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# Economic Motivators for Shoplifting

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*Shoplifting has been attributed to many psychological and physiological factors, especially when women are involved. This article examines the many factors that account for shoplifting behavior focusing on research findings which suggest economic and employment precipitants of the problem. Changes in policy and programmatic responses to shoplifters are suggested.*

Shoplifting is one of the most prevalent crimes in society. As its incidence has been associated primarily with psychological attributes or character defects, responses involve either correctional or mental health services. Little is known about the extent to which economic need may shape or contribute to shoplifting behavior.

While economic factors may cause or contribute to shoplifting, this has not been empirically established. In fact, many studies have ignored the obvious possibility that people may be shoplifting because they need the merchandise and have little money. Absence of attention to economic factors may not only limit the appropriateness of interventions such as psychological treatment strategies but may prevent systematic problem solving required to address economic factors and economic need. While historically the social work profession has acknowledged that economic conditions may influence behavior, the extent to which economic factors are addressed in practice remain debatable. As few social workers have skills and resources which explicitly respond to the economic correlates of their clients' behavior, it

is understandable that psychologically oriented interventions and assumptions may predominate. Nevertheless, inattention to economic factors may reinforce victim-blaming strategies while protecting economic structures and statuses that may be contributing to the problem behavior. Drawing on research findings of two studies of shoplifters, this article addresses the significance of economic variables in contributing to shoplifting behavior. In addition, the article examines the need for expanded assumptions about human behavior and shoplifting, as well as more appropriate preventive, correctional, and treatment interventions. Finally, the social policy implications of the findings are explored.

### Why Do People Shoplift?

Despite considerable research on why people shoplift, a number of studies suffer from methodological problems. Most are based on shoplifters who have been arrested, however, and the few who get caught may not be representative of all shoplifters. In fact, store detectives may watch certain types of people, thereby increasing their likelihood of being detected, while overlooking others. Moreover, because an estimated 60% to 80% of arrested shoplifters have been women, shoplifting has been attributed to women's nature (Cameron, 1964; Robin, 1963; Walsh, 1978). Economic and related societal factors such as unemployment have received much less attention.

Most of the writings impugning women's nature as the motivational source for shoplifting are not based upon empirical research; the few studies that exist have used small samples of women only. The roles of women as wives and mothers have been searched for explanatory clues, and variables relating physiological and hormonal changes during adolescence and menopause have been used to understand shoplifting dynamics. Shoplifting has been presumed to be related to a number of physical factors including menopause, pregnancy, and psychosomatic illnesses (Applebaum & Klemmer, 1974; Rourke, 1957). The most frequently cited emotional problem associated with shoplifting is depression, especially for middle-aged women (Gibbens, 1962; Neustatter, 1954; Russell, 1973). Other psychological factors associated with shoplifting, include low self-con-

cept, symbolic sexual gratification, feelings of guilt, loneliness, fright, confusion, and conflict (Beck & McIntire, 1977; Beers, 1974; Gibbens, 1962; Neustatter, 1954; Rouke, 1957; Russell, 1973; Woodis, 1957).

Other explanations of shoplifting are based upon stress and environmental factors. Some studies assume that shoplifting may be related to the failure of the shoplifter to internalize the dominant values of society (Cameron, 1964; Kraut, 1976; Shave, 1978). A high stress level has recently been identified as a contributing factor in shoplifting by mental health centers providing special services to shoplifters (Free, 1982; Shave, 1978). Society may condone or encourage shoplifting by stressing the importance of material possessions, thus creating a feeling of "perceived deprivation" among people with limited budgets. Shoplifting is made easy by few clerks, the ready availability of merchandise, and the impersonality of stores (Cameron, 1964; Kraut, 1976; Won & Yamamoto, 1968).

While economic factors and their relationship to shoplifting have been relatively unaddressed, those studies that have focused on economic variables merit review. One study concluded that shoplifting might be related to lower income; Thomas found higher shoplifting rates in census tracts with lower median family income and housing in Lincoln, Nebraska (Thomas, 1980). Findings of two other studies using archival data concluded that there was a little relationship between shoplifting and socioeconomic status. Won and Yamamoto found that the shoplifters with incomes under \$5,000 are underrepresented in a study of grocery store shoplifting in Hawaii (Won & Yamamoto, 1968). Cameron, who conducted a seminal shoplifting study in a Chicago Department Store, noted a high unemployment rate among the male shoplifters (Cameron, 1964). Instead of viewing unemployment as an important indicator, the researcher questioned the reliability of the data arguing that the men may have lied about their employment to protect their employers from embarrassment. After analyzing the occupations of the employed shoplifters, Cameron concluded that the shoplifters reflected the socioeconomic pattern of the other customers involving few impoverished and few privileged shoplifters.

The contradictory findings may be explained partially by the

noncomparability in the three data bases. While Cameron, Won, and Yamamoto studied store arrests, the differences in the types of stores might affect shoplifting patterns. Department and grocery stores may attract different kinds of shoppers and shoplifters. Thomas' study was based on city arrest data and may provide a wider cross section of persons arrested for shoplifting, however the data may reflect the referral biases of store personnel. Thus, such studies lead to the conclusion that the relationship of socioeconomic status to shoplifting has not yet been established.

### Methodology

To address the influence of economic variables two data bases were used. Data Base I provided information from police and court records on personal characteristics, crime characteristics, and treatment of shoplifters by the criminal justice system. A one-sixth systematic sampling (200 cases) with a random start was completed on shoplifting cases filed with a municipal court in an urban area in the Northwest, between September 1981 and October 1982.

Data Base II was derived from a shopping center survey designed to obtain shoplifting self-report rates, shoplifting profiles by age, attitudes toward shoplifting, and perception of motivational factors for shoplifting. Questionnaires were anonymous as there were no names or identifying numbers. The questions were stated in a nonjudgmental manner to elicit the most honest response possible.

One thousand questionnaires were distributed—100 at each of ten shopping centers. Shopping centers were selected purposively to provide for socioeconomic differences in the city. Times and days during the week were randomly selected for each of the ten sites. Members of a research team approached shoppers randomly, introduced themselves, explained the research briefly, and asked shoppers whether they would complete the questionnaire. A questionnaire and stamped return envelope were given to those persons stating they would be willing to participate in the study.

Multiple measures of shoplifting motivations were included. For example, measures relating to economic factors were derived from both data bases including demographic data, items sho-

plifted, attitudinal factors, stress levels, and motivations. The following Shoplifting Motivation Scales were developed: (a) economic factors, (b) negative attitudes toward the system, (c) value of possessions, (d) perceived low-risk attitude, (e) psychological factors, (f) social stress factors, and (g) other stresses. Two hundred court records and 382 usable self-report questionnaires form the basis for analysis.

The limitations of the study must be considered when reviewing the findings. The major limitations are the low return rate of 38% of the questionnaires, the small number of shoplifters studied, and the large number of statistical tests performed. The truthfulness of self-reports by respondents is unknown. The study is exploratory and descriptive, thus it is designed to identify variables for further study rather than to offer conclusive evidence.

#### *Description of the Sample*

The two data bases produced differing shoplifting profiles. The Self-Report Study suggests that shoplifters are apt to be young, white, and female. The Court Sample Study, which may reflect observer bias, indicates that men, ethnic minorities, the young, and the elderly may be more frequently arrested and referred to court.

The typical shoplifter was apt to be young, although the respondents' ages ranged from 18 to over 65. Persons aged 25-34 were overrepresented in the Self-Report Sample, and then again along with persons over 65 were overreported in the Court Sample.

More women reported recent shoplifting, but this higher percentage of female shoplifters reflects the larger proportion of women shoppers. Fifty-nine percent of the self-reported shoplifters were women, but 63% of the respondents were women. Men, however, were overrepresented in the Court Sample as 67% of the arrested shoplifters were men.

Ethnic minorities were more apt to appear in the Court Sample than in the Self-Report shopping center sample. While 21% of those referred to the court were ethnic minorities, only 8% of the shopping center sample and 8% of the population were ethnic minorities. None reported recent shoplifting.

Shoplifters reflected a wide variety of occupations in the Self-

Report Study, ranging from blue collar to white collar workers. Approximately one out of three shoplifters was experiencing family disruptions while 13% of other shoppers were separated, divorced, or widowed. Most shoplifters indicated that religion was "somewhat important" in their lives, while other shoppers rated religion as "very important." Shoplifters did not identify as criminals or as being dishonest and did not have friends who shoplift.

### Shoplifting Motivating Factors

#### *Economic Factors*

Economic hardships appear to be strongly related to shoplifting. The economic problems of some shoplifters are perhaps most dramatically indicated by their employment and family income. Eighteen percent of the shoplifters, compared with 7% of the other shoppers, reported unemployment during the previous year. The court data indicated an even higher percentage of unemployed shoplifters, however the category of unemployed in the court sample includes housewives, retired persons, and students. Sixty-four percent of the court sample compared to 36% of the shopping center sample were identified as unemployed.

Although the family income of shoplifters varied widely, shoplifters more often indicated a lower family income than did other shoppers. Almost one-fourth of the current shoplifters had an income under \$5,000 compared to 8% of the other shoppers. As shown in Table 1, another 30% of the shoplifters reported family incomes over \$25,000, however, many of these people indicated on their questionnaires that they were experiencing economic problems.

The economic problems of the shoplifters are further indicated in their responses to stress-related questions. Stress inventory responses strongly suggest that many shoplifters are experiencing economic hardships and insecurity as depicted in Table 2. The Economic Stress Subscale and four individual items on this scale differed significantly between the shoplifters and other shoppers. Shoplifters more frequently indicated that they had been laid off or out of work during the previous year. Almost 40% of the shoplifters claimed that unemployment had been a stressor. Shoplifters also experienced more problems

Table 1

*Comparison of Family Income by Shoplifting Behaviors*

Family Income	Shoplifters		Other Shoppers	
	N	%	N	%
Under \$5,000	8	23.5	23	7.6
\$5,001 to \$10,000	2	5.9	30	9.5
\$10,001 to \$15,000	6	17.6	49	16.1
\$15,001 to \$20,000	2	5.9	42	13.8
\$20,001 to \$25,000	6	17.6	59	19.4
Over \$25,000	10	29.4	101	33.2

Chi Square = 10.7, 5 d.f.,  $p \leq .0573$  (borderline)

Table 2

*Comparison of Shoplifters and Other Shoppers on the Economic Stress Subscale*

*Economic Stress Subscale	(Percent)		$p \leq .016$
	Shoplifters	Other Shoppers	
Concerns about owing money	70.6	50.2	$p \leq .037$
Not enough money for basic necessities	35.3	14.4	$p \leq .004$
Laid off or out of work	38.3	15.4	$p \leq .002$
Problems finding employment	32.4	12.9	$p \leq .005$

\*Scale or subscale statistically significant (t-test).

All items statistically significant (corrected Chi Square).

finding employment than did the other shoppers. Two items relating to a shortage of money were answered differently by shoplifters and shoppers. Shoplifters are more concerned about having money for basic necessities and for repaying debts.

Further support for the influence of economic need on shoplifting is provided by responses to attitudinal questions. The difference in the attitudes of the shoppers and shoplifters indi-



Table 3

*Comparison of Shoplifters and Other Shoppers on Economic Attitude Scale and Items*

* Attitudes Toward Economic Factors Scale	$p \leq .001$
If you don't have money for something you really need like food, it's OK to shoplift.	$p \leq .016$
People shoplift because they are too poor to buy the things they need.	$p \leq .010$
There are many things that I would like to own that I cannot afford.	$p \leq .020$

\*Scale statistically significant (ANOVA).

All items statistically significant (Mann-Whitney U Test).

cate that shoplifters are much more apt to identify "lack of money" and "being poor" as reasons why adults shoplift as shown in Table 3. Included on the list of reasons why adults shoplift was the item, "They are unable to pay." Shoplifters more frequently than other shoppers perceived that people shoplift because they have insufficient funds.

A review of the kind of merchandise stolen further highlights the economic motivations of shoplifting. Food, an obvious basic necessity, was the top ranking category of stolen merchandise in the court sample. Over one out of three shoplifters was arrested for stealing food.

The write-in comments of the shoppers gave further insight into the motivations for shoplifting. Economic hardships are poignantly expressed in some of these comments. A 31-year-old housewife reflected on her shoplifting in the past: "My main reason for shoplifting was because I didn't have the money to buy the things I needed. At the time, it seemed as though we barely had enough money to buy formula for the baby." A 24-year-old woman recalled the painful memories:

I shoplifted because my parents died and it took me over six months before we could receive financial help of any kind. I have two brothers and we were all under 19. It was either shoplift or we would have gone without food and clothing.

A 40-year-old unemployed male stated: "I'm out of work. But a dollar saved is still a dollar." Two shoplifters in the court sample were arrested for shoplifting clothing needed for job interviews.

### *Other Motivations*

Multiple measures of the relationship between shoplifting and shopper's economic status suggest that shoplifting is strongly related to economic and employment variables. Shoplifting, however, was related to several other factors. Some of these other factors may be correlates and consequences of economic stress reaffirming the pervasive influence of economic factors as potential shapers of behavior and attitudes. However, further study is warranted before definitive statements can be made on the extent to which these measures are in fact by-products of economic stress. The following is a summary of factors other than economic related to shoplifting behaviors:

People who shoplifted recently were more apt to check the following items as stressors:

#### *Personal (Psychological Factors) Stresses*

- regrets over past decisions
- feeling sad and blue

#### *Social Stresses*

- being lonely
- watching too much TV

#### *Family Stresses*

- problems with divorce or separation

#### *Physical Stresses*

- personal use of drugs
- sexual problems

People who shoplifted recently were more apt to answer differently the following items:

#### *Attitudes toward Psychological Factors Scale*

- While I get feeling blue, going shopping makes me feel better. (agree)

#### *Attitudes toward the Retail System Scale*

- People shoplift because items are overpriced. (agree)
- The item stolen will never be missed. (agree)

#### *Attitudes toward Perceived Low Risk Scale*

- If I shoplifted, I would get caught. (disagree)

It's not worth the risk of getting caught to shoplift. (disagree)

*Attitudes toward Possessions Scale*

Wearing designer clothes is important to me. (agree)

I like to keep up with the latest fads and trends in clothes. (agree)

People shoplift luxuries they feel they cannot afford. (disagree)

A more accurate picture of shoplifting is obtained by taking into account the combination of several factors, rather than only one motivator. The frequent occurrence of the combination of economic and psychological factors was documented in this study. One-half of the shoplifters were experiencing economic hardships as well as depression or other emotional stress. The psychological consequences of unemployment and economic stress are well documented (Briar, 1976).

### Discussion

Economic need appears to be related to shoplifting. People who shoplifted are more apt to have a lower family income, to be unemployed, and to believe that the economic need causes shoplifting. Not all jobless, economically insecure, or poor people shoplift, of course, and conversely, not all people who shoplift are poor.

Shoplifting and its relationship to the depressed economy is unknown. The unemployment rate in the area in which the research was conducted hovered around 13% and may have contributed to who shoplifts and why. Whether different or more people shoplift during hard times than in more prosperous economic conditions is unknown. That crime is a correlate of unemployment is well documented even though still disputed (Chaiken & Chaiken, 1983). Shoplifters indicated that they were more likely than other shoppers to be experiencing economic stresses, social stresses, and depression. Shoplifters, too, were more apt than other shoppers to highly value possessions and to hold negative attitudes toward the system. The attachment and high value on possessions may be related to the loss of possessions associated with downward economic skidding caused by unemployment (Gordus, 1984). Likewise, economic insecurity and joblessness contribute to disenchantment with the system.

While the findings of this study are correlational and ten-

tative, they do suggest that some of the previous research on shoplifting may need to be reinterpreted. While psychological and social stresses do appear to be related to shoplifting, these factors appear to be present for both women and men. Other factors, especially economic need, appear to be related to shoplifting. Many researchers have limited the scope of their research questions to factors related to women's roles, and therefore, have overlooked the realities of their economic dependence, insecurity, and inequality. Underemployment and economic insecurity are by-products of the caregiver, household role of some women (Briar & Ryan, 1986). The fact that underlying economic problems and stress factors were not assessed may have resulted in limited interpretations and even sexist interpretations of motivations. Moreover, these interpretations fail to explain shoplifting among men and do not adequately explain shoplifting in women.

### *Implications*

The appropriateness of referring shoplifters for psychological treatment is questioned. Such referral is based upon the assumption that the primary motivation behind shoplifting is emotionally based. Exploring only the emotional factors related to shoplifting may result in treating only symptoms since shoplifting appears to arise from multiple motivators for most people. Economic distress has been found to be a correlate of shoplifting and it is very often accompanied by emotional stress. When unemployment or other economic distresses are present, these variables need to be addressed in treatment and criminal justice responses.

Social workers need to develop a broader skill repertoire to work with clients with economic problems. Recognizing the potential devastating impact of unemployment, underemployment, and economic insecurity, practitioners might become more skilled in occupational problem solving, job development, and economic reform. While mental health treatment may address some of the emotional symptoms of economic and employment problems, few shoplifting treatment groups offer job development or job clubs. The shoplifter who is experiencing financial problems may benefit from an income treatment repertoire that

addresses the conditons that cause or contribute to shoplifting behavior. Similarly, job placement diversion programs with the criminal justice system might be developed for shoplifters with economic and employment problems. Social workers have major roles to play in redressing some of the systemic conditions that contribute to shoplifting and in building a knowledge base for practice which ensures that systemic variables are included in research as well as inform clinical program and policy responses.

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