

Study Shows Shoplifters More Readily Identified By Behavior, Not Race

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Shoppers who leave the store without buying anything are much more likely to be walking away with stolen merchandise than those who do make a purchase, a University of Florida study finds.

People who left without paying for any items were six times more likely to be shoplifters who bypassed the check-out line to avoid drawing attention to themselves, said Richard Hollinger, a UF criminologist and one of the study's researchers. The work also cautions against trying to spot shoplifters based on race, gender, age and ethnicity.

“We all believe it to be courteous behavior when a retailer asks ‘May I help you?,’ but what they’re really saying is ‘We know you’re here, please don’t shoplift,’” he said.

Behavioral cues are more important than demographic characteristics in identifying shoplifters, Hollinger said. Professional shoplifters often scan the store to make sure no one is watching them tampering with the products, he said.

“There’s a phenomenon called ‘shopping while black,’ with some evidence to suggest that certain shoppers, particularly blacks, are scrutinized more heavily and even harassed in various stores,” he said. “Our study raises serious questions about the profiling of suspected shoplifters, particularly black males.”

Popular shoplifting stereotypes were challenged in the UF study, in

which researchers covertly observed 1,365 shoppers in an Atlanta drug store with closed-circuit television cameras. Slightly more than 8 percent of the people who entered the store stole an item.

The UF study, which was published in the December 2004 issue of *Justice Quarterly*, additionally disputes the image of most shoplifters being female. “The rule of thumb always has been that women shoplift more than men simply because there are more women shoppers, unless it’s a sporting goods store or a hardware store,” he said. “But we were able to determine that men actually stole more often than women.”

Drug abuse may be driving this trend, Hollinger said. “We estimate, based on other research, that many male shoplifters are not what we would call ‘primary household shoplifters,’ -- they’re not shoplifting food for tonight’s dinner or medications for their child’s cold,” he said. “Rather, many of them hit the film, pain relievers or batteries, steal them in large quantities and sell them, using shoplifting as a way to feed their drug habit.”

And although shopkeepers often are quick to blame juveniles for missing items, the UF study found shoplifters were most commonly between the ages of 35 and 54. These middle-aged adults, most of them gainfully employed, were “primary household shoppers” who occasionally stole to acquire goods whose cost stretched beyond their household budgets.

Overall, blacks and Hispanics were no more likely than whites to steal merchandise. However, when race and gender were examined by subcategory, Hispanic females stole the most, shoplifting at more than seven times the rate of white females, he said.

Many stole household items they needed, such as medicine or makeup, or snatched a candy bar or lollipops off the shelf for their children,

whom they had brought along, if they started to fuss or cry, he said.

Few studies have focused on family shoplifting, except those that examine “distraction teams,” Hollinger said. “These shoplifters might take children along with them, usually with an ice cream cone or a candy bar in hand, mainly to distract the sales clerk, who tries to head off the kids from damaging the merchandise while mom and dad steal,” he said.

Shoplifting is sometimes called the “crime tax,” because it results in annual losses of more than \$10 billion that are passed on to consumers in the form of higher prices, said Hollinger, who did the study with criminology professors Dean Dabney at Georgia State University and Laura Dugan at the University of Maryland. “It’s been estimated that about \$400 is spent annually by each family in America just to pay for the cost of replacing these stolen goods,” he said.

Recent evidence also suggests that many professionally shoplifted items are even fenced overseas and used to fund other criminal activities, including terrorism, he said.

Shaun L. Gabbidon, a criminal justice professor at Penn State Harrisburg and an expert on shoplifting, said the study is “groundbreaking and very important.” It raises serious questions about racial profiling of shoplifters, and unlike other research relies on observational rather than official data, which are often tabulated based on police arrests. Unfortunately, studies show police arrest patterns sometimes reflect bias, he said.

“With this observation data, we can actually see what is going on,” he said. “It tells us that relying on official data is fraught with problems and we should be very careful in how we interpret them. We need more studies like this one.”

Source: University of Florida

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