methods of product display created blind spots. The design and layout of stores helps thieves.
5. **Product removal.** This is similar to above but involves removing goods to a location which was out of view of the cameras.
6. **Become immersed in the crowd.** The presence of lots of people made it hard for anyone to keep watch on them, be that a security guard or an eager camera operator. People blocked the camera view and lots of people gave operators other targets to follow so they were less likely to stand out.
7. **Don't behave in a suspicious way³⁷ that would be likely to attract attention.** Those who look around the store a lot, rather than specifically at products, can look suspicious.

35 Gill, M. and Loveday, K. (2003): 'What do Offenders think about CCTV?' In M. Gill (ed) CCTV. Leicester: Perpetuity Press.

36 Gill, M. and Spriggs, A. (2005): Assessing the Impact of CCTV, Home Office Research Study number 292. London:

Home Office. <http://www.perpetuitygroup.com/prci/publications.html#homeofficecctv>. See also, Hayes, R. and Blackwood, R. (2007) Conditional Deterrence: Offender Perspectives on CCTV as a Deterrent in Retail Environments. In Review.

37 In the Canadian sample nine loss prevention officers were asked how they identified shop thieves and all claimed to use 'behavior observation'. The signs of theft included: walking fast; anything 'out of the ordinary'; their merchandise selection being too fast, too slow, paying insufficient attention to the price, failing to look at the merchandise; multiple eye movements; heading quickly towards the merchandise but in an indirect manner (to scope out the store). Other cues included: carrying backpacks, shopping bags, oversized clothing, and wearing clothes not matching the weather.

Findings

8. **Don't look at camera.** Some thieves made the point that since cameras were located high in the store, not looking upwards (merely straight ahead or downwards) prevented stores from obtaining a picture of the face that would be sufficient to support a prosecution.
9. **Wear a disguise.** Commonly this merely involved wearing a cap or hood, this was especially important if the thief was already a suspect within a store.
10. **Assume cameras are faulty.** They conduct thefts and rely on cameras not working.
11. **Rely on no response.** Some thieves claimed that experience had shown that cameras were often not watched.
12. **Rely on a lack of co-ordination within loss prevention.** Some offenders claimed that they were in the store a very short time and so loss prevention staff would have to act quickly even if something was reported to them, and most often they were not quick enough. Some believed there was a lack of co-ordination between those monitoring the cameras and those on the shop floor such that the risks of being apprehended were not great.

CCTV was definitely a threat, thieves did not want a perfectly clear image of them stealing available to the police and courts, they were aware that this would be a serious problem. So acting naturally and not doing anything to draw attention to them was viewed as the best response. It is worth noting that some thieves believed that a lot of cameras in a store acted as a distraction to the loss prevention efforts as a camera operator could not possibly view all the cameras all of the time. Other felt that cameras merely removed responsibility for identifying thieves from front line staff who no longer viewed it as their responsibility. One Canadian offender claimed to prefer an area of "heavy camera placement" as a plethora of cameras by default indicated a lack of 'natural surveillance' which was viewed as a much bigger danger. This point was noted by others in the UK, cameras could not jump off a wall and arrest them but people nearby witnessing a theft could do just that and this was a much greater threat. Some typical comments included:

Cameras don't stop you, they deter you a bit because you gotta watch for all the little spots and now they are getting so small they can be in almost anything.

Canadian thief

We have a look, see where they are. The first step when we enter ... is looking for the cameras. We have a look, see where they are. I don't get to know exactly where every camera is but I know some of them turn 360 degrees ... and others that focus only on the products ... The cameras are what most intimidate us, much more than the guards.

Brazilian thief

Cameras don't really bother me. Fair enough I might get caught later on in the day but as long as I get away there and then I'm not really bothered. So cameras have not been issue for me like. I mean you're gonna caught y'know more likely because being on the cameras in the shop and then they see you run out and the alarm goes off and you're running away it obvious that they are gonna check the camera to see what you took.

English thief

I wouldn't care about the cameras because everyone seems docile in the shops so I'd just take me chance because they would be focusing on the expensive goods.

English thief

Findings

On the security, I really do give 'em a five [1–5 rating scale] because there's no way you can get by yourself, you know. Understand there's no way you can get alone, so their cameras are really good.

US thief

A store like this there would have to be some serious thinking...like there is so many cameras and on the way out you have to go through a lot of people.

US thief

Security officers

Previous work on security officers in the UK has suggested that often they are employed because they offer reassurance to staff should a violent incident occur, and provide a general deterrence against theft.³⁸ Work with thieves suggests rather more benefits. In Spain, security officers were considered the major threat, more than CCTV. Some thieves avoided stores with guards. One Canadian offender who ran a shoplifting ring, and was therefore very experienced and knowledgeable, avoided any store with guards as he felt there were plenty of alternatives and wanted to avoid the hassle they generated.

In Brazil, a half of the respondents had been previously apprehended by guards (although only a minority had been reported to the police or received any kind of punishment), and 24 of the 30 (80%) thieves claimed that they had previously had to abandon a product they had taken with intent to steal and the primary reason was that they felt they had been spotted and/or were about to be approached by a security officer.³⁹ Their suspicions were aroused when they felt the guard was watching them, seeing them speak into a radio was a worry as it might indicate they are reporting something they have seen, and seeing a guard walk towards them made them anxious, hence the advantage of guards who walk around, it added to the unpredictability. Some thieves became concerned when they sensed someone was behind them (sometimes by first noticing a shadow). Most offenders viewed being followed as a very good reason to abort the theft.

Security officers were a threat that many felt they could fairly easily manage:

If you feel you are being followed and you are being followed then you just ditch it. You hide it in another aisle somewhere and you just leave. If they stop you, you have nothing on you.

Canadian thief

if you know that the security is following you, you walk to a different part of the store, they are gonna continue to follow, well, as soon as you get that one second, well, you just casually put it back.

Canadian thief

In many ways the threat posed by security officers and other personnel was the same as that posed by CCTV, they could be witnesses and provide evidence. Of course, guards can make arrests in a way CCTV cannot. However, many of the avoidance tactics used by thieves to counter guards were similar to those used to counter the threat posed by CCTV. So acting skillfully and not attracting attention to the theft, checking whether they are being watched, using the body to shield the act of theft, using blind spots, removing products to different locales within the store are salient examples. But there are some tactics shop thieves use to nullify security officers which merit specific comment here.

³⁸ Gill, M. (2004) *Uniformed Retail Security Officers*. Leicester: Perpetuity Research and Consultancy International. www.perpetuitygroup.com/publications

³⁹ It is of course possible that the suspicions were initially raised by an alert member of staff, or a member of the public or a CCTV operator for example. But the security guard was there to make the intervention and that is why they are a threat.

Findings

1. **Rely on incompetence.** Some thieves claimed that security officers were not generally competent, often unfocussed, poorly paid and more interested in speaking to cashiers or flirting with staff to pass the time of day rather than apprehend thieves.
2. **Bribe the guard.** Collusion was a big advantage and some thieves claimed they bribed the guards.
3. **Threaten the guard.** Guards could be intimidated either before the theft took place (especially if they were located near an exit) or when they came to make an apprehension.
4. **Steal out of sight.** Thieves noticed whether guards moved around the store, where they were static they were much less of a threat, but a guard that walked around was unpredictable.
5. **Work the low numbers.** Thieves claimed that there were often too few guards to make a difference and that it was easy to avoid them.

In general security officers were a force to be reckoned with, they certainly could not be ignored. In some cases the fear resulted less from the risk of apprehension than the risk of the guard being violent (amongst the Brazilian sample for example). Thieves often saw them as ill-prepared and unfocussed and this worked to their advantage.

Other measures

A key theme that emerged from a review of the work on security measures was that shop thieves do not like being watched; surveillance is a powerful deterrent. Thieves noted that alert sales staff were dangerous, and stores that were customer focused in that they offered a high degree of personal interaction with customers were bad places to steal from:

The fact that people are talking to you and stuff that would be a deterrent because you know that people are paying attention. Like right now, I don't feel like anybody noticed that I was in the store.

US thief

One of the facts that we're walking around the store talking like maniacs...and nobody even asked us what we were doing...nobody asked...can I help you...to at least let us know that we're being noticed.

US thief

In practice though, sales staff were generally too busy to notice theft, and in any event they appeared to thieves to lack responsibility for stopping them:

There no one can see me only there is a camera behind. I'm going to take for example these two packets of chorizo to the wine aisle where I'll hide them on me, it'll be easier there. If you turn your back to them I don't think they will see you. You grab the bottle –see? ... I'll walk through the wine section and see if there's a good one for my father, but no, I'll stick with the vodka. This is easier because there isn't usually anyone [there]. Right now there is a stock woman but she's not very interested in what I'm doing. I see that she is doing her work and that's it.

Spanish thief

Findings

Plain clothes store detectives were a worry, but then so was anyone who might be near them and could potentially see what they were doing. The general point thieves made was that they always had to worry about being watched and whether that was a guard, cashier, store detective or a customer did not make much difference, they all had the capacity to intervene or report the offence and all had to be managed or avoided in a similar way.

Thieves reasoned that store staff, like guards, were poorly trained and inadequately motivated. Of course, they were a threat to be managed. Some thieves spoke to the staff to gain their confidence and avoid any suspicion they are anything other than a legitimate customer. Speaking to a member of staff is also a chance to assess any security measures pertaining to a product. For example, one thief was concerned about loop alarms around a music system, but asked for them to be removed because he claimed he wanted to assess its portability as he was planning to move it around his home. The helpful assistant had the alarms removed and before they could be reconnected he stole the system. Targeting areas where staff were perceived as lazy, busy or disinterested reduced the risk for thieves. One thief felt safer operating in shift changeover periods where staff were otherwise occupied with either leaving work or settling into the work. And working in teams to distract, or colluding with staff increased the chances of success.

As noted above mirrors presented some dangers to thieves. One tactic was to stay away from them and where possible avoid stealing in front of them. As one Canadian thief said, 'I don't care for mirrors'. However, some thieves claimed they were an advantage, they could be used as a counter surveillance tool. This is not the first time a security measure has been seen as an advantage to an offender:

Mirrors, I dunno, mirrors are more a tool [to help me] because if you're standing close to a mirror and the [member of] staff is way over there ... they're gonna be able to see you but not in much detail, and you can keep an eye on the staff in the mirror for sure.

Canadian thief

Safer cases were a nuisance to some thieves and Spanish interviewees in particular considered them a real threat. Some thieves worried that there might be a tag inside. Others noted that because the cases made the product bigger it made them less attractive, as one US thief said, products became 'too big and bulky'. Then there was the added hassle of getting the safer case off and the risk the product might be damaged. Spanish shop thieves spoke about forcing open safer cases with a knife or a pair of scissors, and without these they were unable to proceed with the theft:

Here we have the printer cartridges but there is a problem and it's the case. We need a magnet or something to open it.

Spanish thief

Occasionally though, they struck lucky:

Everything is in a case and since I haven't brought anything to take the alarms off with I can't do anything. Unless, there is one that's open. Look, here we have one. There's always one that is open. It has a sticker but I think that I can take it off. I'm going to take a look.

Spanish thief

Findings

They could open CDs or DVDs by hitting them on the edge of a shop fixture. Clearly though this could attract attention, as one US thief noted: '[I] can get 'em off, but they make noise'.

Sometimes goods are behind displays, but not every thief was deterred by this. One English thief noted that he had sometimes found these accessible, and another noted (and showed the research team) how he removed the screws to the front panelling to access goods:

Yeah, I didn't think much of it. I think if you came along with a flat headed screw-driver and you got it inside you could just pop the end of the screws out – look they are coming out already here, you can see it here, screws hanging out and all like that already... I could easily just pop them out you know. Pull it back and get your hand in and get them off. So I don't think it's that is effective like.

English thief

There is perhaps one other factor that needs to be noted here in terms of what works, and that is having a market for whatever is stolen. There have been attempts to control the stolen goods market by attempting to impact on the demand for goods. This on the face of it would appear to be a good strategy.⁴⁰

Approaching the store

There are many people here that's good because they tend to attract people, that's good, especially security staff. And the underground is nearby that's good too although I never run from stores but it's always good to have the stop nearby. The exit area is pretty big – you can head out in different directions. There are buildings you go in to hide and ... since it's an urban area people watch you less than if it is a small town. There are many escape avenues so you can escape each side or straight out front. There aren't too many people about here at the entrance, there aren't too many people seated here which is also pretty good. The outside area is pretty calm there are no security guards at the doors ... There also don't seem to be any local police doing their rounds ... so if you have to leave running it looks pretty good plus you have the underground and the buses right here. You can hide somewhere here, wait a while, and then leave once all the fuss is over or if you come by car they can wait for you a bit further away ... where there is a lamppost there is usually a camera, but I don't think there are any here since this area is probably town property. There is usually one on the brick wall but here I don't see any – that's pretty good ... Apart from the security guards I look to see if at the exit there are security checkpoints – the magnetic kind (and) if at the entrance, besides a checkpoint, there are cameras ... that belongs to the supermarket and not the shopping centre. This helps me figure out ... what to watch for and where to manoeuvre. At the entrance I would try to avoid them or at least not let them film my face, so you would wear a cap or something.

Spanish thief

⁴⁰ This topic is beyond the scope of this report, but see, Sutton, M. (1998) *Handling Stolen goods and Theft: A Market Reduction Approach*. Home Office Research Study No 178. London: Home Office; Sutton, M, Schneider, J. and Hetherington, S. (2001) *Tackling Theft with the Market Reduction Approach*. Crime Reduction Series Paper No 8. London: Policing and Reducing Crime Unit, Home Office.

Thinking about a response

The general conclusion from this work, mirroring studies of security generally, is that all measures have a value; they all have potential to work in some cases against some kinds of offenders and offences. And the absence of measures was definitely an advantage:

OK, wow...wow...wow...this is probably the easiest one to steal out of that I've been here [to]. No cameras, no mirrors, no people, no staff.

US thief

Interviewees readily admitted that they had not been successful on some occasions in having to leave with goods and most had been caught occasionally (although usually not often). In the US study offenders were asked why they did not steal certain items and one explanation was that they were well protected (others included, not having a market for it, not using it themselves and having better alternatives). Nevertheless, in general the motivation to steal is very high especially where it is done to support an addiction.

The security literature is replete with advice which highlights the need for a good risk assessment, an audit of current security measures to identify gaps and weaknesses, and then a focus on the right mix of measures to fit the problem, which then needs to be properly managed and continually subjected to re-evaluation. Offenders need to be forced to take more effort to commit crime, delaying tactics can work (so some will fail and others be deterred or distracted). They need to be encouraged to feel that thieving is too risky and therefore desist, and deprived from enjoying the rewards such as when they have to damage goods to steal them. Then at the store it is necessary to reduce provocations and this can be done by not making it easy to steal. Moreover, not allowing thieves to make excuses by highlighting the fact that it is illegal, and similarly alerting their conscience that 'shop theft is stealing' can help. And a well run company with committed and engaged staff, fairly rewarded for their efforts serves as a very effective security measure. The evidence from the thieves' perspective underscores the merits of these approaches.

However, thieves are adapting to the heightened threat. They are doing this by spending more time on pre-theft surveillance; dedicating more effort to identifying the safest areas for the concealment of stolen goods; becoming more skilled in the craft of theft; becoming more technology aware; avoiding security measures that create problems for them by going to places where they either don't exist or exist but don't function fully or at all. Using accomplices can be an advantage and so can colluding with staff. Some Canadian offenders had started using two-way radios. They are aided by the fact that the police often show little interest in retail theft and many see the law as unsupportive.

What thieves rely on for success

There are three general areas that thieves said helped them. They involved retailers implementing inappropriate security measures; retailers failing to support staff with appropriate training and procedures; and giving insufficient attention to design issues. Each is considered in turn.

1. Inappropriate and poorly managed measures

Implementing a multiple of security measures is all well and good but they have to be the right ones targeted at specific problems and this was not in evidence since most offenders claimed they were not caught most of the time. Indeed, some measures work

Thinking about a response

to the advantage of the thief, for example if they make staff less security conscious. Some thieves claimed they used mirrors to their advantage (but others found mirrors an irritation). Even if the right measures are applied they have to be co-ordinated. Exit gates that activate an alarm are only any good if someone is there to respond. It did not appear that stores collected good data about losses and without good data identifying patterns of loss, the effectiveness of loss prevention efforts are likely to be less than totally effective. Thieves did not believe that stores shared data, including intelligence because they operated in different locales without getting caught. Because stores often do not audit properly or evaluate the measures they do have, they do not effectively improve security. This enables thieves to operate with relatively little risk and target the same stores again and again.

2. Failure to support staff with training and procedures

Collecting good data needs to be matched by clearly identifying the key learning points and communicating those to relevant audiences in a way that is meaningful. Thieves' accounts suggest that this did not happen in that staff did not pose a serious threat to their activities most of the time. Security measures have their place but if these are not backed up by appropriate procedures and processes they are unlikely to be fully effective, and these and the training of staff in applying them was seen as a gap thieves could exploit. Indeed, at the retail 'coal-face', many non-security staff, including checkout assistants, sales staff and those responsible for stock replenishment remain unaware of security and loss prevention issues. Shoplifters don't like to be noticed, the more staff there are and the greater the interest of staff in them the less opportunities there are for shop thieves to steal. But their feelings were that there was insufficient staff, at least they regularly appeared busy. And in any event, they did not appear especially motivated, by taking less interest in customers, they by association, take less interest in thieves. Moreover, the fact that they were demotivated or otherwise felt they were not treated well made them easier to bribe or threaten, this is as true of store staff generally as it is security staff specifically.⁴¹ It would seem to be an advantage to thieves that store staff are sometimes trained to look for shoplifter stereotypes. Thieves noted that they tried to look like normal shoppers and not draw attention to themselves, that way they may avoid the gaze of those who are looking for unusual or suspicious behaviour.

3. Insufficient attention to design issues (the store environment and packaging)

There is often a tension in retailing between a sales and a security philosophy - locking goods away may prevent theft but it reduces their visibility and availability to the shopper – and it is naive to suggest strategies that will adversely impact upon sales without a measurable benefit. But designing stores and products represents a much neglected opportunity to impact on theft.

The internal design of the environment and the way it impacts upon shop theft has received little commentary⁴² but it is an important topic. There are many examples that can be used to highlight this point and the two that follow are merely illustrative. First, goods on the top shelf can be harder to steal because thieves sometimes have to stretch to reach them and in so doing risk drawing attention to themselves. Second, goods placed near tills (such as batteries) were seen by some English thieves as advantageous because they were near the exit. This is counter to what is common good practice. In practice

41 As research elsewhere has shown, security work can be routine and strategies are needed to keep them engaged.

42 But see, Schneider, R. (2006) Contribution of Environmental Studies to Security. in Gill, M (ed) The Handbook of Security. London: Palgrave, Cardone, C (2006) Opportunity makes the thief: analysis of the physical cues that influence shoplifter perceptions of the retail interior and the decision to steal. A thesis presented to the Graduate School of the University of Florida in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Interior Design University of Florida.

Thinking about a response

locating goods near areas where they can be watched is only helpful if the staff designated to be watching them are able to do so, this requires a line of sight. Thieves claimed that often staff were just too busy to notice what was going on around even if they could see them. So at tills especially, staff need a line of sight on vulnerable goods.

Thieves prefer small packs which are easy to conceal and enables them to remove a larger numbers of items. Moreover, packaging was generally easy to attack.⁴³ The US study noted that heavier gauge plastic increases the time it takes to attack time and may require the thieves to use tools which can complicate the theft.

Goods can only be stolen if they are there. This is an example of a feature that suits both the customer and the thief. Clearly goods cannot be made unavailable. It was noted that where shelves are not regularly stocked it made it easier to rearrange the shelf to disguise a theft, and sparse shelves can be an indication of an unkempt store. The design of stores is often conducive to theft. However, wide open spaces where they cannot hide and thereby control the situation, frustrates them. In Canada, this comment was made even by those who did not believe that the design of the environment was a deterrent.⁴⁴

Revisiting the decision circle

The important point about the decision circle is that it represents different points at which retailers can intervene to impact upon the decision making process of offenders. If retailers can make offenders think differently, that is make them not able or want to steal, then they stop a theft. Below, the decision circle is revisited, and at each stage the various decision points are considered, highlighting ways in which retailers may impact upon thieves.

1. Choosing the store

Many steal locally so understanding who the local thieves are, and sharing that knowledge with local retailers increases the chances of them getting caught.

Thieves like familiarity, and so consideration should be given to changing elements of the environment which make it less predictable without at the same time impacting on the honest customer's experience.

A good store operating with alert staff and effective security will quickly develop a reputation that will help deter some thieves.

Staff who are paid well, are highly motivated and well trained are less corruptible and offer less options to the shop thief.

The local environment can attract thieves, especially if it offers plenty of escape routes on foot or in a vehicle. The object should be to design the local environment so that thieves are more visible and escape routes are less attractive.

2. Entering the store

Offenders like to blend into the background to look like an honest customer; they don't like to attract attention. The more visible they are the less likely they are to steal. Designing the environment to maximise their visibility is, for them, unwelcome.

Thieves obviously don't like staff paying attention to them. Good customer service, such as taking an active interest in people as they enter the store may also double as an effective deterrent.

⁴³ There would be much to commend the building of security into the product at the manufacturing stage.

⁴⁴ Work is currently underway on testing the applicability of the CEPTED model to retailing. Further details available from the author.

Thinking about a response

Offenders feel safer stealing when they understand security measures, that way they can manage the threat. Making the security unpredictable, perhaps by introducing evidence of new technologies creates uncertainty in thieves' minds.

Thieves like to find blind spots, these are a real haven, reducing the number of blind spots or better still eliminating them altogether makes stealing more difficult.

Thieves like lots of exits, just in case they need to get away quickly, it increases options. Controlling the number of exits, restricting the supply of 'hot' products around exits, and increasing visibility around them may contribute to making the store more difficult to steal from.

3. Locating the product

At this stage offenders had an opportunity to assess the security measures in place as well as other risks, such as being suspected by staff. Some worried they might give themselves away by looking around too much and not focussing on products. These are potential tell tale signs staff can be trained to look for.

Good places to steal from were blind spots or areas where blind spots could be created. Thieves said they could turn their back against cameras and on-lookers so CRAVED goods located here were an advantage.

A good target

Let's go right for the razor, let's check things out here, there's no one. So, first you look to see that it isn't alarmed. There are a fair number of people in this area so we keep looking as if we are doing nothing, there's an older person and a girl and well, now there's no one. So you take it and hide it on you and you (behave to make) everything look as natural as possible, you never want to look nervous. Everything must look very natural and then you leave ... The razors are boxed although some, I'm in luck, some are open ... it is its really bulky but I can always take the shaver out but if they catch me then I have to buy it because I've broken it, whereas if I don't break it if they catch me with it I can put it back and that's all. I think I'm going to risk it without breaking it or anything because it seems so easy. This supermarket seems pretty good. Had I known I would have come before.

Spanish thief

4. Concealing the product

Some offenders wear special clothing to help them hide goods. Staff can be trained to look for anything that is out of sync with the season or is otherwise unusual.

Similarly, some thieves use bags or packages and other items such as umbrellas to hide stolen goods. Clearly not everyone dressed unusually or carrying such items is a thief but it may be a factor alongside others that helps to identify a potential suspect, especially if there was some sort of inconsistency such as carrying an umbrella on a day when rain was unlikely.

Some thieves purchased legitimate items and hid stolen goods within them (such as a suit case). Security may help here such as a bar code on the inside of the item so that the cashier has to open the item at the point of sale.

Understanding how thieves steal may put staff on their guard about what to look for, knowing about sleight of hand, distraction, blind spots and collusion (and how that works)

Thinking about a response

give these staff an edge and thieves another risk to manage. Security measures, including safer cases can make goods harder to steal, but as has been shown, these need to be used in a way that increases the overall risk, measures in isolation are not typically a major impediment to most thieves.

5. Leaving the store

Not all offenders walk directly out of the store immediately after stealing the goods, some buy goods (usually an inexpensive item) to imply they are a normal shopper and to give them a moment to see whether there are any signs that they are under suspicion. So buying some goods should not be viewed as implying they did not steal other products.

Some thieves had an accomplice who created a commotion if it looked like the theft had been discovered. Looking for people who distract, or more accurately noticing behaviours as distracting techniques can help prevent thefts and catch offenders (including accomplices acting as distracters).

Thieves needed to get to the exit, the larger the gap between the tills and the exit, and the more the exit is able to be watched the greater the danger for thieves.

6. Disposing of the goods

Where goods are stolen for personal consumption, then they are not disposed of in the conventional sense. But some thieves sell to members of the public and to businesses. An education programme alerting people to the dangers of buying stolen goods has much to commend it. This could focus on personal dangers, such as potentially buying dangerous goods (they may be counterfeit) and to societal dangers on how shop theft feeds other crime including illegal drug taking and even organised crime.

Co-ordinated action against fences would provide focus on a group who rarely attract law enforcement action. This may be facilitated by enhancing product traceability.

Suggestions for further research

Offender perspectives remain a largely unexplored area, yet, as this research has hopefully shown, they provide a very good way of evaluating the art of theft from stores and the limitations and weaknesses in measures and strategies to tackle it. Indeed, what offenders provide is not just an explanation of whether a measure has worked or not, but why it has or has not. There is still a lot more we need to know about a whole range of measures. For example, there are different types of CCTV systems and they work in different ways and understanding how each 'type' impacts on theft is a future challenge. Similarly, there are different types of tags and alarms, and many varieties of property marking, and there are new measures being developed all the time. These all need to be subjected to more rigorous evaluation.

There is a need to understand much better the procedures and processes that are crucial to making security work effectively. The people dimension is as important as the technology dimension, indeed technology is useless without human intervention somewhere along the line. It is far from clear that we have developed the right frameworks for responding. Similarly, the role of store staff is widely recognised as crucial to preventing shop theft, but there are many ways that this can be achieved; these need to be better understood.

The whole issue of design has not been seriously addressed. As has been highlighted there are many features of the design of stores that impact upon theft, but these have not been systematically evaluated from the perspective of the offender. And packaging design too can have an impact, and there is scope for more research here too.

In a different way there is a need to corroborate offenders' perceptions with empirical data about theft in store. Here the object will be to compare specific types of losses in store with the views and experiences of offenders responsible for those losses. And there is a need to examine more closely the overlap between customer theft and staff theft and the nature of collusion.

There is much to be gained from penetration testing.⁴⁵ This is another way offenders' views can be used to assess the adequacy of security and perhaps more importantly to understand the reasons for its strengths and weaknesses. The advantage of penetration testing, if done properly, is that it is relatively quick, very informative and much less costly than a full evaluation.

⁴⁵ The author has conducted penetration tests by taking shop thieves to two major retailers to test out their security. In both cases the thieves were successful although more because of poor implementation of the security in question, and especially a lack of a staff training, than because the measures were faulty or inadequate.

Appendix A: Methodology and sample

The overall aim of each of the studies was to better understand the offenders' perspectives on shop theft. The methodologies were similar, in each study thieves were interviewed, and at least some were returned to the scenes of crime, that is retail outlets, where they were filmed recreating their offences and talking about their approaches to theft. The discussions and filming at the scenes generated valuable insights which in my view can be missed when offenders are interviewed in prison or some other location divorced from the scene. For example, rather than just asking about the threats posed by EAS systems or CCTV offenders could explain their answers and illustrate points they were making. It seems likely that because they were at the scene it triggered them to think about issues that they might otherwise have forgotten or not thought about.

There is nothing especially new about this approach. More than two decades ago Carroll and Weaver took offenders back to crime scenes and were asked to 'think aloud' and their responses were coded.⁴⁶ There are distinct advantages in understanding what offenders have to say as far as developing a response to crime is concerned:

Crime scripts are useful tools for systematically portioning the modus operandi of simple and complex crimes into discrete, standardised stages or units of action.⁴⁷

As noted the samples were derived from different sources and in different ways according to local needs.

In Brazil, 30 adult shoplifters from the greater Sao Paulo area were interviewed. There were 16 men and 14 women, only one was aged over 40 and most were under 30 years old, 10 were single, two were divorced and the remainder were married, 14 were unemployed. The school experience varied markedly, 11 terminated at primary school level, six at secondary school level, 12 had not completed undergraduate studies and one had. While the need for money may have been a motivation for some, 11 of the sample had a mean income classified as up to half the average. Three quarters started their offending before the age of 17, although two were at least 25 years old. All the sample stole at least monthly and mostly weekly and often several times a week at that.

The Canadian sample were also prolific offenders. In all, 20 shop thieves were interviewed, 17 formally and three informally, and six of these agreed to be videotaped.⁴⁸ To attract potential recruits a flyer was distributed across approximately 20 locations in a Canadian city including shopping malls, college and university campuses, and bulletin boards in the downtown core and in front of homeless shelters. Interviews lasted about one hour. The 17 interviewees claimed to have completed an average of 200 thefts per annum (with a range in 2005 of two to 375), between them they had been arrested 60 times in their lifetime for shop theft offences, and had been active an average of 12.5 years (with a range of 1 to 30 years). In all, six of the 17 offenders had no fixed address. Because they lived in homeless shelters or with friends and some paid their way by contributing stolen merchandise to the home owner.

In the UK the sample was collected by snowballing although a story about the research was placed in a local newspaper and that attracted some initial recruits to the study

⁴⁶ Carroll, J. and Weaver, F. opp cite, p26.

⁴⁷ Cornish, D. and Smith, M. (2003) Introduction. in Smith, M and Cornish, D (eds) *Theory and Practice in Situational Prevention*. Crime Prevention Studies, 16. Collumpton: Willan, p3.

⁴⁸ In addition, nine loss prevention professionals and 2 mall security managers were interviewed for their views on shop theft, as well as 2 members of the Police Service Stolen Property Unit and one officer from a Police Service Community Policing unit who worked closely with loss prevention personnel.

Appendix A: Methodology and sample

(about 15 participants⁴⁹) all of whom were involved in revisiting the scene. They were mostly men, about a third were woman and were mostly in their twenties or younger. Nearly all stole to feed a drug addiction.

In Spain the 30 interviewees were obtained by placing an advert in the free city newspaper. The sample did not contain any immigrants, they did not come forward. They filmed five shoplifters at the scene recreating their offences.⁵⁰ Twenty of the 30 interviewees were men and the average age 27.5 years. The vast majority were single and childless. Two thirds had a job but mostly a temporary job, four out of 30 were unemployed. A minority left school at primary level, more than twice as many claimed to have left school either after secondary school or after university. Only two had not been shoplifting within recent months, the majority within the weeks or even days leading up to the interview.

In the US Read Hayes and Robert Blackwood have conducted a range of studies on shop theft which have been draw upon here. They have collected data from over 170,000 shoplifters apprehended by 171 retailers across the US to gain insights into offenders' perceptions of loss prevention. Then three US retailers provided data collected by store detectives for 3000 shoplifter apprehensions. Later these data were supplemented by more collected from trained asset protection staff and 105 offenders (27 females, 75 males) were interviewed. Then twenty shoplifters were interviewed and their comments recorded on camera, and in a different phase of the research five shop thieves agreed to 'walkabouts' where their comments were recorded.⁵¹

49 At the time the work was being undertaken there were two similar studies and some offenders participated (to a lesser of greater extent) in both pieces of research.

50 This was supplemented by interviews with five security managers from and three store managers.

51 More details about this work can be found in Hayes (1997) op cite, Hayes (1999) op cite, Hayes, R. and Rogers, K. (2000) Shoplifting and Science: Inside the mind of the offender. A paper presented at the National Retail Federation's Annual Loss Prevention Conference.

About Perpetuity Research and Consultancy International

Perpetuity Research and Consultancy International is a 'spin out' company from the University of Leicester that undertakes research and consultancy in relation to crime, community safety, risk and security management.

We have established a reputation for excellence in research and consultancy by combining a scholarly approach with entrepreneurial vision to develop effective solutions for our clients.

Our staff includes criminologists who are specialists in understanding crime and community safety and developing innovative responses; experts in security and risk management who assess incidents and evolve preventative strategies; and researchers and analysts who collect and analyse data, identify trends, and conduct evaluations offering cutting-edge insights.

Our collective commitment is to provide our clients with solutions that make a difference.

About the Author

Professor Martin Gill

Martin Gill is Director of Perpetuity Consultancy. Martin has published work on crime, security and policing; over 100 journals and magazines articles and 12 books including, *Commercial Robbery*, *Managing Security*, *CCTV* and the *Handbook of Security*.

Martin Gill has conducted extensive research on retail crime and security covering topics such as the effectiveness of security officers; violence in store, staff dishonesty, the effectiveness of property marking in retailing, the illicit market for stolen goods, the effectiveness of CCTV to name but some. In 2005 the Home Office published the national evaluation of CCTV which Martin led, this has attracted attention across the world. He has recently finished a study of fraudsters in prison and is currently involved in a range of projects involving business crime including shop theft, frauds, staff dishonesty, burglary reduction, robbery, the effectiveness of security measures, and the value of security.

Professor Gill is a Fellow of The Security Institute, a member of the Risk and Security Management Forum, the Company of Security Professionals (and therefore a Freeman of the City of London), Chair of the ASIS Research Council. He is co-editor of the *Security Journal* and founding editor of *Risk Management: an International Journal*.



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