

DEALING WITH THE ADOLESCENT SHOP LIFTER



*(Miss Margaret Allison, BSW)

While shop stealing causes multi-million dollar losses for Australian retailers every year, the number of juveniles who appear in the Brisbane Children's Court is very low. Statistics of the Department of Children's Services for the year ending 30 June 1978 indicated that shoplifting represented only 2.4% of the total number of offences for which children were charged during that period. By comparison, other stealing offences represented 22.5%; breaking and entering offences 22.2% and unlawfully using a motor vehicle 19.9%. A further survey of all juvenile court appearances in the Brisbane metropolitan and Ipswich areas during October 1979 showed that only four children appeared on such charges during this period.

Recognised as a major form of anti-social behaviour of adolescents. (Belson's¹ comprehensive study of juvenile theft reveals that some 70% of boys in the sample had stolen from shops), there are nevertheless, very few children who are charged and brought to court for shopstealing. There are a number of reasons for this, probably the most significant being that most children are never apprehended in relation to their stealing activities. A 1977 survey conducted in Melbourne² among people of both sexes between the ages of 10-20 years indicated that just less than 70% of these people in the sample who admitted that they had shoplifted had never been apprehended.

If a child is caught stealing articles or appearing to deliberately leave a store without paying, the store personnel then have the discretion to decide whether or not to involve the police. This decision also influences the number of adolescents who eventually face a court. A 1978³ American study suggests that three main factors influence such a decision — the retail value of the goods stolen; the age of the suspect, and the race of the suspect, in order of importance. In this study, significantly fewer of those under 18 years apprehended in a store were referred to police.

The other major factor is the policy of Queensland Police to caution children instead of charging them on the first occasion they are apprehended, and to use their discretion in charging others. Such a child may be taken back to the police station on apprehension and their parents contacted, or an appointment made for the parents and child to present themselves to a police station at a later time for a formal caution to be administered.

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Thus the child who finally presents at court is likely to be either a persistent offender, or has stolen an article or articles of significant retail value. In contrast to the majority of adult shoplifters, most adolescents tend to shoplift in groups of two or more. Gibben and Prince's⁴ 1962 British study, though somewhat dated in many respects, indicated that only 16% of the adolescents in the sample who had admitted shoplifting, had done so alone. Too much has been written about the concept and effects of peer pressure among adolescents for it to need to be re-stated at the main influence on group offending. There is generally little pathological significance in group shoplifting, though this activity may be associated with concerning group activities, for example the stealing of glue for the purpose of sniffing it. However, many adolescents who steal from shops while spurred on by group bravado, would not consider doing so alone, as they perceive both the risks of apprehension and the possible consequences as being greater. As one adolescent boy expressed it "At least if they catch you and your mates, you're all in it together. But if you're by yourself, your parents and that think you're real bad because none of your mates or anyone was doing it with you and if you're in court you can't say to the judge that you was just going along with your mates or nothing. They think you're more bad."

As it is planned to devote considerably more discussion to the lone offender, it should be emphasized that it is not intended to make light of the undoubtedly enormous retail losses caused by the "gang" offenders and their activities — some of which are undoubtedly highly organised and competent criminal operations — but rather to consider an area which is less well documented and probably more open to subjective interpretation.

Dealing with adolescents who steal from shops by themselves, with no apparent physical or emotional peer support, is a far more complex issue. It is considered that this group of offenders can be roughly divided into two main categories — the impulsive or needy child, and the distressed or disturbed child.

It is not believed that the child who steals an article on impulse, is likely to continue to offend persistently. The articles or articles stolen — which are most likely to be clothes, books, jewellery or toys⁵ — are usually related to the child's perceived needs. It cannot be over-emphasized how much the same advertising machinery that promotes the sale of goods to young people also subtly convinces them of the necessity of possessing these items to enhance desirable personal characteristics. Once the adolescent, therefore, sees himself as needing these items, it is all too easy for him to justify to himself the act of taking the article. A child in this situation is likely to respond with a comment similar to the effect of wanting or needing the article, on apprehension. In this impulsive type of theft, the child generally is aware that he is committing an unlawful act, but the effect of the intense feeling of needing the desired article is such that it temporarily blocks the moral restraints which would normally prevent the occurrence of such an action. Once apprehended, however, a child in this position will often be shocked at his own behaviour, yet be unable to articulate why he stole, hence the inadequacy of the often given statement mentioned above. Most children do not recognize the impact of sophisticated advert-

ising on them, and it would probably be unfair to persons in authority dealing with them to expect them to have this insight.

As opposed to the child who steals because of a perceived need, there will always be children who steal because of actual need, small though the proportion of total offenders may be. It is extremely difficult for persons in authority to detect this motive, as many children in this situation would rather be perceived as deliberately flouting the law for its own sake than admit their or their family's need. Ignorance of agencies designed to assist people who have no means is usually a major factor in this type of theft, and has been the case with every child I have interviewed who has been considered to have committed a theft of this nature. The articles taken by these children have included foodstuffs, clothing, and blankets. It is felt that people investigating thefts of articles such as these should at least be aware that need may be a contributing factor.

The child who steals bizarre or inappropriate items, or who obviously has sufficient means to purchase the goods stolen, or who steals in such an obviously clumsy way that it is clear that it is his intention to be caught requires considerably closer investigation. Much literature is available on the motivations of offenders such as these. Brady and Mitchell's Melbourne study⁶ quotes from a 1955 American study who concluded that emotionally disturbed persons who shoplifted did so for four major reasons —

1. As a symbolic sexual gratification;
2. As a means of satisfying an unconscious need for humiliation and punishment;
3. To secure acceptance and status;
4. To revenge themselves against parents etc. by disgracing them.

In this respect, the motivation of adolescents who shoplift is quite similar to that of adolescents involved in other areas of criminal activity. Gibben and Prince state that "like other juvenile offences, shoplifting in the maladjusted can be an expression of anxiety and guilt about matters which are unconscious. The depressive background of shoplifting, both in adults and juveniles, is striking".⁷

Gibben and Prince⁸ further clearly outline what they consider to be three major types of motivation in the shoplifting of disturbed adolescents, one or all of which may present in the child. These shall be given in full, with accompanying case illustrations from personal experience.

- (1) "The crime is an act of defiance against restrictive or unsympathetic parents, and by publicly shaming them, punishes them for their lack of understanding."

Case illustration: Joanne, aged 15, the older of two children in a middle class family. Her father is an insurance salesman, and her mother does casual work for charitable organisations on a voluntary basis. Joanne is in 10th grade at a local high school and has an above average academic record. Over the past year, she has been apprehended on three occasions for shoplifting, the last of which resulted in a court appearance. All thefts were committed alone, and all the items taken on each occasion were for school e.g. pens, exercise books. The most valuable item taken was a school diary worth \$7.99. On two occasions, Joanne had sufficient money in her possession to pay for the items stolen.

After her court appearance, I saw Joanne on a number of occasions. She presented as a physically immature anxious girl who could offer no explanation for her behaviour. During interviews, the only signs of animation show were when the family was being discussed. Joanne claimed that she had no privacy at home, was unable to negotiate with her parents to allow her to go out more than one afternoon every week, and that her parents were "going to make her continue at school

and eventually commence University study".

Joanne's parents did express that "they wanted the best for her" and that they expected her to be "better than they were". It became so apparent that Joanne was a child who was angry at her parents' unyieldingly high academic expectations of her, and frustrated at her inability to influence her home situation in the slightest degree. The stealing of the school utensils was an expression both of her own anxiety about school, and her desire to defy her parents in a way that would hurt them most.

- (2) "It is an appeal for help and may lead to removal from home or some improvement in circumstances".

Case illustration: Sue, aged 15, is a child known to the Department of Children's Services, with no family support. At the time of apprehension, she was residing in a girl's hostel. She has previously spent a considerable period in institutional care. She was six weeks pregnant, and had not seen the father of the child for some time.

She was apprehended in a chain store, after stealing a packet of lollies worth 76 cents. When questioned, Sue claimed she stole them because she was hungry, but had money on her to pay for the goods. She asked if she could be charged, and placed back in the institution where she had resided previously until the court appearance. Upon investigation, it became apparent that Sue was unhappy in her present placement, confused about her recently discovered pregnancy, and undertook the clumsy shoplifting attempt in order to give voice to her plight.

- (3) "It is preceded by a period during which the offender has felt guilty of provoking her parents, has felt depressed and worthless, no better than the sort of people who do this, so that she might as well do it too".

Case illustration: Mark, aged 14, was a small immature boy from deprived family background, who had been "in Care" since the age of 10, when he was removed from home because of parental neglect. Mark had been living in several foster placements since that time, two of which had broken down because of Mark's withdrawn state.

Mark's foster mother, annoyed by his lack of response to a request, berated him soundly for his behaviour, at the same time making indirect references to the worthlessness of his real family for not teaching him any better. Terrified that he would again be moved because of what he perceived as his badness, Mark rode his bicycle to a shopping centre, and began shoplifting articles he could have no use for e.g. stationery, colouring pencils.

When first apprehended, he was obviously distressed but could not offer any explanation for his theft of the articles. It was only when the foster mother was called in that she shed some light on the events preceding this behaviour. Mark was not charged with this offence.

A number of factors may be seen to affect incidents of adolescent theft from shops. While only several of these can be mentioned, there are many others too complex to discuss adequately within this paper e.g. the increasing tendency of retailers to display their goods in a self-service way.

Truancy is one of the most important factors. Belsion's⁹ report indicates that truancy plays a major role in children developing both opportunities and associations likely to result in stealing episodes. While poor school performance, academically and socially, is often associated with truancy, many children who do not demonstrate any of these difficulties are also absent from school without excuse because of the excitement of such rule-breaking. It may well be arguable that in some cases, this behaviour leads to acceptance of further rule-breaking activities as being legitimate.

Inadequacy of leisure facilities for youth, particularly

those under the age of 18, is also significant, particularly in outer suburban areas. This has meant that the local shopping complex performs the unintended function of youth drop-in and free entertainment centre, for many young people. For children without income, for those whose parents would not allow them to go to the pictures or skating rink on their own, but will allow them to hang around the local shopping centre without a qualm, and for those whose suburbs may provide them with no more than a pinball machine in the local fish and chips shop, the shopping centre can become an exciting alternative place to "hang round".

A further factor which should be briefly mentioned is the financial situation of many young people who are either ineligible for Social Security Benefits, or who have given up their benefits claim, too baffled by the complexities for the system to be bothered pursuing the issue. The current eligibility criteria for benefits means that only in exceptional circumstances, can a child apply for payment before the age of 16. Some children can have left school and be unemployed for up to a year without being eligible for payment. Many of the children seen by Departmental workers have the added handicap of having families who are unable or unwilling to assist in their support. It is considered that the criteria on which special applications be considered by the Department of Social Security be broadened to include children under the age of 16, who genuinely have no other means of support.

Finally, some comment should be made on practical programmes designed to combat shop-lifting. One programme which has been severely criticized is the Juvenile Shoplifters Reporting Scheme,¹⁰ started in New South Wales in 1966, which while recognizing the futility of simply reprimanding a child and sending him away again put children in situations of double jeopardy by "unofficially" recording offences not proven against them. It was arranged that children apprehended in stores by shop detectives would have their names given to police to keep in unofficial records. If a child's name was already listed, he would be handed over to police immediately. If it was not listed, his particulars would then be recorded. Problems arose when the official and unofficial lists appeared to mesh, which means that information could be given about offences allegedly committed by a child some time ago, now seeking a job. One idea that had some credence is a programme implemented in Place County, California, by the Probation Department.¹¹ Two main thrusts were envisaged:

1. to make juveniles and their parents more aware of the legal and financial consequences of the commission of a shoplifting offence;
2. to educate store owners and retailers how the juvenile court operates, and what alternatives may be open to them when a child is caught stealing.

To this end, the assistance of young people parents, local high schools, police, retailers and members of the public was sought. A pamphlet was produced, spelling out the legal consequences of shoplifting. A slide show depicting the commission of an offence and the apprehension of an offender was prepared, and used in conjunction with speaking engagements by both police and probation staff in the local area.

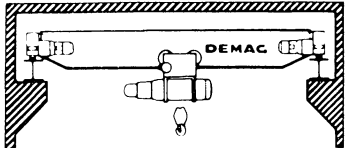
This appears to be one of the most realistic programmes undertaken as it focuses on explanations of why the offence is unlawful and its consequences. Testing done with young people in Melbourne in 1976¹² demonstrates that there are many misconceptions about the law and its application in shoplifting situations. Surely any attempts at preventative education should be welcomed. As one researcher noted "The only education that many children get in this area is when they are caught engaging in some misdemeanour . . . and are caught by somebody in authority. They have had no history

of preparation for considering the lawful strategies for meeting such temptations, nor have there been any explanations for the very sound reasons that underpin the prohibitions themselves".¹³

FOOTNOTES

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