

## DID SHOPLIFTING REALLY DECREASE?

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*Home Office Criminal Statistics show a substantial decrease (of more than one-third) in the number of recorded shoplifters between 1985 and 1989. The largest decrease was for juveniles. In trying to explain why this decrease had occurred, a survey of shop theft was carried out with sixteen retail chains, totalling 7,873 retail outlets, which accounted for a quarter of total retail sales in Great Britain in 1990. The number of shoplifters apprehended by these retailers remained tolerably constant between 1985 and 1989, and their probability of reporting shoplifters to the police also remained constant. The number of apprehended shoplifters tended to increase with the number of store detectives employed by each retail chain, but the retailers reported that their use of store detectives had not changed since 1985. It is concluded from this research that the true number of shoplifters probably remained tolerably constant between 1985 and 1989, and that the number of recorded shoplifters decreased because an increasing fraction of shoplifters reported to the police were dealt with informally, and hence did not appear in the official statistics of shoplifting offenders.*

*Shoplifting and the Peak Age of Offending*

The research on which this paper is based was prompted by Gordon Barclay's article on 'The Peak Age of Known Offending by Males' (Barclay 1990). The peak age for recorded male offending in England and Wales (i.e. findings of guilt plus cautions per 100,000 population) increased suddenly from 15 in 1987 to 18 in the 1988 *Criminal Statistics* (Home Office 1989). This peak age had been 15 since 1972 (see Farrington 1990). Interestingly, the peak age for females did not increase similarly, but remained at 15 in both 1987 and 1988. However, the sudden increase in the peak age for males was an important phenomenon that required explanation.

Barclay identified the root cause: 'It is clear that the rise in the peak age of offending resulted entirely from the reduction in the annual number of offenders cautioned or convicted for theft from shops' (1990: 21). He showed that the decrease in the number of recorded male juvenile offenders between 1987 and 1988 was almost entirely due to the sudden one-third decrease (from about 46,000 to about 30,900) in the number of recorded juvenile shoplifters. This was a dramatic change in the space of one year.

In trying to explain why this decrease had occurred, Barclay wrote to all chief constables and asked them for their comments. Interestingly, 'few forces were aware of the extent of the drop that occurred' (1990: 22). The major explanations that the police proposed were as follows:

1. Most police forces felt that there had been a move from store detectives to uniformed security guards and that this may have been the major factor in

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detering shoplifting (although many forces also pointed out that the absence of store detectives reduced the number of arrests in stores).

2. Some thought that crime prevention measures such as closed circuit television and electronic tagging, and early warning schemes in which the descriptions of likely shoplifters were circulated among stores, had been effective in reducing shoplifting.
3. Some also felt that crime prevention efforts in the schools and youth clubs were major factors in reducing shoplifting.
4. In the main, police thought that shops had not changed their policy in dealing with shoplifters. However, there had been an increase in informal action taken by the police in these cases. For example, the decrease in recorded shoplifting in Nottinghamshire between 1987 and 1988 was entirely explained by a one-third increase in the use of informal (unrecorded) warnings.

Barclay was unable to draw firm conclusions about the relative importance or plausibility of these various explanations, but clearly felt that the decrease in recorded shoplifting partly reflected a true decrease in the behaviour and partly reflected a decrease in recording: 'the explanation of the fall is not so clear. It might be due to a combination of actions taken to deter the offence and to divert juvenile offenders from the criminal justice system' (1990: 22).

#### *Changes in Recorded Shoplifting Offenders*

The aim of the present research is to throw more light on changes in shoplifting (used interchangeably with 'theft from shops') in England and Wales in the second half of the 1980s. As there was a steady decline in the number of recorded shoplifters from 1985 to 1989 (not just between 1987 and 1988), the article focuses particularly on this time period.

Table 1 shows the number of recorded offences and offenders (convicted or cautioned) in each year from 1985 to 1990, according to the annual *Criminal Statistics*. It can be seen that the number of recorded shoplifting offences decreased by 11 per cent between 1985 and 1990, while the number of recorded shoplifting offenders decreased by 27 per cent. The decreases between 1985 and 1989 were particularly sharp: offences decreased by 21 per cent and offenders decreased by 37 per cent. These are large changes over such a short time period. For comparison, the numbers of recorded offences and offenders in 1970, 1975, and 1980 are also included in Table 1, showing the steady rise to a peak in 1985. By 1989, recorded offences had decreased back to the 1981 level and recorded offenders had decreased back to the 1974 level.

It might be expected that recorded offences and recorded offenders would tend to vary together, since a shoplifting offence is usually only recorded when an offender is apprehended. However, the discrepancy between recorded offences and offenders increased between 1985 and 1990. In 1985, 243,801 (87 per cent) of the recorded offences were considered to be cleared up, and the numbers of recorded offenders corresponded to 60 per cent of the number of cleared-up offences. In 1990, 204,907 (82 per cent) of the recorded offences were cleared up, and the number of recorded offenders corresponded to only 52 per cent of the number of cleared-up offences. The increasing discrepancy over time between cleared-up offences and recorded offenders

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TABLE 1 *Changes in Recorded Shoplifting and Other Theft*

Year	Shoplifting		Other theft*	
	Offences	Offenders	Offences	Offenders
1970	101,822	56,218	665,269	128,706
1975	175,552	102,229	781,648	121,409
1980	206,175	119,860	887,219	113,611
1985	281,557	147,338	1,183,236	107,114
1986	255,463	128,044	1,289,940	91,713
1987	247,064	119,770	1,363,825	96,109
1988	216,242	97,893	1,293,967	93,023
1989	222,974	92,874	1,347,043	85,733
1990	250,301	106,956	1,579,307	88,975
% change, 1985-90	-11	-27	+33	-17

\* Other theft excludes shoplifting, abstracting electricity, handling, and theft/unauthorized taking of motor vehicles.

Source: Home Office *Criminal Statistics*.

for different types of crime was also highlighted by Farrington and Langan (1992). This discrepancy might mean either that increasing numbers of detected offenders are not being recorded or that each detected offender is committing an increasing number of recorded offences on average (or some combination of these).

In the interest of providing comparative data on offences similar to shoplifting, Table 1 also shows the number of recorded offences and offenders in other theft categories in 1970, 1975, 1980, and each year from 1985 to 1990. In order for the data on offenders to be comparable over this time period, it was necessary to exclude theft/unauthorized taking of a motor vehicle, because unauthorized taking was downgraded to a summary offence following the Criminal Justice Act 1988. Similarly, abstracting electricity was excluded because this was only shown as a separate offence in the *Criminal Statistics* from 1978 onwards. Unlike shoplifters, the number of other theft offenders decreased from 1970 to 1985. However, between 1985 and 1990 the number of other theft offences increased by 33 per cent, while the number of other theft offenders decreased by 17 per cent. The decreases in recorded shoplifting offenders in 1985-90 (and particularly in 1985-9) were greater than in other theft offenders.

Table 2 shows changes in the number of recorded shoplifting offenders separately for convictions and cautions and for four different age groups. This table was not further disaggregated by sex because males and females generally showed similar percentage changes between 1985 and 1990. For example, the number of convicted males aged 10-16 decreased by 70 per cent, while the number of convicted females aged 10-16 decreased by 67 per cent; the number of cautioned males aged 10-16 decreased by 44 per cent, whereas the number of cautioned females aged 10-16 decreased by 46 per cent. It is clear that the decreases highlighted by Barclay (1990) in recorded male juvenile shoplifting were accompanied by similar decreases in recorded female juvenile shoplifting. More males than females were recorded offenders in all age groups in all years; for example, there were 64,949 males and 42,006 females recorded for shoplifting in 1990.

It is clear from Table 2 that the largest decreases in recorded shoplifting offenders

TABLE 2 *Changes in Recorded Shoplifting Offenders*

	1985	1990	% change
<i>Age 10–16</i>			
Convicted	10,614	3,233	–70
Cautioned	58,303	32,127	–45
Total recorded	68,917	35,360	–49
population (000's)	4,925.3	4,239.7	–14
<i>Age 17–29</i>			
Convicted	33,839	27,876	–18
Cautioned	3,978	11,518	+190
Total recorded	37,817	39,394	+4
population (000's)	10,193.4	10,353.7	+2
<i>Age 30–59</i>			
Convicted	27,486	17,793	–35
Cautioned	4,566	8,639	+89
Total recorded	32,052	26,432	–18
population (000's)	18,262.0	18,955.2	+4
<i>Age 60+</i>			
Convicted	2,495	1,116	–44
Cautioned	6,057	4,653	–23
Total recorded	8,552	5,769	–33
population (000's)	10,432.5	10,596.1	+2
<i>All ages</i>			
Convicted	74,434	50,018	–33
Cautioned	72,904	56,937	–22
Total recorded	147,338	106,955	–27
population (000's)	43,813.2	44,144.7	+1

*Note:* The main volume of the 1990 *Criminal Statistics* shows 106,956 recorded shoplifters, whereas the supplementary volumes (from which these disaggregated figures are taken) show 106,955. The supplementary volumes of 1985 show 147,338 recorded shoplifters, whereas the main volume now shows 147,461.

*Sources:* for data on offending, Home Office *Criminal Statistics*; for population data, number of people resident in England and Wales (Office of Population Censuses and Surveys).

were for juveniles. The total number of recorded juvenile shoplifters in 1990 was only about half of the 1985 figure (35,360 as opposed to 68,917). The increase between 1989 and 1990 (from 28,208 to 35,360) was entirely an increase in cautions, since findings of guilt of juveniles declined between 1989 and 1990 (from 3,296 to 3,233). The number of recorded offenders also decreased in 1985–90 in both of the older age groups; by 33 per cent for those aged 60 or over, and by 18 per cent for those aged 30–59. However, it increased slightly (by 4 per cent) for those aged 17–29, largely because of the great (190 per cent) increase in recorded cautions of this age group. For comparison, Table 2 also shows the total population in each age group. The number of juveniles decreased by 14 per cent during this time period—a far smaller drop than the decrease in the number of recorded juvenile shoplifting offenders—while there were negligible changes in the numbers of older people.

The number of recorded shoplifting offenders (which to some extent drives the number of recorded shoplifting offences) may have decreased for four main reasons:

1. The true number of offenders decreased.
2. The probability of an offender being apprehended by a shop decreased.

3. The probability of a shop reporting an apprehended offender to the police decreased.
4. The probability of an offender reported to the police being officially recorded (convicted or cautioned) decreased.

The explanations put forward by the police to Barclay (1990) focused especially on the first and fourth of these reasons.

### *The Survey of Retailers*

It is difficult to estimate the true number of shoplifting offences and offenders. Buckle and Farrington (1984) systematically followed customers through a small department store and concluded that about 1 in 50 were observed to steal. They also estimated that only between 1 in 100 and 1 in 1,000 shoplifting incidents were recorded by the police. In a self-reported offending survey of 400 London boys aged 18, West and Farrington (1977) found that 15 per cent admitted shoplifting in the previous three years, but that only 8 per cent of these shoplifters had been officially convicted for shoplifting. Only 0.4 per cent of shoplifting incidents led to convictions. This estimate for the probability of official recording is of the same order of magnitude as Buckle and Farrington's, which was derived by a quite different method. It seems clear that only a tiny proportion of shoplifters at any given time are likely to be apprehended by store detectives. Furthermore, not all apprehended shoplifters are reported to the police (Burrows and Lewis 1987).

The aim of our research was to derive an estimate of the number of apprehended shoplifters from the retailers themselves. This does not tell us the true number of shoplifters, but it comes nearer to the reality of shoplifting than the Home Office figures for the number of persons convicted or cautioned. An investigation of the retailers' figures makes it possible to classify the reasons advanced for the decrease in recorded shoplifting into those which are plausible and those which are implausible.

Accordingly, an approach was made to the British Retail Consortium (the association representing multiple retailers and department stores), and especially members of its Security Committee, to determine which of the large retail chains had collected and could provide historical data about the number of persons apprehended for shoplifting in their stores in each year from 1985 onwards. In the end, sixteen retail chains completed our questionnaire: Argos, Boots, Comet, Debenhams, Dixons/Currys, Freemans, Granada, William Jackson, John Lewis/Waitrose, Marks and Spencer, Sainsburys, Sears Sports and Leisurewear, Selfridges, W. H. Smith, Tesco, and Woolworths. In most cases, the questionnaire was completed in April–May 1991 by the chief security officer of the chain.

The number of retail chains who provided information about shoplifters was not large, but the participation of many of the high street 'giants' meant that they represented a very significant percentage of total retail trade in Great Britain. The sixteen retail chains had 7,873 outlets (an average of nearly 500 each) and total sales of £32 billion in the latest financial year. Hence, they accounted for about a quarter of total retail sales in Great Britain, which were about £129 billion in 1990 (Central Statistical Office 1992). It is not possible to extract the figures for England and Wales alone from our survey to make it exactly comparable with the coverage of the Home Office *Criminal Statistics*, but the main conclusions are not affected by this slight non-

comparability. Large retail chains are clearly over-represented in this survey, but few smaller retail organizations or single-outlet retailers keep systematic records of apprehended shoplifters (Home Office 1986).

Table 3 shows the estimated number of shoplifters apprehended by the sixteen retail chains in each year from 1985 to 1990. Where the returns covered financial years, they were converted to calendar year figures. However, the data were reasonably complete only for the last three years, 1988–90. They were about two-thirds complete in 1986 and 1987, and only about one-third complete in 1985. (The ‘known’ figures in Table 3 show the number of apprehended shoplifters that the retailers were able to report to us.) Consequently, retailers with missing data have had their missing figures estimated, based on the changes in shoplifting reported by retailers with complete data, working backwards from 1990. The estimated numbers for each year are directly comparable, but the ‘known’ numbers are not.

TABLE 3 *Shoplifters Apprehended by Retailers*

Year	No. apprehended shoplifters <sup>a</sup>		Annual change (%)	No. recorded shoplifters <sup>b</sup>	Annual change (%)
	Known	Estimated			
1985	(37,005)	101,857		147,338	
1986	(68,916)	106,842	+5	128,044	-13
1987	(74,651)	105,477	-1	119,770	-6
1988	(96,095)	97,014	-8	97,893	-18
1989	(102,743)	103,463	+7	92,874	-5
1990	(112,224)	112,224	+8	106,956	+15

<sup>a</sup> Except in 1990, the known number of apprehended shoplifters was based on fewer than 16 retail chains, so the known figures are not comparable. The estimated figures (explained in the text) are comparable in all years.

<sup>b</sup> The number of recorded shoplifters is taken from the Home Office *Criminal Statistics*.

As an example, nine retail chains reported shoplifting data for both 1987 and 1988, and the total number of shoplifters apprehended by these chains was 8.72 per cent higher in 1987 than in 1988 (74,651 versus 68,661). Consequently, it was estimated that retail chains which were able to provide data for 1988 but not for 1987 would also have had 8.72 per cent more shoplifters in 1987 than they had in 1988 (actual, 1988 = 27,434; estimated, 1987 = 29,827). Also, it was estimated that retail chains with data missing in both 1987 and 1988 would have had 8.72 per cent more shoplifters in 1987 than their previously estimated 1988 figures (estimated, 1988 = 919; estimated, 1987 = 999). The total estimated 1987 figure was thus 105,477 (74,651 known plus 29,827 estimated plus 999 estimated).

It can be seen that between 1985 and 1989 there was very little change in the estimated number of shoplifters apprehended by these sixteen retail chains (from 101,857 in 1985 to 103,463 in 1989). For comparison, Table 3 also shows the number of shoplifters recorded by the police, which decreased by 37 per cent between 1985 and 1989. The comparison of apprehended and recorded shoplifters strongly suggests that the main reason for this decrease lies in the treatment of shoplifters *after* apprehension.

There was an increase in the number of apprehended shoplifters in 1990, to 112,224. Similarly, the number of recorded shoplifters increased between 1989 and 1990, largely

because of an increase in cautions. It is interesting that the total number of shoplifters apprehended by these sixteen retail chains is of the same order of magnitude as the total number of shoplifters recorded by the Home Office in the whole of England and Wales, suggesting that these retail 'giants' might have made a major contribution to national statistics on thefts from shops.

These results are reasonably concordant with the findings of a larger questionnaire survey of 121 retail groups in 1985 (Home Office 1986). These retail groups, covering 15,917 outlets, reported that they apprehended 197,648 persons for shoplifting in 1985. The number of apprehended persons per outlet (shop) of about twelve in 1985 was similar to our figure of about fourteen in 1990 (112,224 apprehended persons; 7,873 outlets).

#### *Age, Gender, and Reporting to the Police*

The retail chains were able to provide details about the gender of apprehended shoplifters in just over half of the cases in 1990 (fewer in earlier years). Almost exactly half of apprehended shoplifters were male and half were female (30,978 as opposed to 30,128; see Table 4). These results are again entirely concordant with the 1985 survey by the Home Office Standing Conference on Crime Prevention (Home Office 1986), which revealed 50,381 apprehended males and 48,848 apprehended females. However, in both 1985 and 1990, the percentage of males among recorded shoplifters was just over 60 per cent (see Table 4). At some stage from apprehension to recording, there seems to be some discrimination in favour of females (see also Burrows and Lewis 1987).

TABLE 4 *Characteristics of Shoplifters*

	Apprehended shoplifters 1990	Recorded shoplifters 1990	Apprehended shoplifters 1985	Recorded shoplifters 1985
Male	30,978 (50.7)	64,949 (60.7)	50,381 (50.8)	89,099 (60.5)
Female	30,128 (49.3)	42,006 (39.3)	48,848 (49.2)	58,239 (39.5)
Age 0-9	1,369 (2.2)	0	2,868 (4.4)	0
Age 10-16	15,091 (24.7)	35,360 (33.1)	17,102 (26.0)	68,917 (46.8)
Age 17-29	23,435 (38.4)	39,394 (36.8)	40,903 (62.3)	37,817 (25.7)
Age 30-59	14,866 (24.3)	26,432 (24.7)		32,052 (21.8)
Age 60+	6,346 (10.4)	5,769 (5.4)	4,806 (7.3)	8,552 (5.8)

Sources: Apprehended shoplifters: surveys of retailers; recorded shoplifters: Home Office *Criminal Statistics*.

Similarly, the retail chains were able to provide information about the ages of apprehended shoplifters in just over half of the cases in 1990 (fewer in earlier years). Table 4 shows that about 2 per cent of apprehended shoplifters were under 10, 25 per cent were aged 10-16, 38 per cent were aged 17-29, 24 per cent were aged 30-59, and

10 per cent were aged 60 or over. These figures are reasonably concordant with the 1985 survey (Burrows and Lewis 1987), suggesting that the age distribution of apprehended shoplifters did not change greatly between 1985 and 1990. However, the age distribution of recorded shoplifters did change greatly, because of the decreasing proportion of juveniles (from 47 per cent of recorded shoplifters in 1985 to 33 per cent in 1990). The comparison of apprehended and recorded shoplifters suggests that the probability of apprehended juveniles being recorded (found guilty or cautioned) declined markedly between 1985 and 1990 (and particularly between 1985 and 1989).

The retail chains were also able to provide data about whether apprehended shoplifters were reported to the police in just over half of the cases in 1990 (fewer in earlier years). Of 60,322 apprehended shoplifters in 1990 for whom outcomes were known, 61 per cent (37,044) were reported to the police. This percentage is close to the corresponding figure of 65 per cent discovered in the 1985 survey (Home Office 1986). The concordance of these two percentages, and the constancy of the number of apprehended shoplifters, strongly suggests that *the number of shoplifters reported to the police by retailers did not change significantly between 1985 and 1989*. Consequently, the main reason for the decline in recorded shoplifters must lie in changes in subsequent processing by the police or by the Crown Prosecution Service (which came into operation in 1986).

The retail chains were also asked about their current company policy on reporting apprehended shoplifters to the police. Five said that their policy was to report all shoplifters, but these chains accounted for less than 2 per cent of the total number of apprehended offenders. Almost all of the remainder said that they took into account the age of the shoplifter and the value of the stolen property in deciding whether to report people to the police. Generally, the very young (under 17) or very old (over 60), the mentally impaired, and those in an advanced stage of pregnancy would not be reported to the police, unless they were caught repeatedly. Some retail chains had been instructed by the police to follow these policies and had also been told not to report a shoplifter to the police if the value of the stolen property was less than £5 or £10, on the grounds that the Crown Prosecution Service would probably not prosecute in these cases.

The retail chains were specifically asked whether they agreed or disagreed that, of all the shoplifters their company reported to the police, virtually all should be charged or cautioned by the police. Of fifteen who responded to this question, every one agreed that virtually all shoplifters should be charged or cautioned by the police. However, only one wanted to see prosecutions in every case. They were also asked if they would like to receive formal feedback from the police about what happened to shoplifting cases reported to them, and fourteen out of sixteen said that they would. The retailers were also asked whether they currently allowed store staff or detectives to caution shoplifters informally, but only six out of sixteen said they they did. A similar proportion (five out of fourteen) said that they would like to have the police administer informal warnings in their stores.

#### *Shoplifting and Security Methods*

The retail chains were also asked whether they thought that the true number of shoplifting incidents had increased, decreased, or not changed since 1985. By a large majority (fourteen out of sixteen, with the other two saying that it had not changed),



they thought that shoplifting had increased. This view may have been particularly affected by the recent (1988–90) increase in the number of shoplifters they had apprehended. It is interesting that no chief security officer thought that shoplifting had decreased, as an uncritical reading of the Home Office *Criminal Statistics* might perhaps be taken to indicate.

The retail chains were also asked to put forward reasons to explain any change that they had perceived in the true number of shoplifting incidents. By far the most popular reasons focused on decreased deterrence: most believed that the probability of being caught had decreased, that there was less policing in shopping centres, that the police increasingly administered cautions, that the public was aware that the Crown Prosecution Service would not prosecute in many cases, and that the courts did not give punitive sentences. Other reasons put forward by the retailers focused on the increased attractiveness of merchandise and increased temptations provided by open displays, an increasing view in society that shoplifting was not really a crime, a general decline in moral standards, an increase in lawlessness connected with drug and alcohol abuse, unemployment, and inner city deprivation, a ready market for goods sold illegally, and an increase in professional teams stealing to order.

In order to investigate the validity of statements made by the police forces in Barclay's survey, the retail chains were also asked about the methods they currently used to detect and prevent shoplifting, and whether they used each of six specified methods in more than 75 per cent of their stores, between 25 per cent and 75 per cent of their stores, or under 25 per cent of their stores. (In retrospect, the survey should also have included the category of 'not used at all'.) Table 5 shows that the most commonly used methods were warning notices, loop alarms or display protection, and store detectives, while the least common methods were uniformed guards and electronic tagging.

TABLE 5 *Retailers' Current Use of Security Methods<sup>a</sup>*

	> 75%	25%–75%	< 25%
Store detectives	4	3	8
Uniformed guards	0	2	13
Electronic tagging	0	1	14
Closed-circuit TV	0	7	8
Warning notices	8	3	4
Loop alarms (display protection)	5	5	5

<sup>a</sup> Selfridges (one store only) excluded.

A specific question was asked about the number of store detectives employed by each retail chain. Six retailers employed no store detectives, while the other nine who provided details employed a total of 1,204. It was clear that the number of apprehended shoplifters increased with the number of store detectives. The eight retailers with up to fifty store detectives apprehended a total of only 2,924 shoplifters in 1990, while the seven retailers with more than fifty store detectives apprehended a total of 108,297. Taking two extreme cases, one retail chain which does not employ store detectives apprehended only 162 shoplifters in 1990, while another of broadly

comparable size and turnover, but which makes extensive use of store detectives, apprehended over 30,000.

The retailers were asked about their number of retail outlets in 1985 as well as in 1990, in order to investigate whether the number of stores covered by this research had changed during this period. Not all retail chains could provide this information for 1985. There seemed to be some increase in the number of outlets of retailers who employed up to fifty store detectives and apprehended few shoplifters (from 1,706 in 1985 to 2,426 in 1990, including only retailers known in both years). However, there was a slight decrease in the number of outlets of retailers who employed more than fifty store detectives and accounted for the majority of apprehended shoplifters (from 2,588 in 1985 to 2,495 in 1990). Hence, in the most important cases, a tolerably constant number of apprehended shoplifters coincided with a tolerably constant number of retail outlets.

Another question put to the retail chains was whether their use of each security method had increased, decreased, or not changed significantly since 1985; the results are shown in Table 6. Of course, it must be realized that these retrospective reports may be of questionable accuracy. Nevertheless, it can be seen that the biggest increases were in closed-circuit television, uniformed guards, and loop alarms or display protection. In contrast, there was little overall change in the use of store detectives. These results suggest that statements made by police forces in Barclay's survey about the increasing use of uniformed guards might have been correct, but that in many cases these guards supplemented store detectives rather than replaced them.

TABLE 6 *Change in Retailers' Use of Security Methods Since 1985*

	Increase	No change	Decrease
Store detectives	3	9	4
Uniformed guards	9	3	4
Electronic tagging	5	8	2
Closed-circuit TV	11	2	3
Warning notices	6	9	1
Loop alarms (display protection)	9	6	1

### *Conclusions*

The present research suggests that the number of shoplifters apprehended in these stores remained tolerably constant between 1985 and 1989. We cannot draw firm conclusions about the true number of shoplifters. However, if the probability of apprehension depends mainly on the number of store detectives, and if the number of store detectives has not changed significantly since 1985, it might be concluded that the probability of apprehension remained tolerably constant between 1985 and 1989. Therefore, it might also be concluded that the true number of shoplifters probably also remained tolerably constant. This implies that explanations of the decrease in recorded shoplifters based on, for example, the success of crime prevention efforts in schools and youth clubs can be rejected.

It should be pointed out, of course, that this research is based only on sixteen major retailers accounting for about a quarter of total retail sales in Great Britain. It is not certain that the conclusions about the lack of change in the true frequency of shoplifting would hold equally for the shops accounting for the other three-quarters of total retail sales. However, there is no obvious reason why potential shoplifters should behave differently over time in the 7,873 shops covered by this research in comparison with the rest of the shops in Great Britain.

This research also suggests that the probability of an apprehended shoplifter being reported to the police remained tolerably constant between 1985 and 1990. It follows, therefore, that the steep decline in the number of recorded shoplifters must have been caused almost entirely by the actions of the police and/or the Crown Prosecution Service. More and more juveniles in particular, but also older people as well, are being dealt with informally, and therefore do not appear in the official statistics of offenders. Hence, changes in the number of recorded shoplifting offenders do not provide a reliable indication of changes in the true number of shoplifting offenders, and indeed can be very misleading.

The increasing use of unrecorded warnings for apprehended juveniles can be seen in the report of the Northampton and West Juvenile Liaison Bureau (1990). In Northamptonshire in 1985, 672 juvenile offenders were apprehended by the police and referred to the juvenile bureau. Of these, ninety-seven (14.4 per cent) were prosecuted and 478 (71.1 per cent) were cautioned, making a total of 85.5 per cent who were officially recorded as juvenile offenders. In Northamptonshire in 1990, almost exactly the same number of juvenile offenders were apprehended and referred (670). However, in 1990, only 50 (7.5 per cent) were prosecuted and 90 (13.4 per cent) were cautioned, making a total of 20.9 per cent who were officially recorded as juvenile offenders. The decline of 76.6 per cent in the number of recorded juvenile offenders in Northamptonshire (from 575 to 140) was entirely illusory.

The main justification for informal processing is that it will have more desirable effects on the future offending career than formal processing (convictions or cautions). There is indeed some evidence, based on self-reports, that offending increases after a first conviction, in comparison with no formal action (Farrington 1977). However, there is also the danger that apprehension followed by informal processing may have a lower deterrent effect on other potential offenders than apprehension followed by formal processing, as the retailers themselves suggested. From a research point of view, a disadvantage of informal processing is that it is impossible to use official records of later offending to investigate the relative effects of different ways of dealing with apprehended offenders.

Nearly all of the retailers who participated in this research wanted to have feedback from the police about what happened to apprehended shoplifters reported to the police. It would be in the interests of the retail sector for them to set up and maintain a national information system on shoplifting that included data on the number of apprehended offenders, the number reported to the police, and what happened to them. Such a system might also serve to meet criticisms long voiced by retailers (Home Office 1986) that some persistent shoplifters operate across a wide range of different police divisions, picking up numerous cautions as 'first-time' offenders, because there is no national record of cautions. (The Home Office is planning that a new National Criminal Records System would include formal cautions.)

This research revealed that few even of these large retail chains maintained shoplifting data for five years or more, which strongly suggests that data collection and analysis are very rarely as advanced as recommended in Home Office publications on retail crime prevention through crime analysis (Ekblom 1986; Burrows 1988). A national information system on shoplifting would provide more reliable data about trends over time and could be used in evaluating the effects of security measures used by stores and of methods used by the police and courts in dealing with shoplifters.

Retailers' concerns about the level of shop theft have been growing, and they are exerting increasing pressure on the Home Office to do something about it (Kay 1992). The need to find new, and effective, approaches is already spawning some novel solutions. Some British retailers, for example, are acting against persistent offenders by issuing notices excluding them from stores and telling them that they will be trespassing if they enter (Sage 1992). This gives retailers the ability to charge repeat offenders with burglary rather than theft, and hence increases the likelihood of conviction.

In the USA, thirty-two of the fifty states have recently passed laws giving retailers the power to extract payments and fines from apprehended shoplifters who admit their guilt and do not desire any involvement by the police or the courts (Strom 1991). Major US store chains such as Woolworths have claimed that their stock shrinkage figures have declined markedly since these measures have been introduced. As more apprehended shoplifters are dealt with informally by the police, British retailers may wish to consider whether they (rather than the police, courts, and Crown Prosecution Service) should have the primary responsibility for warning and punishing shoplifters, for recovering the cost of stolen merchandise, and for keeping records of the apprehension and processing of shoplifters.

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