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Police Shopfronts and Reporting to Police by Retailers

Natalie Taylor and Kate Charlton

As part of their community-oriented policing strategy, the Queensland police service has implemented 49 police beat shopfronts in shopping centres and central business districts across Queensland. While several evaluations of police beats have previously been conducted, findings on the effectiveness of police shopfronts in reducing crime have not been conclusive. It is argued that a reliance on changes in official reporting to police may not be an adequate measure of the impact of police shopfronts on crime. This is because, despite the fact that actual crime levels may remain stable or decrease after installation of the shopfront, reported crime may increase due to retailers being more willing to report crime as a result of police being 'on the spot'. This paper seeks to disentangle these issues. It compares officially reported crime levels (prior to and after implementation), self-reported crime levels experienced by retailers, and perceptions of crime reduction in two shopping centres (one with a police shopfront and one without). Consistent with the above hypothesis, it was found that officially reported crime increased significantly at the centre with a shopfront while the increase at the comparison centre was not significant. The significant increase in reported crime was explained by the fact that retailers at the shopping centre with a police shopfront were more willing to report crimes (in particular shoplifting) than those at the centre without a police beat. Further, while retailers at the shopfront centre perceived that crime at their centre had decreased slightly over the previous four years, retailers at the comparison centre perceived that crime had increased slightly. The findings indicate that the impact of police shopfronts on reducing crime are unlikely to be identified through official data alone.

Toni Makkai
Director

Policing strategies which focus on the local community have become popular in recent years. This shift largely reflects a desire to improve relations between police and the community, and to reduce fear of crime which may result from physical and social distance between police and ordinary citizens (Skogan & Wycoff 1986). Community policing is about proactive police engagement with the community through altering the daily activities of operational police, making them more accessible and visible, and building effective working partnerships with the community. It reflects a recognition that the community is central to the identification of and response to crime and that for policing to work most effectively it requires community support and input. The potential benefits of community policing have been identified by Segrave and Ratcliffe (2004) as follow:

- community-specific advantages:
 - mobilisation and empowerment of communities to identify and respond to concerns;
 - reduction in problems and issues of concern as they are prioritised and addressed;
 - improved local physical and social environment;

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- increases in positive community attitudes towards police; and
- reduced fear of crime;
- police-specific benefits:
 - improved police–community relationship;
 - improved community perception of police ‘legitimacy’; and
 - increase in officer satisfaction with their work;
- shared benefits:
 - decreased potential for police–citizen conflict;
 - reduction in crime rates;
 - better flow of information between the police and the community; and
 - better implementation of crime prevention and crime control activities, as a result of both parties working together toward shared goals.

Examples of community policing include providing specialist police to present to local community groups on issues of concern (for example, how to reduce the risk of burglary) and programs such as Crime Stoppers (which encourage the community to call the police if they have information about a crime which is publicised through the media). Other examples include active involvement with Neighbourhood Watch and Business Watch programs and the implementation of residential police beats and shopfronts. These are mini police establishments set up in selected areas, with officers within those stations given responsibility for a localised area.

Police shopfronts

The concept of beat policing in Queensland followed a recommendation of the Fitzgerald inquiry in 1989 which criticised the nature of Queensland police’s then reactive style of policing. The two types of beat policing which operate in Queensland are neighbourhood police beats (which operate in a residential location) and police shopfronts (which are located in shopping centres or central business districts and provide services to retailers

and shoppers). The shopfront program was launched in December 1992 and aims to provide an effective policing presence in shopping centres and central business districts.

The Queensland police service currently has 49 police beat shopfronts in operation in Queensland. The beats operate with a small number of staff (typically one to four) and are aimed at:

- improving community feelings of personal safety;
- reducing fear of crime;
- raising perceptions that crime will be detected; and
- providing for better communication with police.

Although these objectives do not specifically target retailers, proprietors and staff working within shopping centres are considered a primary client of police beat shopfronts (Queensland police service 2001).

From the perspective of businesses, police beat shopfronts offer a positive solution to a problem commonly complained about by proprietors: a lack of visible policing in their immediate vicinity (Johnston et al. 1994; Mirrlees-Black & Ross 1995).

Crime levels and reporting to police

While several evaluations have been conducted into police beats and shopfronts in Queensland since their commencement (for example, Criminal Justice Commission 1995; Mazerolle et al. 2003; Queensland police service 1993; Queensland police service & Queensland University of Technology 1993), the emphasis has primarily been on investigating the impact of beats on community perceptions of safety and satisfaction with services. Where attention has been given to assessing the impact of police beats on crime levels (in particular crimes against retailers) the findings have not been conclusive. For example, Mazerolle et al. 2003 (using official police data) found no significant differences in the change of reported crime levels over two periods of time between two shopfront and

comparison centres, concluding that ‘there appears to be no persuasive evidence that shopfronts have a positive impact on the rate of reported crime’ (p 83).

One of the underlying assumptions of an increased police presence at a shopping centre is that levels of crime should be reduced after the implementation of a shopfront. This is because installing a police shopfront should presumably result in a higher willingness to report crime (since police are ‘on the spot’) and act as a deterrent to crime (due to increased police presence). So why don’t evaluations find a reduction in crime levels at a centre with a shopfront?

While there are likely to be a range of possible explanations, three in particular are likely to be important in answering this question:

- site selection;
- time periods used for pre- and post-measurement; and
- the type of data analysed.

First, an evaluation of police shopfronts requires comparing a shopping centre which has a shopfront, with a shopping centre without one. The selection of the comparison centre is important in that it needs to be matched as closely as possible to the shopfront centre on relevant characteristics so as to maximise the likelihood that any differences between the two centres on crime levels can be attributed to the presence or absence of a police shopfront. The more closely matched the two centres, the more likely it is that differences in crime between the centres can be argued to be due to the shopfront. Selection of similar centres, however, for purposes of evaluation is often easier said than done. This is because police shopfronts are generally likely to be placed at bigger shopping centres with higher crime problems. Hence, comparison centres of similar size or demographics or crime problems are also more likely to have a shopfront installed. This issue was highlighted in Mazerolle et al. (2003) and is an unavoidable one for researchers attempting to evaluate shopfronts. This is not a reason not to conduct evaluations but it is a caveat

which must be considered when comparing results from different studies.

Second, in addition to comparisons between centres, it is also usual to compare crime data at two points in time for each centre to assess differences. Arguably, to determine whether a shopfront has had an impact on crime levels it is most useful to investigate crime levels over a period prior to implementation of the shopfront and to compare these with a period some time after implementation of the shopfront. Which time periods are used, and when they occur (prior to or after implementation) may impact on findings and hence comparison time periods must also be considered when comparing results from different studies.

Third, which type of data are used as the primary measure of impact will affect what is found. Crime levels are often measured with reference to the number of crimes officially reported to police and, as a considerable literature attests, the number of crimes reported to police does not necessarily reflect the number of crimes that actually occur. In fact, if shopfronts achieve their goals of improving communication and relations between retailers and police, it could well be expected that reports of crime may actually increase at a shopping centre with a shopfront, even if actual levels of crime remain stable.

In order to address the question of whether shopfronts reduce crime it is necessary to untangle the nature of the relationship between the number of crimes which are reported to police shopfronts and the number of crimes which are actually occurring in the vicinity. One means of doing this is to ask retailers themselves how much crime they have experienced and how many of these incidents they reported to police. This information can then be compared with the official data. While this may not be a perfect means of assessing whether shopfronts have an impact on crime reduction (or the degree of impact), the findings should be useful in identifying whether they are consistent with the hypothesis that police shopfronts do in fact impact on crime and that official data on their own cannot answer this question.

Table 1: Demographic data for the police beat and comparison shopping centres

	Centre with police beat shopfront	Centre without police beat shopfront
Centre characteristics		
Number of major retail outlets in centre	5	4
Number of retail outlets in centre	112	97
Complex has security guard(s)	Yes	Yes
Number of burglaries reported to police in 1999–2000	3	3
Number of credit card frauds reported to police in 1999–2000	1	5
Respondent characteristics (% of total)		
Small businesses ^(a)	95.8	97.0
Turnover <\$1,000,000	44.7	47.8
Food retailers	14.5	13.0
Personal/household good retailers	55.3	50.7
Cafes/restaurants	1.3	8.7
Financiers (for example, banks, credit unions)	5.3	10.1
Personal and health services (for example, optometrist, hair and beauty)	14.5	13.0
Other (for example, post office)	4.0	2.9
Total number of businesses in sample	76	69

(a) Definition used consistent with ABS (1999), that is, a business employing fewer than 20 full-time personnel
Source: AIC Police beat shopfronts survey [computer file]; Property Council of Australia Ltd 2002; Queensland police service [unpublished data]

The present study

This paper presents findings from an evaluation conducted at two shopping centres in Queensland: one with a shopfront and one without. Notwithstanding the caveats identified earlier and noting their limitations, the research aimed to answer the following questions:

- Do patterns of official reporting by retailers change after implementation of a shopfront compared with a centre without a shopfront?
- Are retailers more willing to report crime at a centre with a shopfront than a centre without a shopfront?
- If official reporting increases significantly at the centre with a shopfront, is this due to an increase in crime or an increase in retailer willingness to report crime?

Methodology

Two shopping centres in the south of Queensland were selected for the study: one centre had a police beat shopfront (installed in 2000), the other did not. As at May 2004 the shopfront was staffed by

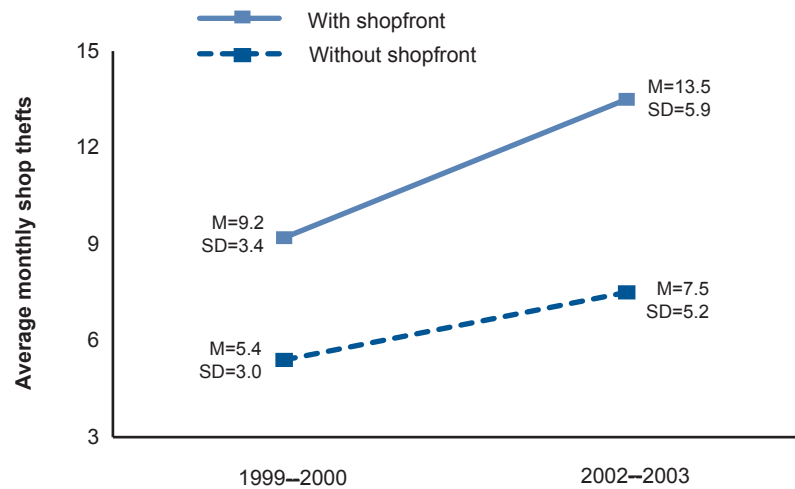
four police. The centre with a shopfront was chosen because of its relatively recent implementation and its medium size. As was similarly experienced in Mazerolle et al.'s (2003) study, however, selecting a suitable comparison proved a difficult task, largely due to the fact that similar sized centres in the area also had police beats located either within them or in close proximity. As a result, it became necessary to choose between a much smaller centre in an area with similar demographics (for example, median income), or a centre of similar size, with a similar breakdown of business types in a somewhat different area. Given that visitors to shopping centres are not necessarily from areas immediately surrounding the shopping centre, and that the size of the centre and types of retailer in it are likely to impact heavily on crime levels and attitudes, it was decided that the selection of the comparison site should be based on characteristics such as the size of the centre, the number and type of retail outlets as well as some external demographic data and crime data (see Table 1). The research involved obtaining data from two sources:

1. the number of crimes officially reported to and recorded by Queensland police at the two shopping centres for the 1999–2000 financial year (this covered the 12 months prior to commencement of the shopfront) and the 2002–2003 financial year; and
2. a survey of retailers in the two shopping centres.

The survey involved distributing questionnaires to retailers in May 2004. Prior to undertaking the survey, centre management were consulted and, with their assistance, the questionnaire was piloted with a small number of retailers in one of the shopping centres to identify any problems with the questionnaire. The final surveys were distributed by hand by a researcher to all retailers in both shopping centres (services such as doctors surgeries were excluded from the sample) and collected two days later by the same researcher. It was requested that the proprietor or manager (whoever was at the business most often and in the best position to respond to the survey) complete the survey. Only outlets with a shopfront either on the inside of the shopping centre or the outside walls were included (this excluded outlets whose premises were detached from the centre). Upon delivery the researcher explained the purpose of the survey, assured retailers that it was anonymous and provided a contact number should the retailers have any questions. The questionnaires were brief (on average they took 10 minutes to complete) and covered retailers' experiences of victimisation, reporting and perceptions of the centre.

As a result of the personal contact made with the retailers and the fact that questionnaires were collected by hand, response rates were 68 per cent in the centre with a police beat shopfront and 71 per cent in the centre without a police beat. This yielded a final sample size of 145 retailers. Business types were categorised according to the Australian and New Zealand standard industrial classification (ANZSIC) (Australian Bureau of Statistics 1993). Table 1 provides demographic data for the retailers who responded to the survey in

Figure 1: Changes in mean official monthly rate of shop thefts reported to police per 100 retailers



Note: change in mean rate at shopfront significant $t(11) = -2.90, p < .05$
 Source: Queensland police service [unpublished data]

each shopping centre. The vast majority of retailers were small businesses, employing less than 20 full-time staff.

Changes in official reported crime levels

One way to determine the effectiveness of police shopfronts in reducing crime is to compare changes in officially reported crime levels, before and after implementation, with a comparison shopping centre. As noted, however, it is possible and indeed likely that reported crime levels may increase at a centre with a shopfront (given proximity of police and improved communication) compared with a centre without a shopfront, regardless of any change in actual crime

levels. Hence, while it is generally hypothesised that actual levels of crime should decrease at a centre with a police beat, official levels of reported crime may reflect either a change in crime rates or a change in willingness to report crime. In trying to assess which of these is more likely, only the number of shop thefts officially reported to police will be investigated since:

- shoplifting accounts for the vast majority of crimes suffered by the retail industry (Mazerolle et al. 2003; Taylor 2002); and
- shop thefts are one of the only crimes reported where the victim must have been a retailer (as opposed to a customer).

Table 2: Self-reported crime and proportion reported to police in 2002–2003

	Centre with shopfront			Centre without shopfront		
	Number	No. reported	% reported	Number	No. reported	% reported
Burglary*	19	18	95	17	11	65
Shoplifting*	423	192	45	269	63	23
Cheque/credit fraud	39	9	23	36	11	30
Robbery	3	0	0	1	0	0
Vandalism	10	4	40	17	2	12
All crimes*	494	223	45	340	87	26

* chi square differences between centres (% crimes reported) significant to $p < .05$
 Source: AIC Police beat shopfronts survey [computer file]

The Queensland police data indicated that the average monthly rate of reported shop thefts at the centre with the police beat increased significantly between the 1999–2000 and the 2002–2003 financial years (see Figure 1). The increase at the centre without a shopfront was not significant (primarily because the variation around the mean was much higher at the comparison centre). These findings beg the question: does the greater increase in reported shoplifting at the centre with a shopfront reflect an increase in incidents of shoplifting or an increase in willingness to report shoplifting? Given that:

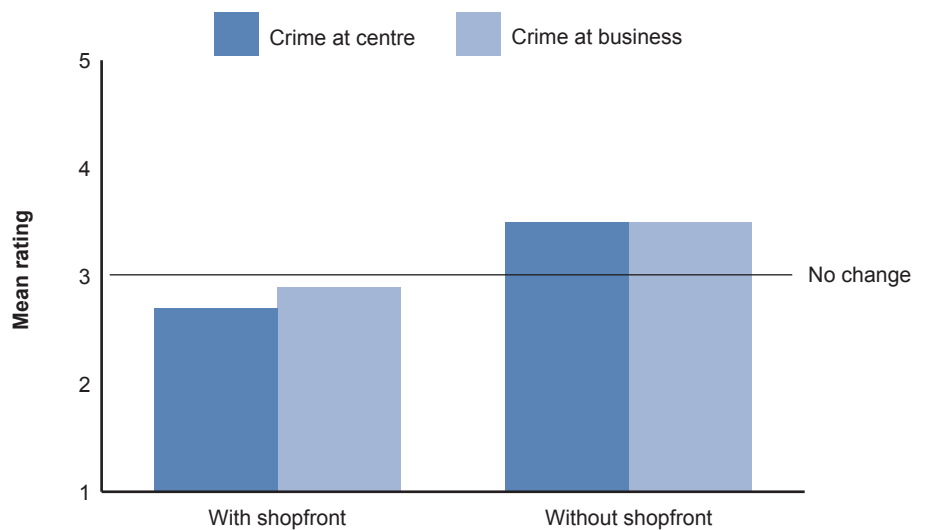
- communication and relations between police and retailers should be improved as a result of a shopfront; and
- it is presumably unlikely that an increased police presence would result in increased shoplifting,

it is arguably more plausible that the increase in reported shoplifting at the centre with a shopfront reflects a greater willingness of retailers at this centre to report shoplifting.

Retailers' reporting to police

The above analysis related to official data recorded by police. Another means of approaching the issue of whether retailers are more likely to report crime at a centre with a shopfront is through self-report data. Retailers in the survey were asked to indicate how many incidents of shoplifting, burglary, cheque and credit card fraud, robbery and vandalism they had experienced in 2002–2003 and how many of these incidents they had reported to the police. As expected, the vast majority (82%) of crime incidents involved shoplifting. Shoplifting and burglary were significantly more likely to be reported to police at a centre with a shopfront than a centre without one (see Table 2). Forty-five per cent of shoplifting incidents at the shopfront centre had been reported to police compared with only 23 per cent at the comparison centre. This reporting rate at the centre without a shopfront is consistent with the reporting rate for shoplifting found in a survey of Australian retailers (just under 20 per cent – Taylor 2002). Such a

Figure 2: Perceived change in crime levels over last four years



Note: Responses given on scale 1 (greatly decreased) to 5 (greatly increased). T-test differences between centres on ratings of crime at centre and crime at business significant to $p < .05$
Source: AIC Police beat shopfronts survey [computer file]

finding supports the argument that higher official rates of reporting at a shopfront reflect a greater willingness to report rather than an increase in actual crime.

It has so far been shown (see Figure 1) that official rates of reporting to police significantly increased at the centre with a shopfront after its implementation while the increase at the centre without a shopfront was not significant. Two possible inferences can be drawn from this result: that either incidents of crime actually increased at the centre with a shopfront (meaning that the shopfront had a negative impact on crime reduction) or that the rates of reporting by retailers increased at the centre with a shopfront but not actual incidents of crime.

One means of addressing this question was to ask retailers themselves about the number of crimes which they had experienced in the previous year and the number which they had reported to the police. If the percentage of crimes (number reported divided by number experienced) reported at the centre with a shopfront was higher than the percentage of crimes reported at the centre without a shopfront, then this would support the argument that the increase in reported crimes at the centre

with a shopfront did not reflect an increase in actual crime but an increase in willingness to report crime. Table 2 supported this hypothesis. The proportion of burglaries and shoplifting reported at the centre with a shopfront were significantly higher than at the comparison centre. A second means of addressing this question is to ask retailers for their subjective perceptions of how crime levels at the centre and at their business have changed over the past four years (that is, since the implementation of the shopfront).

Figure 2 shows that retailers at the centre with a shopfront on average believed that crime levels at their centre had decreased slightly over the past four years. Retailers at the comparison centre, however, believed that there had been a slight increase in crime at their centre over the past four years. These differences were significant and again support the contention that an increase in reported crime at a centre with a shopfront is likely to reflect an increase in willingness to report crime rather than an increase in actual incidents of crime.

Conclusions

In order to determine whether police shopfronts are effective in reducing crime

against retailers, this study compared levels of officially reported crime, self-reported crime by retailers and perceptions of crime change at a shopping centre with a police beat shopfront and one without. It was found that while official rates of crime increased at the centre with a shopfront over a four-year period, the percentage of burglary and shoplifting crimes which retailers at the shopfront centre claimed to have reported to police was significantly higher than the percentages claimed to have been reported at the comparison centre. This is consistent with the hypothesis that retailers at a shopfront centre are more willing to report crime than retailers at a comparison centre. Further, when asked about levels of crime change over the four-year period, retailers at the shopfront centre believed that there had been a slight decrease while retailers at the comparison centre indicated that there had been a slight increase. These findings support the interpretation that police shopfronts do impact on crime levels but that it is necessary to compare self-report crime data with official data to reveal the impact.

Shopfront beat police have a difficult role as they are required to perform numerous tasks, many of which do not necessarily involve or include retailers and which place demands on their limited time and resources. They are often called out to deal with car thefts, car break-ins and other crimes involving shoppers and visitors at the centre rather than retailers inside the centre. Police beat shopfronts are often responsible for shops surrounding the shopping centre as well, meaning that time must be spent patrolling these areas and attending to incidents. Many of the tasks that police beat officers perform will not be seen by

retailers and many retailers will remain unaware of what it is that police shopfront officers do. However, it was seen in this study that an increased police presence is likely to result in a higher level of reporting to police, presumably because they are 'on the spot' – building relationships with retailers and encouraging them to report crime not only fosters a better sense of community spirit but also provides police with valuable information about crime which they might otherwise be unaware of.

In sum, the findings from this paper suggest that police beat shopfronts may be effective in increasing rates of reporting to police and impacting on crime levels. They also underscore the importance of not relying solely on official reported crime data when evaluating the effectiveness of police shopfronts since an increase in reported crime is an expected outcome of having a shopfront in close proximity. While this study only investigated two shopping centres, and it is possible that other characteristics of the centres themselves may account for some of the differences (an analysis of more paired centres would be required to provide stability in findings), this paper should be viewed as a contribution to the continuing body of research into the impact of police shopfronts on crime.

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