

Working with retail and security to reduce shoplifting

Published on 14 December 2021 Written by Retired Inspector Graham Osborne, Nottinghamshire Police

Practice note: Tackling prolific retail theft

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I spent the last two years of my police service on secondment to the Co-op, working in their risk team to support crime and security. It became apparent that there was a disconnection between the retailers and the police regarding retail crime.

Retailers recognise police resourcing pressures but were frustrated at inconsistencies in how different police forces responded to shoplifting, particularly when the retailer does not receive a visit from the police. For their part, retailers may then not report crimes or make CCTV available, which results in crimes being closed down with no further investigation.

Police forces adopt a threat, risk and harm approach to the management of resources, which sometimes means that shoplifting is considered a lower priority than violent crime.

In 2020, [research sponsored by the Co-op](#) showed that shoplifting was the biggest driver of in-store violent crime, with 38% of all violent crimes being the result of someone shoplifting in a store.

What did you do?

Project Zeal was launched to strengthen the relationship between retail, security and policing by sharing information, using technology to identify prolific offenders and tailoring policing solutions to tackle crime. It involved:

- cross-referencing crime recorded by police with the Co-op's internal system (My Safety), which confirmed a misleading intelligence picture for the police
- selecting nine stores across four policing neighbourhoods with varied levels of security
- Mitie (the Co-op's security provider) sharing Merlin crime software with police free of charge and providing a dedicated analyst
- agreeing a working protocol with the neighbourhood policing inspectors

- Merlin being developed to link up crimes for unknown offenders by allocating a nickname to images of each offender for all stores to use, which meant offenders were charged with between 20 and 30 crimes, rather than two or three
- setting up an information sharing agreement between the three parties with a simple summary confirming about what could and couldn't be shared
- the Co-op legal team being able to serve banning notices directly to the offender
- each neighbourhood team providing a single point of contact (SPoC) to focus on prolific offenders committing crime in their area and to support Criminal Behaviour Order (CBO) applications
- a Crown Prosecution Service SPoC to oversee Criminal Behaviour Orders (CBO) applications
- listening sessions with stores, leading to better communications and improved access to specialist services, such as victim support
- an education piece for stores on the importance of attending court, giving statements, police resourcing of incidents, and policing procedure around threat, risk and harm
- a weekly meeting between Co-op, Mitie and the police that focused on reporting issues, emerging prolific offenders, and positive or negative outcomes

What were the results?

Prolific offenders were charged with multiple offences. Previously unknown offenders were also identified and charged with high volumes of offences. In the nine stores where Project Zeal operated, retail crime reduced by 30% between October 2020 and April 2021 (as measured by My Safety), against an increase of 28% across the national Co-op estate over the same period.

Stores reported that prolific offenders stopped seeing the Co-op as an easy target and no longer cause problems, as they know that crime will be reported and the police will investigate. The detection rate for the Zeal stores is 33%, compared to a force detection rate of 15% for all retail crime.

Confidence in the police has also notably increased among shop workers. Prior to Zeal going live, a Co-op colleague was seriously assaulted in store and the offender was never charged. He was scared to go to work and felt let down by the criminal justice system. He now has confidence in the police and feels safe in his working environment.

Project Zeal was a finalist at the Retail Risk Awards and the British Security Awards for the most innovative project in 2021. Funding has also been secured from Co-op, Mitie and our police and crime commissioner to work with prisons and commissioned providers to support the rehabilitation of offenders and to address their complex problems, building on the excellent work of West Midlands Police.

References

Taylor E. (2020). 'It's not part of the job' Violence and verbal abuse towards shop workers: A review of evidence and policy. Co-op.

- This article was peer reviewed by Detective Chief Inspector Claire McGuire, Greater Manchester Police

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