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A STUDY OF JUVENILE SHOPLIFTING BEHAVIOR

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# A STUDY OF JUVENILE SHOPLIFTING BEHAVIOR

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Shoplifting is the largest monetary crime in the nation and of great concern to retailers and the society in general. Previous efforts to study shoplifting behavior attempted to profile the typical shoplifter by identifying descriptive characteristics of those apprehended. Although these studies have offered insights into the shoplifting problem, they have been criticized on the grounds that those apprehended make up only a small portion of shoplifters. There also has been a lack of theory to help understand the demo-socioeconomic differences between those who commit this crime and those who do not.

The present study provides a theoretical framework for studying shoplifting. It seeks to explain this type of deviant behavior with theories of developmental psychology and sociological models of human behavior. The focus is on juvenile shoplifters who are believed to account for the largest percentage of all shoplifters. The results of the survey of 7,379 juveniles suggests that young shoplifters can be identified on the basis of demographic characteristics and shopping styles, suggesting that retailers should focus their efforts on detecting shoplifters rather than attempting to prevent shoplifting through increasing the difficulty of committing the crime.

# A STUDY OF JUVENILE SHOPLIFTING BEHAVIOR

## ABSTRACT

With shoplifting being the largest monetary crime in the nation, attempts have been made in earlier studies to profile shoplifters but little attention has been given to conditions leading to such behavior. The present study provides a framework for studying such behavior; it seeks explanation for this type of deviant consumer behavior from theories of developmental psychology and sociological models of human behavior. The focus is on juvenile shoplifters who are believed to account for the largest percentage of all shoplifters. A survey of 7,379 juveniles demonstrated the usefulness of using interdisciplinary perspectives in understanding and explaining shoplifting behavior.

## INTRODUCTION

Shoplifting is the largest monetary crime in the nation. Annual retail losses are on the rise (Griffin 1978, Conner 1980) and were recently estimated at \$16 billion nationally (Forbes 1981). This crime has become a growing concern among several groups, including retailers, consumer educators, government, and social scientists in general.

Retailers see shoplifting losses as high as 7.5 percent of dollar sales, depending on the type of store (Messenger 1975), and they are interested in developing effective security measures, antishoplifting campaigns, and educational programs (Verill 1978). Consumer educators are interested in understanding shoplifting behavior in order to develop effective consumer education materials that would increase the awareness of the economic hazard of consumer theft (Conner 1980). Government officials are also concerned with this type of crime because they are seeking economical and efficient means of handling shoplifting cases and alternatives to processing them through the criminal justice system (Case, Mathews, and Fortenbenny, 1975). Finally, sociologists are interested in understanding shoplifting behavior in the context of crime and delinquency (e.g., Klemke 1982, Gold 1970, Bennett 1968).

In spite of the growing concern about shoplifting, one finds relatively little research on the topic. Most of the existing research has been based on data from store records of apprehended shoplifters (e.g. Won and Yamamoto 1968, Cameron 1964, Robin 1963). Strong suspicions arise, however, that store records reveal mainly the control policies and biases of store personnel. In addition, these records contain a "selection" bias, since reliable data indicate that for every thief apprehended thirty-four get away (Taylor 1979).

A few studies utilizing self-reported methods attempted to provide descriptive data on shoplifters. For example, Kraut (1976) explored the relationship

between perception of risk, attitude toward shoplifting and shoplifting behavior among college students. A general study of delinquency presented some descriptive data (Gold 1970) and a more recent exploratory study attempted to interpret data in the context of deviant behavior and socialization (Klemke 1982).

Descriptive findings across the different types of studies offer insights into the profile of the typical shoplifter. One important finding is that juveniles make up the largest percentage of all shoplifters. Verill (1978), for example, examined several studies and concluded that juvenile shoplifters account for fifty percent of all shoplifting. Similarly, another study reported that 50 percent of all shoplifters were juveniles (Stores 1971). The apprehended shoplifter is likely to be a juvenile who has stolen candy, records, toys or cosmetics (Chain Drug Review 1979)

A 12-year longitudinal study found that the proportion of apprehended shoplifters under 30 years old was 70.2 percent (Security Management 1978). Another study in Scotland showed shoplifting by juveniles to be a "nuisance" rather than the greatest threat to profits. Younger children stole "sweets, crisps and things like that," while the teenagers who were likely to attack "textile and cosmetic goods" go about it in a rather unsystematic, almost casual fashion (May 1975). These findings suggest that a great deal of shoplifting may not be planned in advance but occurs on impulse.

A recent study of 409 juvenile first offender shoplifters in Fulton County, Georgia found that 38.9 percent of all merchandise stolen was valued at \$5 or less (National Coalition 1980). Klemke (1978) found that apprehended youths did more subsequent shoplifting than those who had never been apprehended. Those apprehended by police subsequently shoplifted more than those

apprehended by store personnel. Won and Yamamoto (1968) investigated the relationship between class position and shoplifting. Skilled blue collar families accounted for the largest percentage of shoplifters. Klemke (1982) found moderate relationship between social class and shoplifting. This moderate relationship coincides with other studies of delinquency which have also pointed to the modest value of social class as a causal variable (cf. Klemke 1982).

Store record studies showed more females being apprehended for shoplifting than males (Robin 1963, Cameron 1964, Won Yamamoto 1968, Brandy and Mitchell 1971, Chain Drug Review 1979), while a more recent study of 1,189 high school students produced contradictory findings (Klemke 1982). The discrepancy may be because the studies of store records include all age groups, suggesting that males may be more active shoplifters in the earlier phases of the life cycle while females become more active after early adolescence (Klemke 1982, Cameron 1964, Taylor 1979).

Finally, studies have examined attitudinal and psychological factors associated with shoplifting. El-Dirghami (1974) found that students who had not shoplifted held a significantly more unfavorable attitude toward shoplifting than did the shoplifters. Additional studies have shown that personality traits (trust, hostility, deceit) differ between shoplifters and nonshoplifters (Wright and Kirmani 1977, Beck and McIntyre 1977).

Unfortunately, the results of these studies have not been interpreted in the context of any theories to help us better understand why people shoplift. Although these studies have provided insights into the shoplifting problem by profiling the shoplifter, little attention has been devoted to the examinations of antecedents and conditions contributing to the development of such behavior. The present study seeks to explain differences in shoplifting behavior using the socialization perspective, which makes the assumption that in order to

understand human behavior one must specify its social origins and the processes under which it is acquired and maintained (McLeod and O'Keefe, 1972).

Explanations of this particular aspect of deviant consumer behavior are sought in theories of developmental psychology and sociological models of human behavior. The study focuses on juvenile shoplifting since this group comprises the largest segment of shoplifters.

#### THEORY AND HYPOTHESES

Socialization theories generally fall into two categories: cognitive development and social learning. Studies utilizing the cognitive developmental approach to explain the development of youth's behavior usually view socialization as a function of qualitative changes (stages) in cognitive organization occurring between infancy and adulthood. Such stages are defined in terms of cognitive structures the child can use in perceiving and dealing with the environment at different stages. Piaget, for example, describes four stages during which the child's cognitive development is expected to occur: (1) Concrete Operations (from birth to 1 $\frac{1}{2}$ -2 years); (2) Preoperational Stage (ages 2-7); (3) Concrete Operations (ages 7-11); and (4) Formal Operations (ages 11-14) (Wadsworth 1979). Socialization is assumed to occur as the child moves from one stage to another. The social learning approach, in contrast, seeks explanations for learning on sources of influence in the child's environment applied to him. Learning of cognitions and behaviors is assumed to be taking place during the person's interactions with such sources of influence--known as "socialization agents" in various social settings.

Cognitive development theory suggests that the adolescent has moved beyond the generalized acceptance of parental norms evidenced in cognitive development stages one and two. Seemingly, as a precursor of current personality develop-



ment theory, Aristotle stated that the adolescent is a player who dons one mask after another to see which one he likes best and which fits best. This general testing of norms can become norm violating deviant behavior when it is an overreaction to society's requirements of predictable stability (Kvaraceus 1976). Since character development and delinquent proclivity are cumulative in nature up to and including the adolescent period, the prevailing view that delinquency begins to increase during early adolescence and peaks in the mid-adolescent period (e.g. Klemke 1982) leads us to expect an increase in shoplifting behavior as young people grow older.

H<sub>1</sub>: As juveniles grow older, they are more likely to shoplift.

The general process of moral development outlined by ego and moral judgment theories involves increasing maturity of moral thinking and impulse control. A developmental view of impulse control is inferred largely from a theoretical curve developed by Anna Freud (Elder 1968). Such a curve shows the 14-year-old as having reached about 65 percent of mature development in impulse control; by 19 years old, the control has reached nearly 95 percent.

H<sub>2</sub>: Shoplifting on impulse is more likely to occur among younger than among older juveniles.

Sociological theory and personality development theory suggest that the mature child and adolescent is striving for greater independence from his parents as s/he matures. Unable to establish the state of personal independence (as in work and marriage), he substitutes a dependence on his peers for his earlier dependence on parents (Campbell, 1969, p. 824), thus becoming susceptible to peer group norms and influence. Youth's contacts with their peers are expanding and becoming more important during the high school years. For different reasons several theorists stress the importance of evaluating the role

peers play in delinquency involvements. For example, Sutherland's (1937) "differential association" theory focuses on close criminal associational patterns in a socialization context, while Linden and Hackler's (1973) "affective ties" theory distinguishes between youth having close ties to conventional peers and those having close ties to deviant peers. Support for these theoretical generalizations that "significant others" can be deviant socialization agents comes from a number of studies showing that juveniles in contrast to adults, are much more likely to shoplift with companions (Cameron 1964, Klemke 1982, Robin 1963). In particular, Klemke's findings lend support to the deviant socialization hypothesis showing a surprisingly high relationship ( $r=.82$ ) between shoplifting and having shoplifting siblings. If the youth's susceptibility to peer influence accounts for such deviant behavior, one would expect variation in shoplifting activity with age. Specifically, Piaget posits a curvilinear relationship between chronological age and conformity to peer influence, with the highest level occurring some time between late childhood and early adolescence (cf. Hartup 1970).

H<sub>3</sub>: There is a curvilinear relationship between shoplifting with others and age, with the highest level occurring in late childhood and early adolescence.

Throughout delinquency research, males are shown to exhibit a higher amount of delinquent behavior than females. This ratio varies in the literature from 5:1 to 7:5, with all findings showing fewer females committing offenses against persons and property (Miller 1979). Diverse social experiences among peers are seen as a facilitative condition for moral learning and development. The development of inner controls and moral autonomy is markedly slower among girls than among boys and this can be interpreted in terms of the stronger autonomy and identify pressures experienced by boys (Elder 1968). Boys express less unquestioned identification and acceptance of parental restraint and thus can be

expected to shoplift to a larger extent than girls. Thus, it is not surprising that males were found to shoplift more than females (Klemke 1982).

H<sub>4</sub>: Male juveniles are more likely to shoplift than female juveniles.

H<sub>5</sub>: Female juveniles are more likely to shoplift on impulse than male juveniles.

Girls in their need for subjective indices of their potential have a stronger peer orientation than do boys. This peer orientation leads to girls displaying higher degrees of conformity than boys (Campbell 1964). With most delinquency occurring in a social context with an implied audience (Miller 1979), girls would seem more apt to shoplift when accompanied by a peer. Because girls are likely to interact more frequently and become more responsive to peer norms than boys (Powell 1963), their responsiveness may be stronger and more lasting.

H<sub>6</sub>: Female juveniles exhibit greater tendencies to shoplift with peers than male juveniles.

H<sub>7</sub>: Female juveniles compared to their male counterparts are more likely to shoplift with others as they become older.

#### METHODOLOGY

In ten diverse areas of Georgia, a survey was conducted of elementary, middle and high school students. Urban, suburban and rural areas were represented. Questionnaires were administered within a regularly scheduled class to 7,379 students, ages 7 to 19. Trained DECA (Distributive Education Clubs of America) students visited randomly selected schools in the various geographic areas and administered the anonymous questionnaires as part of a project and sponsored by the National DECA organization and the National Coalition to Prevent Shoplifting. A small number of questionnaires had incomplete demographic information (age or sex) making 7,328 completed questionnaires available for initial analysis. With respect to age groups, 1,549 of the respondents were between 7 and 11, 2,582 were 12-14, and 3,216 were 15-19.

Shoplifting behavior was measured by asking respondents if they have ever taken anything from a store without paying for it. Those who answered affirmatively were asked to indicate whether they had done this alone or with someone else. Responses were used to measure two variables: shoplifting alone and shoplifting with others. Finally, the same respondents were asked: "Did you plan to take something from the store in advance or was your decision made in the store?" Responses to this question were used to construct "planned shoplifting" and "shoplifting on impulse." Although these questions may not precisely measure shoplifting behaviors among those who shoplift on a frequent basis, it was felt that responses to these questions by such respondents would tend to reflect their most frequent behavior. Each respondent was also asked to report his attitudes and motives related to shoplifting. Attitudinal responses were used to validate the behavioral measures used.

Self-reporting of shoplifting behavior follows a long tradition in delinquency research. Research by Clark and Tift (1966) found substantially less bias introduced by the possibility of inaccurate self-reporting compared to the magnitude of biases introduced by the use of official statistics. Many other researchers have used this approach of measuring shoplifting behavior (e.g. Klemke 1982, Gold 1970) and suggested its desirability. This approach avoids serious limitations of store records (e.g. absence of comparative data on nonshoplifters, small portion of shoplifters is caught) and has been found to be highly valid (Elliot and Ageton 1980).

Following Piaget's theory of cognitive development, the respondents were grouped into three age categories corresponding to Piaget's levels of development. Students 7 to 11 years old (N=1,549) were assigned to category one which corresponds to the concrete operational stage of cognitive development. Students 12 to 14 (2,582) made up category two, Piaget's period of formal opera-

tions. At this stage the child's cognitive structures have reached maturity. The third stage, late adolescence, includes those students 15 through 19 (3,216). While the adolescent has developed formal operations, his thought processes differ from that of an adult because of the unique ego centrism of the adolescent. At this stage there is a relative failure to distinguish between his point of view and the point of view of the group which he hopes to reform; thus, the adolescent is manifesting more than a "simple desire to deviate" (Wadsworth 1979).

### FINDINGS

Table 1 shows relationships between age and shoplifting behaviors. Shoplifting appears to increase with age ( $p < .001$ ), a finding which supports Hypothesis 1. Among the students ages 7 to 11, 15.2 percent indicated having shoplifted compared with 32.2 percent and 42.7 percent in the 12-14 and 15-19 age groups, respectively. Similarly, Hypothesis 2 is supported. The percentage of juveniles who have shoplifted on impulse is substantial and does seem to decline with age ( $p < .001$ ). Among the 214 respondents in the 7-11 age group who shoplifted, 84.6 percent shoplifted on impulse in comparison with 78.5 percent of 1,318 students in the 15-19 age group reporting similar behavior, suggesting that juveniles tend to plan more to shoplift as they grow older. The relationship between shoplifting with others and age appears to be curvilinear ( $p < .001$ ), offering support for Hypothesis 3. Approximately half of the respondents in the three age groups reported shoplifting behavior in the presence of others.

Table 2 shows relationships between sex and shoplifting behaviors. Generally, males are more likely to shoplift than females. Approximately 41 percent of males and 26 percent of females reported having shoplifted at some time, a finding which supports Hypothesis 4 ( $p < .001$ ). Furthermore, the data in Table 2 indicate that females who shoplift are more likely to shoplift on

impulse than males. Approximately 87 percent of females and 76 percent of males who indicated shoplifting behavior seem to decide to shoplift after they enter the store ( $p < .001$ ). This finding provides support for Hypothesis 5.

Shoplifting with peers appears to be more common among girls than among boys. About 61 percent of the girls who said they had shoplifted did so with someone else compared with only 47 percent of boys ( $p < .001$ ), a finding which supports Hypothesis 6 (Table 2). Furthermore, Table 3 shows that shoplifting with others tends to increase with age among girls, as posited by Hypothesis 7 ( $p < .001$ ). Whereas half of the time (nearly 50 percent), the young (ages 7-11) male and female juveniles commit this crime with peers, the percentage of older (ages 15-19) female juveniles shop-lifting with others is significantly higher than that of boys (approximately 62 and 45 percent, respectively) ( $p < .001$ ). The decline in boys' shoplifting behavior in the presence of others with increasing age was also significant ( $p < .001$ ) (Table 3).

The findings concerning (a) the decline in impulse shoplifting with age, (b) female's greater tendency to shoplift on impulse, and (c) female's greater propensity to shoplift with others with age suggest possible sex differences in decision making to shoplift (impulse vs. planned) as well as differences in peer influence on such a decision with increasing age. To investigate these notions, the data on the shoplifting decision were first analyzed by age, controlling for sex. Males showed a decline in impulsive shoplifting behavior, thus an increase in planning for shoplifting with age ( $p < .001$ ). However, this was not the case among female shoplifters ( $p < .31$ ) (Table 4). The same analysis was carried out one step further by introducing another variable, the shoplifting environment (shoplifting alone vs. with peers). The results of this analysis are shown in Table 5. Unplanned or impulse shoplifting with others is not only more common among females but it also becomes more frequent among females with

increasing age ( $p < .006$ ). However, this does not appear to be the case among males ( $p < .21$ ). This finding suggests that peer pressure on shoplifting may operate differently among boys and girls. Since shoplifting tends to take place in the presence of peers, it is often regarded as a norm or challenge, rewarded or reinforced by peers, especially among female youths. The finding that planned shoplifting is rather infrequent among both groups suggests that motives for shoplifting may not be purely economic but also social.

### DISCUSSION

Although the study found a relationship between age and shoplifting behavior, one cannot conclude that older juveniles shoplift more than younger ones. The increase in percentage figures of those having shoplifted in the 12-14 and 15-19 age groups includes shoplifting behaviors committed in previous years (age brackets). In fact, when one examines incremental changes in percentage figures it appears that shoplifting activity declines after the mid-adolescent period. Whether these statistics represent an accurate statement of declining activity might be questionable because the time span in each interval is different. However, previous research by Klemke (1982) shows similar findings which clash with the prevailing view that delinquency begins to increase during early adolescence and peaks in the mid-adolescent period. There can be several ramifications of establishing an alternate pattern, a model which Klemke (1978 and 1982) calls Declining Adolescent Crime (DAC). Thus, the findings regarding the relationship between age and shoplifting should be interpreted with extreme caution, and future studies should attempt to address the same question using different measures of shoplifting behavior. Measures such as frequency of shoplifting and shoplifting during a specified time frame might produce more reliable results.

The way one goes about measuring shoplifting may affect results. Ideally, the measures should differentiate between different merchandise values. If the

decision to shoplift follows the general pattern of consumer decision making process, one would expect those who shoplift high value ("shopping") goods to preplan shoplifting, while those taking low-priced ("convenience") products to behave on impulse. Unfortunately, our data could not be analyzed by dollar value of stolen merchandise. It may be that sex and age differences in impulse/planned shoplifting are due to the value of stolen merchandise.

The study, however, supports the contention that male juveniles shoplift more than female juveniles. Of greater importance, however, is the demonstrated variance in shoplifting behavior which reflects the different socialization patterns of males and females. Females are more likely than males to shoplift with others suggesting that peer pressure on shoplifting may operate differently among boys and girls. The findings that planned shoplifting is infrequent and that it tends to take place in the presence of peers suggests that peer pressure may be important in activating the major motivations for theft. Various writers also have pointed to the game-like aspects of shoplifting (e.g., Cameron 1964, Gold 1970, Klemke 1982) which offers the potential for excitement and trophies and suggested that peer pressure may be the main reasons for such "sporting" motivations and "economic" motivations. This pattern apparently is more likely to exist among females who tend to shoplift more frequently with others with increasing age than their male counterparts.

Implications from an education perspective show a distinct demarcation between male and female students. The male student with his earlier obtained moral autonomy is less likely to be restrained from deviant market behavior by parental or other authoritative "shoulds." Rather, he must be assisted in an early internalization of the consequences of such individual behavior. The female student with her early and continued need for subjective indices of self-evaluation



needs to be supplied with such indices beyond peer norms and need for conformity. Thus, group discussions and development of alternatives to simple conformity to group deviant norms would seem to have educational potential.

Retailers concerned with shoplifting generally have two broad strategies for reducing shoplifting losses: shoplifter detection and shoplifting prevention. The first approach involves the hiring of security-detection personnel, and educating the store personnel to be alert to the shoplifter's early warning signals. This strategy appears to be most effective when shoplifting is relatively frequent and potential shoplifters can easily be identified by some objective characteristic. For example, the older teenage female is relatively more likely to shoplift than the older teenage male; she is also more likely to shoplift on impulse while with others. Thus, the most valuable merchandise will be that which is appealing to this teenager and which is displayed so that it made an impulse theft relatively easy.

Shoplifting prevention, on the other hand, focuses on increasing the difficulty of shoplifting. Examples include, installing electronic warning systems, placing items in locked display cases and planning store layout with deterrence in mind. This approach is most appropriate when shoplifting is rather infrequent and shoplifters cannot be easily identified. Given that (a) frequency of shoplifting varies by store type and location, and (b) shoplifters can be profiled, retailers have both strategies open to them to apply under conditions most suitable to their individual circumstances.

Future research should examine shoplifting in the context of theories of socialization and deviant behavior. Our study addressed only a limited number of independent variables derived from such theoretical formulations and can only be used as a rough blueprint to the study of this phenomenon. Specifically, the examination of the processes by which one develops this pattern of deviant beha-

avior could be particularly useful. For example, we need to know not only the conditions that facilitate shoplifting (e.g. socioeconomic deprivation) but also the influence processes, especially the role peers. Finally, future research should develop better measures of shoplifting behavior than previously used that would incorporate both situations and frequency of shoplifting.

TABLE 1  
 Juvenile Shoplifting Behaviors By Age

	AGE GROUP			Significance Level
	7-11	12-14	15-19	
Shoplifted	15.2% (1,549)	32.2% (2,582)	42.7% (3,216)	.001
Shoplifted on Impulse	84.6% (214)	82.4% (796)	78.5% (1,318)	.001
Shoplifted with Others	49.4% (233)	55.6% (828)	51.9% (1,371)	.001

NOTE: Numbers in parentheses indicate bases on which percentages are computed.

TABLE 2  
 Juvenile Shoplifting Behaviors By Sex

	Males %	Females %	Significance Level
Shoplifted (n = 2,465)	41.5	26.1	.001
Shoplifted on Impulse (n = 2,351)	75.9	86.8	.001
Shoplifted with Others (n = 2,457)	47.3	61.5	.001

NOTE: Numbers in parenthesis show bases (numbers of shoplifters) on which percentages were computed.

TABLE 3  
 Shoplifting in the Presence of Others by Age,  
 Controlling for Sex

<u>Age Group</u>	<u>Males</u>	<u>Females</u>
	%	%
7-11	49.3 (134)	49.0 (98)
12-14	50.5 (485)	62.7 (343)
15-19	44.9 (820)	62.5 (549)
	p < .001	p < .001

NOTE: Numbers in parenthesis show bases (numbers of shoplifters) on which percentages are computed.

TABLE 4  
 Shoplifting on Impulse by Age  
 Controlling for Sex

<u>Age Group</u>	<u>Males</u>	<u>Females</u>
	%	%
7-11	84.3 (102)	84.8 (78)
12-14	79.3 (371)	86.9 (285)
15-19	72.7 (569)	87.2 (465)
	p<.001	p<.31

NOTE: Numbers in parentheses show bases (numbers of shoppers on which percentages are computed).

TABLE 5  
 Shoplifting on Impulse in the Presence/Absence of Others  
 By Age Among Male and Female Juveniles

	MALES			FEMALES		
	<u>7-11</u> %	<u>12-14</u> %	<u>15-19</u> %	<u>7-11</u> %	<u>12-14</u> %	<u>15-19</u> %
Shoplifted Alone	45.4	38.8	39.8	44.4	31.8	28.1
Shoplifted with Others	38.7	43.7	38.7	41.1	58.0	61.4
(N)	(100)	(349)	(522)	(77)	(274)	(436)
		p<.21			p<.006	

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