Fact sheet: Providing information and assistance to retailers to prevent retail theft

What does this strategy involve?

This involves providing information to retailers in your local area about the strategies they can use to prevent retail theft. This will help them to implement access control measures and awareness campaigns, which the best available evidence suggests are effective strategies in reducing ‘stealing from retail store’ offences.¹

Access control refers to interventions that can be implemented in retail stores to make it more difficult for offenders to gain access to desirable merchandise or to remove stolen merchandise from the premises. Common access control measures include:

- electronic article surveillance (EAS) tags and/or ink tags
- lockable cabinets
- ‘keeper’ boxes, and
- security guards.

Access control measures can be implemented in retail stores experiencing high rates of stealing offences. They can be implemented store-wide or in areas within a store that are at higher risk. They can also be targeted at specific merchandise identified through internal audits and inventory recording systems as being particularly prone to theft (‘hot’ merchandise). Determining the most appropriate type of access control measure will depend upon what local information identifies as the major security weaknesses in a store or shopping precinct, the types of merchandise being stolen and whether the intervention aims to prevent stealing offences committed by store employees or customers.

Access control measures can be supported by an awareness campaign that provides potential offenders with information about the security mechanisms being used in the store. This information is typically communicated through large posters placed throughout the store (to prevent stealing by customers), or by retail management to staff through induction or loss prevention training, regular meetings or leaflets (to prevent stealing by employees).

¹ The development of these strategies has been informed by a combination of the best available evidence, a strong theoretical crime prevention framework and practitioner experience. While there is strong evidence underpinning many of the strategies, there is clearly significant scope to improve the evidence base by increasing the amount of crime prevention activities that are rigorously evaluated. In some cases, the evidence around the strategies is not particularly recent, which reflects the lack of recent evaluation activity. Some of the case studies used to illustrate these strategies therefore are also not recent. In other cases, the evidence around the strategies is not as strong as for others and the strategies therefore draw more heavily from theory and practice.
Awareness campaigns can also involve strategies that increase a potential offender’s perceived risk of detection through more subtle measures. For example, in one strategy, retail management placed red markers on products and used posters placed throughout the store to inform customers that these products were known to be particularly attractive to shoplifters. Awareness campaigns can also be used to raise awareness of appropriate and inappropriate customer behaviour through the use of incentives.

Local government can provide assistance by distributing material or holding seminars for retailers with information and education on access control and awareness campaigns. They can also assist through developing signage to be displayed in the stores, or by undertaking or coordinating targeted security audits to identify particular risks or weaknesses.

**How does the strategy work?**

Some access control measures (e.g. lockable cabinets) limit the access potential offenders have to merchandise that internal audits and inventory record systems have identified as being particularly attractive to shoplifters. Other access control measures (e.g. security guards and EAS tags) can also prevent offenders from leaving the store premises once they have taken the targeted merchandise. Both types of access control measures lead to an increase in the risk and effort an offender associates with the commission of an offence, as there is a greater risk they may be identified or apprehended.

Awareness campaigns provide information to potential offenders to raise their awareness of measures that are being used in a store to prevent stealing from retail store offences. This information can also lead to an increase in the risk an offender associates with the commission of an offence. Awareness campaigns can also encourage individuals (potential victims or individuals who provide opportunities for retail theft to occur through their inactions or actions) to consider the implications of their actions and discourage behaviour (e.g. not responding to EAS gate alarms) that create opportunities for retail theft to occur.

**What does the evidence say?**

A number of studies have shown that strategies involving access control measures and an awareness campaign can be effective in reducing ‘steal from retail store’ offending. In two studies that demonstrated evidence of effectiveness, access control measures and an awareness campaign were delivered together as part of a multifaceted strategy. Access control measures were also effective in reducing ‘steal from retail store’ offences when delivered in isolation or with other interventions (not including awareness campaigns). Similarly, four of the reviewed studies that demonstrated evidence of effectiveness involved an awareness campaign as the sole intervention. This suggests that awareness campaigns are not only effective when implemented alongside other strategies (particularly access control measures), but may also be effective when delivered in isolation.

While most of the reviewed strategies were not the subject of a long-term evaluation, one program that involved access control measures delivered in isolation was evaluated over a five-year period. The evaluation suggested that the initial decrease in offending rates deteriorated slightly in the longer term. Further, although none of the evaluations identified a displacement of crime effect, in one of the strategies (also involving access control measures delivered in isolation), theft of merchandise not targeted by the intervention decreased. This suggests that the strategy had a diffusion of benefit effect.
Where will the strategy work best?

Effective strategies targeted retail stores that were identified as having a problem with stealing from retail store offences. A number of the reviewed strategies were implemented in sites where other interventions (e.g. security guard patrols) were piloted but had failed to have a significant impact on offending rates.

Access control measures are best implemented in retail stores where the staff and management are enthusiastic about the changes. This is particularly important as the evidence suggests that the effectiveness of access control measures can deteriorate over time.

Awareness campaigns and access control measures are most effective when they are appropriately targeted at the offender group that local information suggests is responsible for the majority of ‘steal from retail store’ offences occurring in the retail store. In particular, it is important to know whether employees or customers are responsible for the majority of offences.

What will you need to implement this strategy?

The accompanying handbook provides more detailed information on how to implement this strategy, but briefly:

A good understanding of your local problem

A review of prevention initiatives showed that effective strategies were targeted at individual retail stores or chains with high rates of recorded ‘steal from retail store’ offences. Previous research has identified a number of situational risk factors for shoplifting, including the presence of desirable and portable merchandise, liberal store return policies, floor plans that provide opportunities for offenders to conceal items or avoid detection, unsecured merchandise and the absence of perimeter security (e.g. security guards or EAS gates).

You will need a thorough understanding of the types of merchandise being targeted by offenders, hot spots for offending (such as blind spots within stores or particular stores within a shopping precinct) and information about the characteristics of these offences. This involves a thorough and systematic analysis of available data on the prevalence and characteristics of ‘steal from retail store’ offences, their causes and risk factors. This can include recorded crime data, but more useful information may be available from other sources, including business owners, management and staff, or even customers. Store inventories may help to identify missing stock and formal or informal reports of shoplifting incidents observed and reported by people working in the store, or customers, may provide more in-depth information about the offences. While it may be difficult to determine, it is particularly important to have an understanding of whether employees or customers are responsible for the offences that are being committed. Once you have determined the key risk factors for shoplifting offences, you can then design and tailor an appropriate and effective prevention strategy.
Stakeholder commitment and engagement

The maintenance of a strategy involving access control and an awareness campaign will ultimately be the responsibility of the store’s management and employees. Therefore, it is vital that they are enthusiastic and committed to the program from the outset. This can be facilitated through involving them in the development of the strategy and providing them with training in new security measures and crime prevention more generally. Most importantly, it should be reinforced to staff that they still have a vital role to play in preventing shoplifting, despite the presence of access control measures.

CASE STUDY 1: The use of EAS for offences committed by retail staff

This strategy was implemented in four stores in a retail chain that was experiencing high rates of stealing offences. The stores were located in relatively ‘rough’ areas and customer aggression towards staff was common. Management had previously implemented EAS and ink tags in a number of the stores, but this had proved to be ineffective in reducing offending rates. The use of EAS tagging was increased to cover 90 per cent of the four stores’ stock and detection gates were installed at every store entrance and exit. Posters advertising the EAS system were placed in highly visible locations throughout the store and a security guard was hired to monitor the store exit, respond to EAS gate alarms and monitor suspicious customer activity.

An evaluation of the scheme found that while three of the stores achieved a 22 per cent (and higher) reduction in stealing offences, one store only reported only a slight decrease (five per cent). The evaluators attributed the failure of the strategy in this store to the program being targeted at preventing offences committed by customers, when it was actually store employees who were the main perpetrators. This suggests that access control measures such as EAS gates may not be effective in reducing thefts facilitated or perpetrated by staff.

CASE STUDY 2: The use of EAS tagging in the United Kingdom

This strategy was implemented in two stores that were experiencing very high rates of ‘stealing from retail store’ offences, with more than 10 per cent of stock being stolen every year. The strategy involved EAS tagging all of the merchandise in two stores – one located in Wolverhampton the other in Altrincham – and installing security gates on all store exits and entrances. Store employees were also provided with training on how to respond to EAS gate alarms. Notably, the Wolverhampton store employees were sceptical of the new program and showed a reluctance to respond to EAS gate alarms. By comparison, the Altrincham store employees were enthusiastic about the strategy and vigilant in responding to EAS alarms. An evaluation of the strategy found that although both stores experienced an initial decrease in ‘steal from retail store’ offending rates, further follow-up revealed that Altrincham’s shoplifting rates had continued to decline, while the Wolverhampton store experienced an increase in offending.

CASE STUDY 3: The use of ‘keeper’ boxes in the United States

This strategy was implemented in 10 stores belonging to a major US supermarket chain that was experiencing high levels of ‘stealing from retail store’ offences. Internal inventory records identified two premium brand razorblade replacement packs as being particularly prone to theft. The intervention consisted of storing all of the two razorblade replacement packs in clear lockable boxes (‘keeper’ boxes) that could only be opened by store employees working at the cash registers. This strategy appeared to be very effective, with theft of the two products across the 10 stores decreasing by almost 50 per cent during the 13-week post-intervention period.
Endnotes


Further reading

For further reading in this area, refer to the accompanying handbook and literature review.

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