

Retail Theft

As a professional problem solver I am always searching for abstract and new ways to create solutions to ongoing issues. The issue of shoplifting among adolescents was brought to my attention by the Florida Youth Court. Retail theft is the most common crime in adolescents from elementary to high school. Besides the most common crime this is a business's most negative consumer behavior, inevitably raises the costs of all the items in the store, ultimately affecting those patrons who do not steal.

The Florida Youth Court conducted a study of 12,000 Florida adolescents in 2006. The study explored the nature of first crimes committed. Their study focused on gender, location, race, and age. The study determined that most juvenile repeat offenders processed in this youth court were white males, and the most common first offenses were retail theft, with possession of marijuana, assault, possession of paraphernalia, and petit theft a far second. The study also found that females most frequently committed retail theft, and at higher rates than males. Both white males and females felt they were less likely to be caught because they were not African American or Latino, two commonly profiled races by retail security.

Typically on the surface the punishment for first time retail theft is usually seems minimal facing either trespassing warrants or community service, and parents usually being charged to pay for the items that were stolen and a \$200 fine. But the most damaging penalty is the police record that rarely acts as an immediate deterrent, but does become a permanent record that could prevent future opportunities to be successful as an adult. However, at the age of 14 protecting your future seems far less relevant when faced with an immediate need or want exasperated by the persuasion of peers. Especially to an adolescent who is not considering how a seemingly victimless act could make their own family the victims.

So "what's the crime?"

Retail theft sets in motion a pattern of devious behaviors. Whether an adolescent repeats the retail theft or not, they have stolen, most likely lied, and therefore started a string of events that increase the chances of committing other anti-social activities. Retail theft may be one beginning to an individual's acceptance of manipulative strategies, and a lifetime of other anti-social behaviors. Promoting thinking that is more appropriate would create understanding of the current and future consequences, including the financial burdens, emotional turmoil, and disruption to the family these criminal acts cause.

Shrinking budgets limit the ability for schools to continue police anti-shoplifting programs for adolescents. However, the Juvenile Court felt the need for this was essential, and appealed to me for help by create interactive technology to face this dilemma through prevention instead of punishment.

I started by taking an opportunity to attend some of the actual programs and meet some of the officers. What I immediately noticed were that even the most animated officers with the best presentations left the children in the classes unengaged, uninterested, and therefore not truly getting the full potential of the program. The class listened and answered questions, but it was rare that they asked questions, or talked about their personal feelings in regards to retail theft. I feel the lack of interaction was due to the lack of realistic discussions. These programs main emphasis were on the penalties with prevention being based on deterrence.

My immediate action was putting together a focus group of 700 adolescents. I also reviewed 200 case histories, and then interviewed 87 families whose children had been convicted of retail theft through out the state of Florida. These studies and interviews were the base in creating the curriculum tools that use interactive presentations to introduce you to the most common venues for youth to give in to temptations toward attaining what may otherwise be unattainable material possessions, accompanied by eight real life scenarios in which an adolescent commits retail theft. You then meet the adolescents, and observe why and how they committed their crimes.

You also learn the penalties they received, but unlike any other deterrent to retail theft and in the privacy of a computer. This tool also challenges the "adolescent user" to analyze the reasons why the crime was committed, and questions whether they sympathize with the motivation of the person responsible for the theft. An innocent challenge, "Do you understand why the act was committed?" presents a natural opening for a dialogue and discussion.

My long-term goal for this presentation went beyond preventing the act of retail theft. It addresses the penalties of being caught by in store security as a deterrent. However, this tool also outlines the negative complications to a family, while addressing how others think and feel, therefore alerting an adolescent to more ethical thinking about the consequences to their family and others, while helping define their own emotional and psychological makeup. This presentation also warns the adolescent about manipulative strategies their peers who steal may use to lure them into stealing. I hope that these tools will arm an adolescent with enough information to refrain from becoming the manipulator themselves, and to think about consequences before they do something criminal.

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