AN INVESTIGATION INTO THEFT FROM SHOPS AMONG JUVENILES

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This research project studies aspects of the crime most commonly committed by juveniles - that of theft from shops. It determines the extent of the offence amongst a sample of 13-16 year olds and examines peer group perceptions. Brief consideration has been given to the social influences and patterns of adolescent behaviour which may contribute to the offence being committed. The 'victims', the shopkeepers, have been invited to discuss what efforts the retail trade has made to combat the incidence of crime and the importance they place on it.

The juveniles involved in theft from shops have been identified using the police records over a two year period. The subsequent action and the re-offending rate have been recorded and analysed.

It has been gratifying that in North Bedfordshire, where the research was undertaken, the police have responded by introducing an 'informal warning' for first time offenders committing theft from shops or other minor offences, providing certain criteria are met.

This was instigated in September 1988 as a one year pilot scheme. Whilst a formal evaluation of the scheme is still to be made, initial findings appear promising. It is apparent that there exists scope for national research to be undertaken, the results of which could significantly address the prevention, detection and resolution of this offence.

The Dodger had a vicious propensity, too, of pulling the caps from the heads of small boys and tossing them down areas, while Charley Bates exhibited some very loose notions concerning the rights of property, by pilfering divers apples and onions from the stores at the kennel sides and thrusting them into his pockets.

Charles Dickens in Oliver Twist, 1837

H. AGED 11, entered a store and was seen to remove from the counter a Mars bar and a tube of sweets. He then left the shop without paying. When stopped by the shopkeeper, he was found to have 20p in his possession. H had no previous convictions.

J aged 14 entered the changing rooms of and after trying on a pair of trousers wore her own on top and attempted to leave the store without paying. On being apprehended she was found to have in her possession a jumper and cosmetics which she admitted stealing earlier from another store. Total value of goods £58.00. J had no previous convictions.

In both instances, the response was a formal caution citeable in court should the juvenile re-offend. The two cases illustrate the width of the most prevalent juvenile crime - theft from shops - and highlight the dilemma of the police and other agencies confronting the problem.

It is easy to become complacent about an offence that is so common. It is important to extract cause and effect from the mix of factors operative within adolescent behaviour if the most effective offence resolution is to be found. The juvenile must recognise the response
as being appropriate and meaningful. This research project was designed to study aspects of this offence and to consider whether a formal caution is an appropriate response for a juvenile accused of that offence. The study was to increase or reduce the tenability of that form of disposal in the light of attitudes held by offenders and 'victims' and other members of society affected by the crime.

In order to appraise the attitudes of juveniles towards theft from shops a questionnaire was completed by 602 Bedford school children representing 83 per cent of the total target sample of 718.

The juveniles were all in the age range of 13-16 years and were drawn from whole year groups in three urban schools. Prior to the questionnaires being distributed, a letter was sent to parents of each pupil, informing them of the survey and asking them to contact the school should they not wish their child to participate. The parents of four children requested that their child should not take part.

The pupils and the schools were assured of anonymity and the questionnaires were distributed during a form lesson and returned in a sealed envelope, by form tutors.

The 17 per cent of those failing to complete the questionnaire was accounted for by absenteeism and it was estimated that their inclusion would not have changed, to any appreciable degree, the overall picture obtained from the juveniles actually surveyed.

The police records were obtained of all juvenile offenders in a named division covering central Bedford and incorporating the schools which participated in the questionnaire. All juveniles convicted of theft from shops from September 1985 to September 1987 were identified and the subsequent action taken and the re-offending pattern examined.

A video was made of an impromptu discussion involving young recidivists.

All the interviewing of the shopkeepers took place within the shop setting. Initially, managers were approached and appointments sought. Stores were selected at random but amongst those chosen were shops from which children, who had been charged, were known to have taken goods.

Although a predetermined framework of questions was used, shop managers were free to express wider views.

Assembling information concerning the social background of youngsters involved in theft from shops would be a valuable contribution to a project of this nature. Although not possible within the scope of this paper, I have studied research undertaken by others and I would like to draw on some of their conclusions in order to obtain an insight into the status of juveniles convicted of theft from shops.

Theft from shops may be a normal part of growing up. The owner of a supermarket seems so distant and the whole display so impersonal that taking things does not feel like depriving another person of his property.

In 1982, one of the country's biggest department stores carried out a three month nation-wide survey, published by the Association for the
Prevention of Theft in Shops. They found that more than a third of the shoplifting incidents recorded concerned the 11-16 age group and almost 60 per cent concerned people under 23.

For juveniles, theft from shops is often seen as a dangerous, foolish prank. Most 'normal' children have a herd instinct, they like to do whatever is the fashionable thing of the moment, whether it is as harmless as wearing their sleeves rolled up or something more dangerous such as glue sniffing. Shoplifting and petty theft may also be a craze from time to time with gangs forming and competitions being organised to see who can steal the greatest number of articles, or who can steal the most unusual item. For many, the catalyst is the lure of danger for its own sake, made all the more exciting because it is forbidden. It is that same lure that compels people to climb mountains or to sail solo around the world. The challenge of danger is one of the most difficult factors to combat.

In his study of juvenile theft, William Belson (1975, p-157) examined the hypothesis that 'going out looking for fun and excitement is a contributing factor to the initiation and maintenance of juvenile stealing. He found that 55 per cent of boys said they had stolen for fun and excitement and the principal factors which prevented them obtaining this stimulation in other ways were lack of money, lack of time, insufficient facilities or equipment, being too young, not enough mates. Lack of money and insufficient facilities were mentioned by up to 38 per cent.

What is it then about stealing which provides the fun and excitement? It gains the juvenile prestige in the eyes of his mates and wins him friendships when he talks and laughs about it. The daring of the deed, the risk of getting caught, being chased and outwitting people and the sense of achievement in knowing you have been doing something that is forbidden appears to be an important contributing factor operating within a complex of other factors.

Jeffery Greenwell, Chairman of the 1988 working party on juvenile crime reported to the Standing Conference on Crime Prevention that:

Good parenting is essential if children are to grow up as law abiding and responsible members of society. Without it, one of the strongest checks on anti-social attitudes and behaviour is removed.

In the juvenile shoplifter, there appear to be three motivational strands, common to other types of delinquent behaviour. Although one motive may strongly predominate, in many, the offence successfully fuses all three elements:

i. The crime is an act of defiance against restrictive or unsympathetic parents and by publicly shaming them punishes them for their lack of understanding.

ii. It is an appeal for help and may lead to a removal from home or some improvement in circumstances.

iii. It is preceded by a period during which the offenders felt guilty of provoking their parents, have felt depressed and worthless, no better than the sort of people who do this, so that they may as well do it too.

The practical need for the goods, which may be either quite strong or
relatively slight, lies beneath the surface of such undercurrents. If in the view of juveniles, their home is an unhappy one, and this relates more to the number and extent of the rows that take place rather than the financial security, then they tend to want to spend more time out of it.

If they then mix with local juveniles and shoplifting is a recognised activity amongst them, then the youngster from the 'miserable' home is more likely to become caught up in it.

Unlike general samples of juveniles displaying delinquent behaviour where there is a bias towards the below average academic ability, this is not the case amongst juveniles convicted of theft from shops.

In examining the attendance records of offenders, it is found that over 50 per cent have good attendance records and of the rest, most will have a history of truancy at some time. It is my experience that within my research sample of offenders 1985-87, only a few cases of theft from shops occurred when youngsters were actually truanting. This is probably due to the fact that when truanting, youngsters in general will try to keep out of the public view.

Juveniles are vulnerable when allowed to wander around the shops during school lunchtime and also immediately after afternoon classes. Particularly with boys, theft from shops may be a typical 'marauding' offence, when groups wander through shops picking up a selection of articles of little use to them. In some instances, it is the wish to appear as resourceful as their friends that leads to the offence being committed and many are dared and told how easy it is. The stealing and subsequent present giving is a powerful means of buying friendships and establishing social relationships.

To-day, one in three families suffer loss through separation which may be due to marital breakdown or bereavement. For some juveniles, the possession of goods is sought as compensation for that loss and may be an expression of anxiety and guilt about matters which are unconscious. Medical evidence indicates that the depressive background of theft from shops, both in adults and juveniles, is striking. Child guidance clinics point to the fact that such thefts often begin after the birth of a younger brother or sister or during the illness of a grandparent when the parents' time is taken up by another member of the family. The child, feeling deprived, compensates by stealing. Counsellors working with bereaved children have found that theft from shops is often a presenting problem in youngsters who, for one reason or another, have been unable to grieve and have not come to terms with their bereavement. The experience of a 'mixture of anger and despair is common during the act of shoplifting itself.

Associated with the pattern of adolescent behaviour, there are physical disorders which have been identified and researchers suggest these may lead to an increased risk of juvenile offending. For example, the effect of menstruation on behaviour is not yet fully understood, but pre-menstrual tension is now a recognised condition amongst women and of significance amongst adolescent girls. It acts by disorientating and destructing the sufferer so that she loses her normal social control (Pollock, 1961).

In 1968 Cowie et al. (1984, p. 164), whilst surveying juvenile shoplifters, argued that physical size was a predisposing factor
noting that girls convicted tended to be oversized, lumpish, uncouth and graceless, and suggested that these may be indications of chromosomal abnormalities. Reinforcing the theory of physical size, Elizabeth Bostock (1987) links shoplifting and binge-eating to the anti-social tendency and stresses that it is compulsive and can occur at all ages. It is linked to deprivation and characterised by stealing or destructiveness.

For the juvenile, who has become dependent on drugs, theft from shops becomes a means of obtaining the money required for the daily supply of drugs. In some instances, vast quantities of goods are stolen. Examples of £130 worth per day have been quoted by youngsters who have ultimately sought help with their addictions. Shoplifting becomes a practised art borne of necessity.

Compulsive gambling on fruit machines is a growing craze amongst juveniles and one method of obtaining the money they require is shoplifting to order. A common practice is to pick up receipts from shop floors, steal goods to that value, return them to the till and receive the money which then allows them to satisfy their gambling needs.

In North Bedfordshire, theft from shops currently accounts for 34 per cent of all juvenile crime. Such is the extent of the problem that, even in accepting that it may be a passing phase within the pattern of adolescent behaviour, it cannot be ignored. Juveniles have to be made to understand that it is plainly theft and that a conviction could have serious consequences.

If the most effective deterrent is to be sought for juveniles who have committed theft from shops, it is important to look at the attitudes towards the offence both by those who have committed it and those whose peer group is involved. It was to this end that the views of the target group of 718 school children was sought by means of a questionnaire (Appendix 1).

A total of 602 school children aged 13-16 inclusive completed the questionnaires - 178 (29 per cent) of the juveniles admitted to theft from shops on at least one occasion.

Among the ‘general public’, it is a mistaken view that the majority of shoplifters are girls and women. Statistics prove otherwise and, although the research does not imply that the situation and apparent motives differ between the sexes, there are gender differences in the final forms of behaviour.

Within the random sample, 310 girls were surveyed with 58 (18 per cent) of them admitting to have engaged in theft from shops. Of 287 boys surveyed, 120 (41 per cent) of them admitted to having engaged in theft from shops It is possible that the social role in which girls continue to be cast, added to temperamental differences, inclines them to tolerate hardship far better than boys. They may make internal psychological adjustments to make life tolerable rather than to select and alter their external environment. Parental attitudes appear to subject boys to more authoritarian treatment than the girls and much less to firm discipline. This leads boys to reject parental control and participate in antisocial behaviour. The parental view that girls are more likely to come to harm when allowed out alone allows them less opportunity to commit crimes.
A daughter who commits offences is more likely to cause deep shock to her parents than are sons, suggesting that higher standards are expected of them.

The desire for trendy clothes and cosmetics now occurs at 13-14, long before a girl is earning. When school friends say that shoplifting is easy, rarely detected and generally accepted behaviour, then it is easy to succumb to temptation.

For the girls, puberty may also bring its compensations. The girl who up until then has felt the underrated child becomes the young woman with assets which are sought and which supply a need for affection. Crime by comparison is unrewarding and if limited to shoplifting is likely to be abandoned as other experiences and relationships become more meaningful.

Of note, there is a recent narrowing of the differences between male and female crime rates in western urbanised countries and social practices are being invoked to explain them. As increasing social and economic independence affects females, so their social behaviour has changed making them more likely to commit crimes, and changing societal views of the role of females will be reflected in police and judicial processes. Further research into this trend and its effect on juveniles would be interesting.

Within the context of this research, race issues were not specifically addressed. No comparison was made to the apprehension or disposal of juveniles committing theft from shops in relation to the colour of the skin. As an extension of the research, it would be fascinating to make such comparisons, looking at shop proprietors’ attitudes if encountering a black or white subject and the attitude of the police and the Panel.

In a study by Landau and Gad (1983), they found that non local variables such as age, area, ethnicity, parental control had a significant effect on the decision to caution. Blacks had a lesser chance of being cautioned than whites. The Greater London Council's Policing London (Number 13) found that in 1982, 40 per cent of white juveniles apprehended by the Metropolitan Police received a caution compared with 26 per cent of black juveniles. This could not be explained by the differences in the nature of the offence and previous offending history.

It can be seen from Appendix 2 that the percentage difference of those admitting theft from shops remains fairly consistent between males and females with the exception of the 14 year old age group, where the gap is much narrower. This is due to a small increase in the percentage of girls committing the offence but more as a result of an approximate drop of 15 per cent of boys admitting the offence. This I consider to be attributable to external influences on the boys of the other age groups rather than the positive factors acting for the 14 year olds.

It is interesting that the educational provision for all the youngsters surveyed was a middle to upper school arrangement whereby children change schools at 13. Their status within their school setting is therefore altered. At 13, they are top of their middle schools, at 14 they are the newcomers to their upper schools. Whether, amongst the 14 year old males, there is an increase in other crimes such as criminal damage would be an interesting factor to
examine.

Of those convicted of theft from shops in 1985-86, the peak age was 14 and, in 1986-87, the peak age was 13 (Appendix 3). The implication may be that as adolescents become older, they also become more accomplished and discreet, therefore reducing the likelihood of detection.

For the purpose of the project, the children surveyed were considered in their age groups and further divided into sexes. The results were as shown below.

The picture that emerged in this age group for both boys and girls was very similar. The 13 year old admitting theft from a shop was aged between 10 and 13 at the time the offence was committed and was accompanied by one other person, with the offence being committed on a Saturday. Food was the main item stolen and the youngsters did not get caught. For girls, jewellery, cosmetics and clothing emerged closely rivalling food as the main item stolen and perhaps accounted for the fact that equal numbers estimated the items that had been stolen to be worth either under œ10 or over œ20. For boys, the value of the goods was mainly under œ10.

Of the boys, 57 per cent said they had been caught, as against 16 per cent of the girls. However, the numbers here were too small to be of great significance. The difference may lie in the more overt behaviour of boys, making them more conspicuous to shopkeepers, and the fact that more boys stated they had committed the offence on more than one occasion and in half the cases when they were still under 10 years of age.

In the case of the girls, the picture that emerged was identical to that of the younger girl. The 14 year old girl was aged between 10-14 at the time of the incident, shoplifted once with one other person on a Saturday. They stole food worth under œ10. A higher percentage did now admit to participating more than once and 25 per cent of them said they had been caught. The increase in the number of thefts of cosmetics and jewellery indicates the growing interest in their personal appearance.

The 14 year old boy, however, was still between 10-14 years at the time of the incident, but was now operating as part of a group with an equal number of offences being committed on weekdays and Saturdays. Food was by far the most popular item to be taken and was under œ10 in value but now only 22 per cent claimed to have been caught.

The group behaviour of boys, a feature of this age, is becoming more apparent and a growing desire for independence probably allows them to wander through the town centre where as previously, they would have returned home after school.

As previously stated, 22 per cent of females and 57 per cent of males claimed to have been involved in theft from shops by the time they were 15 years of age.

With girls, the pattern remained consistent. Most had been between 10-14 years old and, by a small margin, had shoplifted only once with one other person on a Saturday. Food was the commonest item stolen, under œ10 in value, and 19 per cent of them admitted to having been
The boys were aged between 10 and 14 at the time of the offence, but now 74 per cent admitted to having been involved on more than one occasion. More offences were committed on a weekday and only 15 per cent of the boys claimed to have been caught. Although food continued to be the most common item taken, ‘other’ items featured particularly amongst the boys. Within the questionnaire, the children were not asked to specify ‘other’, but those who did so voluntarily indicated that this included such items as pens, badges, calculators, stereos and stationery.

Disaffection from school is generally higher within the 15-16 year age group and may influence the number of offences committed during school hours. Of greater concern is the number of juveniles of this age group who are legitimately out of school as a result of exclusion and who occupy their time wandering around town centres.

This age group corresponds with a juvenile’s last year at school. For those taking exams, it is an important year with added pressures being inflicted both at home and at school. For those not taking exams, school has ceased to be of significance and juveniles are looking towards employment and an income of their own.

Amongst the girls, most still claim to have been aged between 10 and 14 at the time of the offence, the numbers claiming to have shoplifted on more than one occasion almost equal to those who say it was a once only situation. Now a greater number of offences occur on a weekday. Food under £10 remains the common item and 90 per cent claim not to have been caught.

Of the boys, 78 per cent say they have been involved in theft from shops on more than one occasion, whereas the age at the time of the incident remains 10-14. The group activity appears to be reduced with more offences having been committed along with one other person only. Food under £10 is stolen on a weekday and 66 per cent claim not to have been caught.

The significance of most offences having been committed on a weekday may be the fact that many youngsters of this age are employed on Saturdays and so opportunities are reduced on that day.

Whilst 29 per cent of the young people surveyed admitted to having engaged in theft from shops, the remainder indicated how the crime was perceived by them.

It was seen as an offence most common amongst the 10-14 year age group. They believed that youngsters steal on more than one occasion, usually on a Saturday, with one other person being involved. Food, clothes and cosmetics were seen as the most likely goods to be stolen. Only 39 per cent thought it likely that they would be caught.

This clearly indicates that young people have an accurate perception of shoplifting amongst their peer group, but the impact of this awareness needs to be gauged. The vital questions are: what makes a proportion of them indulge in the crime, and to what extent could peer group pressure be used as a preventative measure?

Theft from shops is a prevalent crime between the ages of 13 and 16 years, with 61 per cent admitting to having offended on more than one occasion.
occasion and only 22 per cent of them having been caught. With the peak age at 13-15, peer group influence is strong and deficiencies in parental control are being exposed. Prestige and excitement are inducements and low detection rate is an added encouragement to offend again.

The fact that low value food consistently remains the commonest item taken amongst all age groups lends weight to the suggestion that it is essentially an opportunist crime. With the onset of puberty, so cosmetics, jewellery, clothes and other items take on a greater significance as they serve to meet the needs of youngsters in adolescence.

The decline, albeit slight amongst the older age group, indicates that although it is a serious problem which must be addressed, theft from shops amongst juveniles does decline with maturity as other influences affect the pattern of adolescent behaviour. This, in the majority of instances, serves to divert the young person from criminal activities.

Having considered the perceptions of juveniles regarding the offence, I extended the research to look at the records of juveniles who had been convicted.

In order to do this, I examined the police records from September 1985 to September 1987. This period corresponded with the first two years in which a multi-agency Juvenile Consultation Panel had been in existence.

It was found that a total number of 382 juveniles were convicted over the two year period representing 27 per cent of all juvenile offenders. Appendix 5 tabulates the forms of disposal and shows the rate of recidivism for each disposal.

Of those juveniles convicted of theft from shops between September 1985 and August 1987, only 9 per cent re-offended within the two year period.

The sex distribution of those convicted was approximately one female to every two males (Appendix 3) with a small decrease in female offenders over the two years and a small increase in the number of male offenders.

Comparison of the two years demonstrated that children as young as six had been apprehended for theft from shops. Although they have on some occasions been with older children, there have also been examples where all the participants have been under ten.

Examination of the records shows that theft amongst this age group is opportunistic and involves the taking of sweets and toys.

In 1985-86, 14 children under ten were reported to the Panel and, in 1986-87, 12 were reported.

No further action is taken with regard to the children offending but if it is felt that the child is neglected or lacking in control, then some input into the home may prevent further offending and help will be offered by the appropriate agency.

These figures, although a very small percentage of the total, should
not be considered reflective of the number of children who actually engage in shoplifting at this age. Many remain unreported because:

i. the offence is considered trivial;

ii. the value of goods is low;

iii. the incident is not reported and is dealt with unofficially.

Small shopkeepers, particularly those whose shops are close to schools, are concerned at the extent of pilfering that occurs. Some take preventative measures allowing only limited numbers of children in the shops at any one time, whilst others employ extra staff to cover the period from the end of school.

I found the attitudes towards reporting very young children to be inconsistent. One shopkeeper stated that he always takes the name and address of any youngster whom he catches and contacts the parents and the school whilst another claims a 'boot up the backside and remember the face' is the most effective way to deal with them.

In several cases, it has been found that when the school is consulted over young people who have committed offences, then staff will know of other instances in which the same child was involved whilst still under the age of criminal responsibility. Parents also report that these juveniles have often been stealing from home before going on to shoplifting.

Police input into lower schools tends to place emphasis on road and personal safety. Perhaps a crime prevention programme geared especially to this younger age group, looking at such crimes as theft from shops, vandalism, and bullying would dissuade some of these youngsters from becoming involved in crime as they become older. It would also nurture good relationships between the police and schools whilst describing to children another aspect of police work.

In line with the national trend, the incidents of theft from shops increase after the age of ten, peaking at 13-14, then decreasing after that.

The factors accounting for this have already been given some consideration and in summary are set out below.

13-14

i. Peer group pressure and status is influential.

ii. Parental control is less rigid.

iii. The desire for material goods is strong.

iv. The onset of puberty.

v. The techniques employed are amateurish.

15-17

i. A degree of maturity is attained.

ii. Earning power is increased and therefore the need to obtain items by criminal methods reduced.

iii. Techniques become more sophisticated so those participating are less likely to be caught.

There was no evidence to indicate that shoplifting is an alcohol related offence amongst juveniles. In only one case was it found that the juvenile was under the influence of alcohol when the offence was
committed and, although cans of drink were common amongst the items
taken, these were not usually of alcoholic content.

A recent working group on young people and alcohol, chaired by
Baroness Masham, recommended that alcohol advertising be banned from
the television and cinema and that the drinks industry should be
encouraged to set up a wide range of alcohol free facilities for
youngsters. The group agreed that there is a strong association
between intoxication and certain crimes of violence and disorder.

With the increasing amount of alcohol now being sold in supermarkets
as opposed to the small off-licence, it will be interesting to note
whether this begins to figure more largely in the reported incidents
of theft.

Comparison of the conviction rates compiled for the two years shows
no clear seasonal pattern, with November being the peak month in
1985-86 (35 cases) and April (19 cases) in 1986/87.

In both periods, June is the month that shows the lowest number of
convictions. This can probably be accounted for by the fact that it
is still in term time and that youngsters tend to frequent parks and
pursue outdoor activities during their leisure time rather than visit
shops.

Although shopkeepers report a high increase in the number of
juveniles frequenting shops during school holiday periods, the
conviction rate does not increase significantly, nor is any increase
shown during either the essential sales periods of January and July,
but this is probably due to the fact that shop assistants and
detectives are not at leisure to observe children.

The year 1986-87 shows a levelling of conviction rates throughout the
year with only 11 cases separating the lowest month (June) from the
highest month (April).

The recent provision of holiday playschemes and activities for
juveniles in the major school holiday times is likely to reduce the
number of offences by juveniles.

The graphs (Appendix 4) show the disposal of juveniles reported for
theft from shops over the two year period. During this period, the
Juvenile Consultation Panel adopted the policy of cautioning
youngsters for their first offence and prosecuting should they re-
offend. Only in exceptional circumstances was a second caution given.

Therefore, it can be concluded from the figures (Appendix 4) that of
the 379 juveniles convicted of theft from shops, 269 were first time
offenders and received a formal caution administered at the police
station by a Police Inspector.

Fifty eight juveniles were prosecuted, in the main because of
previous offences or because the offence was not admitted but the
evidence was sufficient to take the case to court, or the extent of
the shoplifting and the amount of goods deemed it appropriate for the
case to proceed in court.

In 49 cases, no further action was taken; 26 of these involved
juveniles under the age of criminal responsibility and of the
remainder there was insufficient evidence, the injured party
requested no further action or it was thought to be the most appropriate form of disposal.

Of the six charged directly to court, all were due to appear before the magistrates having been involved in other criminal activities.

The aim of my research project has been not only to look at the offence of theft from shops but also to consider whether a formal caution is an appropriate disposal for convicted youngsters.

Appendix 5 shows the re-offending rates following the different methods of disposal. Of the 269 juveniles convicted of theft from shops who received a formal caution, only 15 (5.5 per cent) re-offended within the considered two year period. Even taking into consideration that a proportion would re-offend after September 1987, the figure is encouragingly low.

Two conclusions may therefore be proposed:

i. that a high proportion of juveniles with no previous criminal record, when convicted and cautioned for theft from shops, do not re-offend;

ii. the formal caution that was administered was a sufficient deterrent to prevent juveniles from re-offending.

The question that is posed is: 'Was the deterring factor the fact that they were caught at all, or was it the subsequent "punishment" they received (the formal caution) that was of significance?'

It is virtually impossible to answer this question accurately. It is difficult to make valid comparisons between groups of juveniles who would prove to be selected in various ways.

Statistics relating specifically to juveniles involved in theft from shops are not readily available from geographical areas where either 'no further action' or informal action by the police or juvenile liaison bureau is the most frequent disposal.

In Northampton in 1986, 69 per cent of juveniles committing shoplifting offences did not re-enter the formal police notification system again that year but like any organisation, agency or institution in this field, the Bureau would not claim to have necessarily achieved a sustained behaviour modification reform.

Whilst the formal caution appears to have a lower rate of recidivism, it does not follow that juveniles have undergone some revolutionary or miraculous change precluding further offending (although it may be true in some cases of course). It could be argued that a court appearance would perhaps produce a similar statistic or that those children would possibly cease offending without further detection or intervention at all.

Whilst other factors governing the peak age of offending can be considered, the effect of maturation is undoubtedly the most significant and, whatever the response of authority, most young people grow out of offending around 15-16 years of age. They obtain further, more rewarding, social skills which negate the thrill and perceived status acquired through opportunistic criminal acts.
I am aware of the possible inherent danger in too tight an interpretation of statistical data and at whatever level the response is pitched, the fact might well be that the majority will offend once only.

Current trends in juvenile justice aim at minimising harm and destigmatising offenders. The juvenile who believes himself to be labelled as an offender is more likely to behave as one.

The Home Office Circular 14/85 recommends in the guidelines on cautioning:

It is also important that a formal caution is not issued unless the circumstances of the case are sufficiently justified. It should be considered whether it is more appropriate to deal with an offender without formal proceedings of any kind, for example, by an informal word of advice or warning.

I would suggest that this is an area in which further research should be undertaken using a wider range of cautioning options. A non-recordable caution could be administered by an officer other than the Cautioning Inspector. In reality, the juvenile himself is unlikely to distinguish between types of cautions although he would be told that it would not remain as a record.

In talking with youngsters who have received a caution, it is what has been said and the way it was said that has been of more significance than the fact that the caution was recorded against them.

There is a dearth of information about the effectiveness of the system. This may well be determined by a number of factors such as information available to the cautioner, the way the caution is given, the persons present and the place.

In 1979, the Avon and Somerset Constabulary (Tweedlie 1982, P. 168), in an attempt to provide some evidence of the effect cautions have on the juveniles to whom they are administered, constructed a practical exercise. Two types of caution were devised. The admonitory caution was administered in the police station and was a very formal version of a typical police caution. The other, 'the advice and guidance' caution, was administered in the juvenile's home by an officer in civilian clothes. It was less formal and included greater emphasis on counselling.

The results of this exercise indicated, certainly in the eyes of the juvenile, that the more formal approach was within his expectations and that generally he understood and remembered and reacted more favourably to it. The conversational approach had more impact on parents than juveniles and, as a general rule, should be confined to them either before or after the caution.

The threat of a court appearance on re-offending is one point which was clearly understood and this simple, straightforward message is likely to have the more lasting effect.

What must be sought is a positive method of resolving offences as and when they occur.

An area of my work is with a young recidivists' group aged between
10-14 years. The juveniles have all been involved in criminal activities which have led them to be formally cautioned by the police.

The juveniles are encouraged to consider their offences and to look at how their actions may affect others. Within the time they belong to the group, a degree of behaviour modification is sought. In showing them a range of options and reinforcing their right to choose, an attempt is made to divert them from offending.

A video was used to record an impromptu discussion. The observations made by the boys in the light of their own experiences mirrored the results of the questionnaires. Of particular interest was the obvious influence of their friends and the desire for items which were unobtainable to them because of a lack of resources.

The different parental responses were revealing and the feelings they provoked in the boys appeared to have considerable influence on the desire to re-offend.

For most of the boys, the formal caution had been uncomfortable and difficult and as an experience was one they were not likely to forget. One lad clearly felt it to be a deterrent.

The video was not intended as a formal contribution to this research but is nonetheless valuable as the boys' notions and experiences of shoplifting confirm the research findings.

It was also a lively interlude allowing a contribution to be made by boys for whom shoplifting became a reality.

Multiple stores and department stores together account for 81 per cent of all charges brought against children, though the range of stores is wider than in the case of adults.

For most juveniles, the notion of a store as a victim is remote, and as the idea of violation of personal space dwindles, so the importance of the offence decreases. Even in the smaller shop where the shopkeeper has an identity, he is not seen personally as a victim. Michael Wadsworth (1979, p. 24 and p. 132) gives theft from shops a score of 2 on the social acceptability of crime scale. The crime may be impulsive and there is no primary victim.

I was aware of a reluctance by shops and stores to divulge information regarding either the extent of theft from shops or measures taken to prevent it. It was therefore of no surprise to receive a mixed reception when I approached the managers of three large department stores and three smaller shops which specialise in either clothes or toiletries, all situated within the town centre.

Their degree of co-operation varied between a refusal to discuss the topic to a keen interest being expressed with constructive measures being suggested.

A basic framework of questions was used but encouragement was given to the expression of a wider point of view.

The report of the Home Office Standing Committee on Crime Prevention (1973) Shoplifting and Theft by Shop Staff referred to: "... the little regard that is paid to security in the layout of the shop and
in the display of goods?

All the retailers agreed that layout could make a substantial contribution to the prevention of losses but that this was governed by Head Offices. Display units are designed to encourage sales but they also make shoplifting simpler. The high displays and unattended low counters and shelves were designed when the concept of one entrance and one exit was in practice. Now there was a tendency for the larger stores to have a number of entrances and exits with multiple checkout points. Almost all shops have succumbed to the pressure to change to self-service, encouraged by the substantial economies to be made in shop labour.

It was apparent that the retailers saw theft from shops amongst juveniles as a large problem which was increasing. The manager of one store said that shop assistants dread the school holidays and that the store appears to be taken over by large numbers of juveniles usually in groups. In his experience, cosmetics were the most common item taken by girls and toys by boys, whereas both took confectionery. In the main, there was a full recovery of items taken by juveniles who were convicted.

It was generally agreed that the most effective security measure is an alert, watchful staff in sufficient numbers to provide a good service to the customers and keep the counters under observation. The larger stores ran training courses for their staff paying particular regard to this aspect. Of the small stores, only one provided specific training. Although staff presence is identified as the most effective deterrent, the managers say that despite huge increases in target sales, the staff ratio has decreased as a result of imposed economies.

Electronic devices, surveillance mirrors and close circuit television are reckoned to account for approximately two per cent of the crimes detected.

New methods continue to be developed. One of the latest is a lightweight plastic clothes tag which can be clipped onto a variety of clothes and can only be removed with a special air key controlled by the store.

Any attempt to force the tag open results in concealed dye capsules being fractured and squirting the dye over the garment, making it useless for wearing, and over the shoplifter's hands. The makers claim that it can cut shoplifting by 80 per cent.

Notices advising customers that detectives and/or technical aids are used were not apparent.

The policy towards juveniles involved in theft from shops varied. The manager of one of the smaller clothes shops was particularly adamant that all shoplifters should be prosecuted in court regardless of age or items taken. At the other extreme was the retailer who felt that it was important that three measures were taken:

i. The police were notified.
ii. The parents were notified.
iii. The school was notified.
He saw this three pronged attack as the most effective way of stressing the seriousness of the crime to the youngsters. He did not see a necessity to prosecute but in every case he involved the police. He said youngsters would walk out of the shop with smiles on their faces thinking that they had got away with their crime, but that they quickly became frightened when apprehended, particularly concerning the attitude of their parents and their schools. It was his opinion that most parents behaved responsibly when contacted and he felt that the police handled the youngsters firmly but kindly.

Two years ago in Luton, a 'Stop It' campaign costing œ5,000 was launched by the Chamber of Trade. It was advertised on television and radio and its purpose was to heighten the awareness of retailers to the extent of theft from shops, to supply window stickers, a pamphlet of guidance and advice on how to educate staff. The campaign was seen as successful and, although retailers were unwilling to be precise, they did admit that theft from shops decreased following the campaign. A new initiative is shortly to be launched by the local Chamber of Trade in conjunction with the Crime Prevention Panel and Luton Police.

In Bedford in December 1987, the police and shopkeepers targeted an initiative on juveniles with sets of posters being placed in shops in the town shopping precincts and publicity being given to the campaign. A more extensive co-ordinated approach is required between retailers faced with the problem and all those concerned with the diversion of juveniles from crime. Local retailers could be encouraged to contribute equipment and provide other forms of support for activities which would occupy children at times when they might otherwise be unsupervised.

Theft from shops is a common crime amongst juveniles. Is it a relatively trivial offence or does it reflect a serious disturbance in a child's development? Its prevalence and the lack of an identifiable victim makes it almost socially acceptable, even affording status within the peer group. The crime itself is almost always opportunistic and provides fun and excitement, an essential ingredient of adolescent life. The belief is held amongst juveniles that it is easy to steal from shops and that the thief is unlikely to be caught. Unfortunately, these are facts which cannot be disputed.

My research confirms that theft from shops by juveniles is very much the 'amateur's crime' with significantly lower rates of recidivism than other more serious offences. Children and teenagers convicted of shoplifting are rarely convicted of it in later life.

An established fact is that of those convicted, the majority will not re-offend. The opportunity exists therefore, for a firm line to be taken with juveniles, which will leave them in no doubt that, whatever their perceptions of shoplifting, it is the crime of theft and is considered to be serious.

The cautioning of juvenile offenders should be an exercise in effective communication and I believe the low rate of recidivism could still be achieved by the administration of a caution which is not citable in court. If the disposal is a constructive alternative, it should not be dismissed as a soft option. For those who would not re-offend, it negates the stigma of a juvenile record and for the small proportion who do become further involved in criminal
activities, the option remains to either formally caution or prosecute in court. It is important nevertheless that such a disposal is used appropriately and not placed in some form of false tariff system. A flexibility of approach needs to be maintained.

As the single major problem in the area, it is one that might be influenced by an attempt to educate and change attitudes before offending takes place. This requires a joint approach by police, retailers, social workers, school and parents.

It is a matter for the whole community and to help identify and provide possible solutions, consideration should be given to the instigation of inter-agency juvenile crime prevention groups. There are already 45 of these panels around the country which allow young people to demonstrate an enthusiastic commitment to crime prevention.

A total strategy should be adopted which diverts juveniles from prosecution, from care and from custody and, most importantly, from crime.

Cautioning practice

This has been discussed previously under the conclusions but implications for practice do extend to a national level. A standardisation of police cautioning procedures could take advantage of a crime which accounts for the highest number of juvenile offenders with one of the lowest rates of reddivism.

Reparation

Reparation schemes involving juveniles have to be skilfully handled to ensure that the victim of a crime does not suffer any further distress and also that any reparation attempted is a meaningful exercise to the juvenile concerned.

Local store managers have indicated a willingness to cooperate if such a scheme were to be introduced for juveniles involved in theft from shops. The juveniles would be given an opportunity to apologise personally to the shop manager who would in turn explain how shoplifting affects the management of his store and his service to the public. In a controlled setting, the youngster would confront the implication of his crime and be allowed the dignity to make good and understand how people other than himself are affected.

Education

There is a responsibility for all people working with juveniles to target groups most at risk and look at preventive work.

Youngsters themselves must be allowed to examine a range of consequences arising from their actions beyond purely legal - for example, the impact on families and schools, the social implications and their own futures.

Already there are several schemes in operation. Within the police input to schools, there are programmes which focus on crime prevention and these include theft from shops. In Wellingborough, under the auspices of the Juvenile Bureau, a crime prevention package, which includes a film, has been developed. It focuses on theft from shops and the Bureau is working in conjunction with
Schools and the police in blanket covering relevant years in key schools. Referral patterns from these schools are being measured against a control group to assess the value of the film and the follow-up discussion of crime prevention measures.

Schools must accept that they have a vital role to play and social awareness programmes should be built into the curriculum. Juveniles become disaffected from school because of an inability to cope so that boredom and disruption occur. These children are at risk of truants, being excluded and seeking satisfaction through criminal means.

Schools and other youth services should address this problem. If the quest for stimulation leads juveniles to seek it in criminal ways, this in turn suggests that the remedial action required is the development of alternative outlets which provide activities that are both socially acceptable and attractive to youngsters at risk.

Schools should develop close links with local communities and local education authorities should cooperate with other agencies in developing a co-ordinated approach to crime prevention.

Implications for parents.

The law insists that parents are responsible for the care of their children in most circumstances, and the parents of many of the juveniles convicted of theft from shops are both hurt and angry. They impose punishments upon their youngsters which probably have as great an impact as any police procedure. These may take the form of restricting their freedom over a long period of time or depriving them of pocket money or the opportunity to go to shops unless in the company of an adult. Man families are able to deal with the problem and need no outside help.

A conviction may also lead parents to examine their own degree of guilt and consider whether, inadvertently or otherwise, their lifestyle may have led their child to seek excitement through crime. Throughout this period, the parents themselves may require support, and should be directed to the appropriate agency.

Publicity through schools and local press can highlight the extent of the problem and heighten parents’ awareness of it. The message must be not to presume that ‘it is someone else’s child’. Will the next shoplifter be your child? The responsibility has to be given back to the parents and to the juveniles themselves.

National survey

There is a danger that professionals working with juveniles involved in theft from shops become complacent when the problem is viewed alongside more serious crimes.

I believe a national survey would produce frightening statistics, particularly with regard to the extent of the offence. The social factors contributing to the crime need to be surveyed with the attitudes and perceptions of juveniles, their parents and professional agencies assessed. Only then can a concentrated co-ordinated approach to the problem be adopted.

Within this research project, I set out to examine. the concept that
theft from shops is a symptom of adolescent behaviour and that the response should be appropriate within the terms of harm - minimising and discouraging re-offending.

To this end, the objectives were satisfied, but it became apparent that there existed scope for much wider research being undertaken if the factors which contribute to a juvenile becoming involved in theft from shops are to be fully understood.

I would like to research further a number of areas:

i. Sociological factors - home background and social status; school status looking at academic achievements, attendance records and any correlation that exists between truancy and theft from shops; the effect of peer group influence; health factors including general state of health and specific stress conditions.

ii. Rates of recidivism on a national level - solely for theft from shops; in relation to recidivism rates for other crimes; previous convictions for juvenile theft from shops amongst adult offenders.

iii. Court disposals of juveniles convicted of theft from shops and recidivism levels.

iv. Wider research into retailers’ attitudes towards juvenile theft from shops and preventive action they are prepared to take.

A national research project on this scale would provide an opportunity to address a crime considered essentially trivial in nature but one which affects the lives of thousands of young people and their families.

A firm research base would exist for future proposals and if there is a genuine wish to understand and tackle this particular aspect of juvenile offending, then it can be done so with remarkable effect.

References

Association for the Prevention of Theft in Shops (1982)


Home Office Circular 14/85 Cautioning of Young Offenders.


Appendix 1
THEFT FROM SHOPS SURVEY OF YOUNG PEOPLE AGED 13-16 YEARS

1. AGE:

2. SEX: MALE FEMALE

3. HAVE YOU EVER STOLEN GOODS FROM SHOPS?
   YES
   NO

   IF YOU HAVE ANSWERED YES TO QUESTION 3 THEN COMPLETE COLUMN A
   IF YOU HAVE ANSWERED NO TO QUESTION 3 THEN COMPLETE COLUMN B

A.

4. HOW OLD WERE YOU AT THE TIME?
   (a) UNDER 10
   (b) 10-14
   (c) 14-17

5. HAVE YOU STOLEN GOODS
   (a) ONCE
   (b) MORE THAN ONCE

6. WERE YOU
   (a) ALONE
   (b) WITH ONE OTHER PERSON
   (c) WITH A GROUP

7. WHAT DAY WAS IT?
   (a) A WEEKDAY
   (b) A SATURDAY

8. WHAT TYPE OF GOODS WERE STOLEN?
   (a) CLOTHES
   (b) FOOD
   (c) COSMETICS
   (d) JEWELLERY
   (e) TOYS
   (f) BOOKS
   (g) OTHER

9. WHAT WAS THE VALUE OF THE GOODS?
   (a) UNDER 10 POUNDS
   (b) 10-20 POUNDS
   (c) OVER 20 POUNDS

10. HAVE YOU BEEN CAUGHT STEALING FROM SHOPS?
    (a) YES
    (b) NO

B

4. MOST THEFTS FROM SHOPS ARE CARRIED OUT BY YOUNGSTERS
   (a) UNDER 10
   (b) 10-14
   (c) 14-17
5. YOUNGSTERS STEAL FROM SHOP
(a) ONCE  []
(b) MORE THAN ONCE  []

6. DO THEY STEAL FROM SHOPS WHEN:
(a) ALONE  []
(b) WITH ONE OTHER PERSON  []
(c) WITH A GROUP  []

7. DO YOU THINK MOST THEFTS FROM SHOPS OCCUR ON
(a) A WEEKDAY  []
(b) A SATURDAY  []

8. WHAT TYPE OF GOODS DO YOU THINK ARE STOLEN?
(a) CLOTHES  []
(b) FOOD  []
(c) COSMETICS  []
(d) JEWELLERY  []
(e) TOYS  []
(f) BOOKS  []
(g) OTHER  []

9. WHAT IS THE AVERAGE VALUE OF THE GOODS STOLEN?
(a) UNDER 10 POUNDS  []
(b) 10-20 POUNDS  []
(c) OVER 20 POUNDS  []

10. DO MOST YOUNGSTERS WHO STEAL FROM SHOPS GET CAUGHT?
(a) YES  []
(b) NO  []

Appendix 2-4 omitted

Appendix 5

Juveniles convicted of theft from shop September 1985-August 1987
Disposal and rate of recidivism

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number convicted</th>
<th>Number of re-offenders</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total all disposals</td>
<td>382 36(9%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prosecuted</td>
<td>58 13(22%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cautioned</td>
<td>269 15(6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No further action</td>
<td>49 8(16%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The results show that 91% of the juveniles did not re-offend the two year period.