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AICrime Reduction Matters

Australian Government
Australian Institute of Criminology

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Preventing retail theft

Shoplifting is one of the most common crimes affecting small businesses in Australia. More than one in five businesses that participated in the 1999 Small Business Crime Survey reported being the victim of shoplifting. It has been estimated that shoplifting costs Australian businesses around $810 million annually.

There are several measures that businesses may take to reduce the risk of shoplifting. Store layout and presentation is an important factor in preventing shoplifting. Racks, shelves and other displays should not be cluttered and should be kept tidy where practical. Orderly displays make it clearer when merchandise has been removed.

In addition, they should be of a suitable height so that they do not block sales assistants' views of the store. They should not create barriers, behind which customers can hide. Exits should be visible to staff and merchandise, particularly more expensive or desirable items, should not be placed too close the exits. These items, particularly if easily concealable, should be displayed in locked cabinets. Alternatively, empty boxes or dummy items could be displayed.

Other measures available to reduce theft include electronic and ink tags. Electronic tags must be either removed or deactivated (in the case of stickers) before items leave the store. If this does not happen, alarms at special security 'gates' will be activated when the item is passed through. Ink tags may be combined with electronic tags or stand-alone. Any attempt to remove the tag without the proper tools will result in the article being damaged by ink. It is therefore vital that stores take measures to secure tag-removal devices.

The most important tool in reducing shoplifting is vigilance by staff. Display a sign in a prominent location stating that bag checks may be conducted. Remember that bag checks must be voluntary and that staff must not ever touch the customer or their possessions. Whilst aids such as electronic tags may reduce theft, sales staff should not rely on them to prevent shoplifting. Shoplifters who are determined enough to steal will continue to find new ways to bypass store security systems.

Further reading:

Australian Government Attorney-General's Department 2004. Small business: is your business secure? A crime prevention kit for small business. Available online at http://www.crimeprevention.gov.au

Clarke RV 2003. Shoplifting. *Problem-oriented guides for police problem-specific guides series no. 11* Department of Justice, Washington. Available online at http://www.cops.usdoj.gov

Mayhew P 2003. Counting the costs of crime in Australia. *Trends & issues in crime and criminal justice* no. 247 Australian Institute of Criminology Canberra http://www.aic.gov.au/publications/tandi/tandi247.html

Nelson D & Perrone S 2000. Understanding and controlling retail theft. *Trends & issues in crime and criminal justice* no. 152 Australian Institute of Criminology Canberra http://www.aic.gov.au/publications/tandi/tandi152.html

Taylor N 2002. Reporting of crime against small retail businesses. *Trends & issues in crime and criminal justice* no. 242 Australian Institute of Criminology Canberra http://www.aic.gov.au/publications/tandi/tandi242.html