



Retail Theft in Western Australia

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Few studies of retail crime have been conducted in Australia. To some extent this reflects a certain acceptance within the retail industry that stealing is an unavoidable and inevitable part of doing business with the public. According to the most recent Australian survey of small business victimisation, the Small Business Crime Survey conducted in 1999, while 9 out of 10 completed burglaries and robberies were reported to police, only 1 in 17 incidents of employee theft, 1 in 5 incidents of shoplifting and 1 in 4 incidents of cheque/credit card fraud were reported to police (Taylor, 2002). It was also found that completed crimes were more likely to be reported to police than attempted crimes. These trends were supported by a more recent Queensland study of retail theft (Taylor and Charlton, 2005) that found fewer than 14% of incidents of retail theft were reported to the police.

The reported stealing offences described in this bulletin are not presented as an accurate reflection of the 'true' extent of retail theft in the community. Rather, the data are a snapshot of the amount of retail theft that comes to the attention of the police. Previous research findings indicate that property crimes that become known to the police tend to be: (a) more serious offences, (b) the product of policing activity and/or insurance claim obligations, (c) reported by victims who have high expectations of the police, and/or (d) reported by victims who have experienced previous satisfaction with police responses to their reports.

Overview of Reported Stealing Offences

In the 12-month period from July 2004 to June 2005, almost 19,000 retail-related stealing offences were reported to and recorded by WA Police.¹ Stealing offences overall represent approximately 30% of all crimes reported to police, and retail theft accounted for roughly 26% of all reported stealing. Associated with these retail-based offences were over 198,000 items of stolen property, with a total value of approximately 5.7 million dollars. Three-quarters of all reported business-related stealing offences occurred in the Perth metropolitan area.

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Disclaimer: The findings and opinions expressed in this report are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the policies or views of the government departments who supported the research.

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What is Stolen in Retail Thefts?

The Top 10 categories of goods stolen from retail outlets (by quantity and value) are displayed in Table 1. Overall, thefts from retail premises show a distinct pattern - although just over one-quarter (26%) of the total quantity of stolen goods is taken from these premises, these items represent only 12% of the total value of stolen goods. Some examples of this include the following:

- Jewellery stolen from retail outlets account for almost half the total amount of jewellery stolen, however, these items comprise only 20% of the total value of stolen jewellery.
- Cash stolen from retail outlets accounts for about half of the total quantity of cash stolen yet makes up only 15% of the total value of cash which is reported as stolen. Cash appears to be stolen more frequently from retail outlets than from any other place; however these retail-based offences tend to involve smaller quantities of money. It must be noted that given

variation in recording quantity and value for cash these results must be interpreted carefully.²

- Less than 20% of computer theft occurs from retail outlets. Moreover, computer items stolen from retail outlets tend to be of lesser value than those stolen from homes and offices.

Overall, the data show that *stealing offences reported by retail outlets generally comprise lower-value items than those offences reported by personal victims*. A number of factors may explain this relationship. For instance, it may be that higher levels of surveillance and security measures at retail outlets make more valuable goods harder to access and steal. Variations in reporting behaviour may also be influenced by insurance policy/premium implications making personal victims of stealing offences less likely to report more minor offences.

Who is Caught Stealing From Retail Outlets?

The characteristics for offenders processed by the police for stealing in the 2004 financial year are displayed in Table 2³. Retail outlets were the most common places from which all types of offenders stole, irrespective of the demographic characteristics of the offender with 62% of offenders apprehended for retail theft. However, it was found that (a) female offenders were more likely than male offenders to be processed for stealing from shops; (b) retail premises were the most common location of theft amongst Indigenous offenders; and (c) non-Indigenous juveniles were more likely to be processed for stealing from retail outlets than their Indigenous counterparts⁴.

Stealing offences occurring in retail premises were the most likely to result in the apprehension or 'processing' of an offender. Offenders were identified and processed in 45% of all reported shop thefts, 35% of shopping centre thefts and 29% of pharmacy thefts.

Category of Goods	Qty	% Qty
Cash	116,188	58.6%
Fuel/Oil	16,554	8.4%
Cards	11,338	5.7%
Personal	10,223	5.2%
Food/Drink/Cigs	8,667	4.4%
Household	7,135	3.6%
Jewellery/Precious	6,921	3.5%
Office/Computer	5,855	3.0%
Clothing/Footwear	4,261	2.1%
Medical/Health	2,363	1.2%

Table 1a. Top 10 types of goods stolen from retail outlets by quantity

Category of Goods	Value	% Value
Household	\$1,580,803	27.5%
Cash	\$963,804	16.8%
Jewellery/Precious	\$532,283	9.3%
Office/Computer	\$401,176	7.0%
Phone/Communication	\$383,819	6.7%
Personal	\$260,456	4.5%
Clothing/Footwear	\$246,683	4.3%
Fuel/Oil	\$245,823	4.3%
Vehicle Parts/Access	\$205,219	3.6%
Bicycle	\$177,960	3.1%

Table 1b. Top 10 types of goods stolen from retail outlets by value

Offender Demographics		
Sex:	Male	44.0%
	Female	43.8%
	Unknown	12.2%
Indigenous Status:	Indigenous	9.1%
	Non-Indigenous	14.1%
	Unknown	76.8%
Age-Status:	Juvenile	45.5%
	Adult	53.1%
	Unknown	1.3%
Age:	Mean	23.4 yrs
	Median	19.0 yrs

Table 2. Demographic characteristics of processed offenders.

These high rates most likely reflect the presence and operation of in-house security measures where private security personnel independently detect and deal with stealing offences before handing over to police.

Regional Differences in Retail Theft

As can be seen from Table 3, the majority (76%) of stealing offences reported to police by businesses were located in the Perth metropolitan area. Outside the metropolitan area, Peel (5%) and the South-West (5%) accounted for the greatest other percentages of reported stealing offences. Overall, across WA, personal victimisation incidents outnumbered offences committed against businesses by a factor of 2.3. Overall, stealing from retail outlets or shops accounted for 26% of stealing offences.

Implications for Crime Prevention

One of the most significant findings to emerge from the study is that cash is by far the most attractive item stolen by offenders. Cash is frequently stolen by *all types* of offenders and from *all types* of locations. That money is a desirable item to steal is hardly surprising, however, that it is being stolen from *all types* of places, especially retail premises, suggests that more could be done to improve the security and handling of cash, both at a personal level and in a business/retail sense. From the evidence, it appears that the theft of cash at retail premises may be committed by staff or by persons using non-confrontational or indirect methods of gaining access to cash.

This research indicates that the most successful strategies to improve security and/or handling of cash include: (a) increased security monitoring at cash registers (e.g., through CCTV technology), (b) improved cash handling procedures, and (c) adopting more vigorous screening (i.e., criminal record) checks on new staff.

The 'inverse' relationship between the value and volume of property stolen from retail premises – high-volume but of low-value – suggests a need for targeting both high value and high volume retail theft to achieve a balanced crime reduction policy. Successfully implemented initiatives aimed at high-volume theft offences (e.g., the stealing of fuel/oil from service stations)

could bring about sizeable and highly visible reductions in the incidence of these offences.

Region	Reported Offences	
	N	%
Gascoyne	102	.5%
Goldfields-Esperance	793	3.6%
Great Southern	345	1.6%
Kimberly	409	1.8%
Mid West	565	2.5%
Peel	1,126	5.1%
Perth	16,892	76.1%
Pilbara	427	1.9%
South West	1,110	5.0%
Wheatbelt	414	1.9%
WA State Total	22,183	100.0%

Table 3. Reported stealing offences at businesses by region in WA.

References

- Australian Bureau of Statistics (2003). *Crime and Safety - Australia 2002, Cat. No. 4509.0*. Canberra: Australian Bureau of Statistics.
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¹ Stealing offences **not** included in the study were those relating to the theft or unlawful use of motor vehicles (although theft from motor vehicles and the theft of vehicle parts and accessories were included). Also excluded were stealing offences committed as part of either a burglary or robbery and stealing offences that involve the use of deception (i.e., fraud offences). This definition of stealing offences was developed in collaboration with the OCP.

The number of reported offences for a period (e.g., Year) comprises all offences reported during that period and may include offences committed during earlier periods. Therefore the reporting of historical offences will inflate the number of reported offences for a period. Offence classifications may also alter between periods due to changes in legislation or administrative recording practises.

² The WA Police advised that there may be some inconsistency in the manner in which 'quantities' of cash are recorded by police in the IMS system. For example, in some instances, the stealing of, say, \$200 has been recorded as 'quantity = 200 × amount = \$1', while in other instances, the data has been entered as 'quantity = 1 × amount = \$200'. However, in all instances, the total *value* of the cash stolen is the same (e.g., \$200). Some caution should therefore be exercised in the interpretation of data relating to *quantities* of cash stolen.

³ Processed persons data refers to persons who have either been arrested, summoned, formally cautioned or referred to a Juvenile Justice Team program. It does not represent total clearances as clearance figures include offenders subject to statute bar, diplomatic immunity and other related processes.

⁴ Aboriginality/Ethnicity is derived from the Western Australia Police Service Identity Code field for Ethnic Appearance. The field is completed on the basis of the attending police officer's subjective assessment of the person's appearance, and is recorded for operational purposes only. Care should be exercised in the interpretation of these statistics, as subjective assessment means it is possible that a person attributed to a particular group does not belong to that group.

This bulletin highlights aspects of the findings from research conducted by the Crime Research Centre at The University of Western Australia and funded by the WA Office of Crime Prevention (OCP). This research examined stealing, burglary, and stolen goods markets in WA and was designed to assist in the development of appropriate policy and policing responses and to complement the joint OCP/WA Police initiatives, the State Burglary Reduction Taskforce and the development of a State Stolen Goods and Stealing Strategy. Data for the project was supplied by WA Police, having been extracted from the Incident Management System (IMS). The data presented here relates to the 12-month period from 1 July 2004 to 30 June 2005.

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