

THE GENDER OFFENDERS

Women love to shop, but more men like to 'shop-lift.'

New research highlights organised element of retail theft and explodes myth of predominantly female offenders

Women may be the dominant sex on the High Street, but it is men who love going down the aisle for the wrong reasons, according to the latest in-depth retail crime research.

Not only do more men end up in prison for shoplifting and staff theft, but they are predominantly older, more organised and are often stealing higher value goods to order which explodes the myth of store theft being a largely opportunistic and 'harmless' offence carried out for a dare or an adrenalin kick.

The independent research has been carried out by the influential Centre for Retail Research (CRR) on behalf of retail security specialists Checkpoint Systems which commissioned the report as part of its 'Stop Shrinkage' and 'Don't Take It Anymore' awareness campaigns that will be supporting retail staff and educating offenders respectively.

Drilling deeper into the gender differentials, Prof Bamfield, author of the respected European Retail Theft Barometer (ERTB) which put the cost of retail crime across Europe at €33 billion last year (£21 billion), says there is not much to differentiate the amounts stolen by men and women – averaging £83 per offence, but as they get older the gap widens.

For example between the peak ages of 21 and 23 men steal an average of £163.64, compared to £92.84 for women, although female retail crime tends to carry on longer.

However there are some anomalies in the findings. Anecdotal evidence suggests that women's criminal behaviour tends to tail-off when they go down a different kind of aisle. The figures of those convicted who put 'Mrs' as a descriptor suggest that there are fewer married women actively involved in customer theft with an average of £63 compared to the female average (£82.46). Those who put 'Ms' down stole on average £85 which outperformed the male average of £83.51.

Indeed, the cumulative figures reveal that shoplifting potency of both sexes carries on into the 40s with shoplifters between 16 and 50 accounting for 90 per cent of all offenders.

Again, small-scale theft account for less than one third of the total customer theft while around 22 per cent is theft of items of more than £500. In gender terms what people steal is a differentiator with women targeting clothes, grocery, perfumery, toiletries and health products with men cornering the electronic black market with

TVs, hairdryers, electrical toothbrushes and power tools on their shopping lists as well as hardware, DIY and CDs.

Theft by staff, which across Europe is on the increase according to the ERTB, threw up a different set of figures with women playing a more active role, although there are still more men on the take and stealing more. The figures show that of the 2,476 staff thefts reported during a 12-month period by 14 retailers, 1,209 were women stealing an average of £816 per offence, while 1,277 were men whose average theft was £919.68. The women involved were in this case older than the men and the more prolific female offenders – those stealing more than £10,000 – stole more than 40 per cent more than their male counterparts.

“These figures reveal that fact that the criminal justice system does seem to be out of step with the retail reality. Shoplifting and staff crime, including fraud, are not harmless cases of pilfering but more often than not organised raids on stores and those who get caught are fall guys or girls for the organised criminals behind them,” says Prof Bamfield.

David Nuttall, the managing director of Checkpoint Systems, adds: “There is a wide assumption that retail crime is a female pre-occupation. This is probably based upon the anecdotal evidence that more women than men like shopping or work in retail, but the evidence we have from the stores that our systems protect is that it is men, often working in gangs and increasingly using violence, who are causing problems for staff and security personnel. In terms of staff theft, we are now targeting this offence in a different way and we believe we will see the figures coming down in line with those of overall shoplifting.”

The report follows hot on the heels of Checkpoint’s study looking at the true cost of retail crime in the UK, again carried out by the CRR. Professor Bamfield’s findings reveal that in 2002-3 - the last year for which full details are available - the total cost to society of shop thieves was a massive £3.442 billion.

Almost one-half of this is the value stolen from retailers - £1.711 billion, a sum that was inevitably passed back to honest shoppers in the form of higher prices.

But the public pays a further £1.731 billion (50.3% of the full total), on the cost of the criminal justice system which includes police resources and court time dealing with thieves, as well as business disruption and retail security costs.

Ends

Research facts at a glance

- The total prison population is 75,015 of which only 4349 are women (5.8% of the population)
- 1200 women were in prison for shoplifting compared to 4000 males
- More unmarried women steal items of higher value (£82.46) per offence compared to their married counterparts (£62.98)

- Male theft peaks in their early 20s, earlier than women who continue to steal into their 40s
- Most theft takes place between the ages of 16 and 40 for both sexes. This accounts for almost 90 per cent of offences
- Small scale theft accounts for more than one third of offences, but almost one quarter relates to thefts of goods valued at more than £500
- What is stolen goes along predictable gender lines with women taking items such as clothing, groceries, health products and perfumes, while males go for electrical equipment and power tools
- With staff theft the average value of theft rose as they are in positions of easier access and trust
- The average stolen by women staff was £816 compared to £919 for men
- Female staff offenders were on average three years older than their male counterparts with the more prolific thieves (those stealing up to 40 per cent more than men) up to 6 years older
- Although older staff are in a position to steal more, the largest amount of staff theft is by those aged between 20 and 25 who steal 57.8 per cent
- More than half staff thieves steal small amounts (less than £250) through fraud
- 52.6 per cent of goods stolen by staff is cash, 26.2 is goods and almost 4 per cent is both
- Other significant frauds are refund fraud, collusion and fraud involving loyalty cards or gift vouchers