

Alternatives for Preventing Retail Theft

Research into preventing shoplifting is providing insights into how retailers can deter external theft for first-time and repeat offenders. *LP Magazine* asked Dr. Lucia Summers about how her research and experience with interviewing offenders can benefit retailers.

In your opinion, what is the best way of preventing external retail theft?

As with any crime type, four main approaches can be taken—stop people from becoming offenders in the first place (primary prevention); prevent first-time offenders from committing additional thefts (secondary); persuade chronic offenders to stop committing crime (tertiary); and/or modify the environment so that crime opportunities are minimized (situational prevention). Of the first three, secondary prevention is the most feasible, due to its timing. This is because would-be offenders are extremely difficult to identify, and established offenders are hard to catch and deter. So I'd say preventing first-time offenders from committing additional crimes and situational crime prevention are the best options.

What is situational crime prevention?

Situational crime prevention tries to make a crime harder to commit, increase the risk to the offender, or minimize its profitability. The idea is to make the offender think it is not worth committing the crime because the anticipated costs in terms of effort and risk are much greater than the expected benefits. Examples of situational prevention measures include keeping valuable items behind a staffed counter (increasing the effort required to steal them), CCTV cameras (increasing the risk), and requiring gift cards to be activated before they can be used (reducing the rewards).

Are there any particular situational prevention measures that appear to be better deterrents?

The difficulty in applying situational prevention to shoplifting is that one must do so while ensuring customers still have a positive experience. For this reason, effort-increasing techniques can sometimes be unsuitable; if a certain item is kept in a locked cabinet and an associate is not immediately available to retrieve and check it out for the customer, sales could be affected.

LP Magazine interview with Dr. Lucia Summers



Lucia Summers, PhD, is an assistant professor in the School of Criminal Justice at Texas State University. Her specialist research areas include the spatio-temporal patterns of crime, offender spatial decision making, and situational crime prevention. Dr. Summers received her PhD in criminology from University College London in 2012.

Risk-increasing measures can be effective, but they require proper implementation. For instance, electronic article surveillance (EAS) pedestals that are placed too close to the outside, and too far away from the store floor, may not allow associates to effectively respond once the alarm is activated. Benefit-denial measures are perhaps the most promising, as they are easier to implement and do not disrupt legitimate sales.

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Do these measures really stop offenders from shoplifting?

It depends on the type of offender and on contextual factors. More experienced and determined offenders may put a lot of effort into getting around a deterrent. We see this quite often with EAS devices. Offenders share information online about how to disable these, which helps amateur shoplifters become more proficient. We have just finished interviewing a large number of offenders for a National Institute of Justice research project Dr. Kim Rossmo and I are leading at Texas State University, and

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our data shows that, unfortunately, experienced shoplifters often displace their criminal activity in response to certain preventative measures.

What do you mean by “displace their criminal activity?”

When a crime prevention measure is implemented, an offender might respond by not engaging in the criminal act. But they may also displace by changing their methods to get around the measure (tactical displacement), selecting a different target to which the measure does not apply (target displacement), committing the offense elsewhere (spatial displacement), returning at a later time to commit the

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offense (temporal displacement), or switching to a different crime type altogether (functional displacement). The main aim of our research is to determine how property offenders respond to crime prevention and security measures, and to what extent and how they displace their criminal activity.

What does your research show?

We’re still analyzing the data, but preliminary findings suggest certain measures are more prone to certain types of displacement, while others appear to be more resistant. In general, shoplifters seem to be most deterred by those measures that incorporated a human factor, such as attentive associates or security at the exits, especially if staffed by police officers, rather than private security guards. But even when displacement occurs, there is often a disruption that may lead to a net benefit.

For example, if an offender switches to a lower-value item to avoid an EAS device, then we’ve reduced the

shrinkage value. If they try to steal multiple lower-value items to compensate, the risk of apprehension will be greater, which is also a good thing. Several offenders explained how they specifically targeted low-risk stores because these didn’t have as many security measures in place. This indicates such measures are a problem for them.

Will harsher punishments help?

The problem with dealing with external retail theft this way is that such cases are difficult to detect and successfully prosecute. Experienced shoplifters are familiar with the laws and use this to their advantage. Some stores have been successful with trespassing orders, which are easier to obtain and allow the stores to arrest the relevant offender as soon as he or she sets foot in the store after the order is granted. Research shows only about one in fifty shoplifting events results in an arrest, and when prosecuted and incarcerated, offenders tend to go back to shoplifting. This implies detection and prosecution are probably not the most efficient tools at our disposal. Instead, situational crime prevention techniques and pre-trial diversion programs appear more promising.

What are pre-trial diversion programs?

Pre-trial diversion programs are used for first-time offenders as an alternative to prosecution. Their main goal is to give such individuals a second chance and prevent them from entering the criminal justice system; once they have a criminal record, it is much harder for them to lead a crime-free lifestyle because they may have difficulty in finding employment, among other reasons. Most research in this area has focused on juveniles who are often the beneficiaries of such programs, and there is now some reliable evidence that recidivism rates for offenders on diversion programs are lower than those who have been criminally prosecuted. Both local governments and private companies such as Corrective Education Company (CEC) have made these programs available to retailers.

How can a retailer learn about current research and implement evidence-based strategies?

This can be a bit challenging because new technologies are constantly being developed and evaluation studies take time to yield reliable results. The Loss Prevention Research Council at the University of Florida does really good research in collaboration with retailers, which is helpful as they address the issues retailers are most worried about. It’s important to understand that the effectiveness of crime prevention measures is very context-specific, so what might work in one setting may not work in another. For this reason, retailers should make every effort to collect good-quality data, so they’re able to conduct detailed analyses to understand the specific problems they’re experiencing and choose the best solutions from the range of available options. ■