

## Convenience Store Crime Prevention

*By Bill Hobby*

Want to do something TODAY to prevent crime? Something that doesn't require any more laws, policing, courts, or prisons?

Convenience store owners and other businesses, along with the help of law enforcement, can do just that, according to a year-long study by a student at the LBJ School of Public Affairs.

The study, conducted by LBJ graduate Nancy La Vigne with the help of the Austin Police Department, looked at business practices and environmental characteristics of 48 convenience stores in Austin. The study showed that criminals choose stores that look easy to rip off.

La Vigne collected information on all aspects of the stores that either made them look like good crime targets or bad ones. Among those were the use of crime prevention measures such as signs, closed-circuit televisions, and automatic door locks. She also looked at the lighting levels, the amount of graffiti and litter, and the physical layout of each store. By comparing store practices to Austin Police Department calls for service data, the study found that stores with certain business practices had high crime rates.

What the study revealed for gas drive-offs should not come as a surprise:

- Stores that require customers to pay first before pumping gas have 48 percent fewer gas drive-offs.
- Stores with uncovered windows have 84 percent fewer gas drive-offs and 30 percent fewer robberies than stores with obstructed windows.
- An increase of just one foot-candle of lighting near the gas pumps will reduce drive-offs by five percent.
- An automatic door lock reduces robberies by 25 percent.
- Stores with signs saying that clerks can't get into the store safe have 25 percent fewer robberies.
- Stores can discourage all kinds of crime by keeping premises neat and cutting back undergrowth that provides cover for bandits.

These conclusions make good sense. After all, how can a clerk keep an eye on potential gas thieves when the windows are covered and the lighting is low? Likewise, how can cops and neighborhood folks see into the store to know when a robber has a clerk at gun point?

Most of these changes don't cost a cent, and those that do are cheap. One security store quoted the cost of an automatic door lock at just \$60, which is \$83 less than the average loss in a convenience store robbery--not to mention the costs arising from injuries to clerks.

And when, as a veteran Austin police officer put it, "you walk into a convenience store to investigate a call and find the clerk dead on the floor of the back room with his face half blown off", these easy steps can save more than money, they can save lives.

The convenience store study suggests easy changes that reduce crime. By making stores look better, the message to criminals is that people care and that they are vigilant. And by clearing windows and putting in bright lights, criminals are less likely to think they can rip the store off and get away without being seen.

But the results of the study aren't limited to crimes of convenience. Many grocery stores, fast food restaurants, liquor stores, and drug stores can benefit from these same recommendations. Neighborhood associations and city planning departments can reduce street crime and burglaries by installing brighter lighting and paying better attention to physical maintenance. Home owners can prevent crime by

maintaining their grounds and keeping their yards well lit.

This new angle on fighting crime is becoming more and more common in police departments right here in Texas. In Arlington, Texas, police and city officials tackled a cruising problem by making it more difficult to cruise the streets and offering teenagers a parking lot as an alternative cruising location. And in the Pine Terrace apartments of southwest Houston, management reversed the decaying and crime-ridden trend of the neighborhood by cleaning up the grounds and evicting late rent-payers immediately.

The point is that all of us can take steps to fight crime. It's just a matter of making it harder for criminals to do their job. As Police Chief Tom Sweeney of Stamford, Connecticut, said, "The real crime problem is all these kids out there that steal every thing that's not tied down."

Maybe what we need to do is not lock everyone up, but tie a few more things down.

*Written in 1991.*