Shoplifting

Controlling a Major Crime

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D. P. Walsh

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Introduction

The main reason for producing this study has been a growing and developing interest in the role of victims in relation to crime, which has in turn led on to subsidiary interests. Isolating the three chief components in any crime that occurs consists of distinguishing the criminal (his personality, his characteristics and the cultural context within which he occurs) from the criminal event (as the occurrence of an act which is proscribed by the criminal law, which takes place in a particular place at a particular time, executed by a particular method which may be commonly used by a number of people), usually involving a victim, who may be either singular (just one person) or plural (a number of people, perhaps an organisation or a firm).

Studies which have tried to isolate 'causes of crime' have perhaps failed for reasons which are intellectually endemic to the subject matter of criminology, which is intrinsically a tangled skein which cannot be sectioned by using just one tool or approach. More particularly, such studies have obviously failed as a result of their focus on criminals alone, as if they were semi-autistic beings. The emotional reaction which follows any crime usually produces a pressure to do just this of course, to examine the criminal to the exclusion of other features which surround him, or which he may be linked with. Ultimately, criminology must deal with the type and form of the criminal event, and the relationship of the victim as well as, and together with, characteristics or qualities of criminals.

Very little is known about the victims of crime for various reasons, principally, perhaps, access to representative groups. Victims have a role which includes failing to inhibit particular crimes, and it is highly likely that most of them do not become victims solely through the operation of chance alone. For reasons which are not yet clear they have been selected by criminals as targets, whereas

other possibilities have been rejected, perhaps as being in some sense unsuitable. Criminology needs to know, amongst other things, much more about the individuals deemed unsuitable as victims, as well as why it is that particular people become victims. It is also true that inasmuch as criminologists may see themselves as having some loosely defined obligation to involve themselves in crime prevention, without a victim a crime cannot occur, and this obvious truth might pinpoint an alternative way of tackling crime prevention.

If the victim is not present, or will not for some reason collaborate or co-operate with the criminal (without realising the significance or outcome of what he has started to involve himself with), or if the victim reacts unexpectedly in a way that the criminal could not have predicted, then the majority of criminal enterprises must fail. The criminal in preparing to engage in crime has already made certain tacit assumptions about the probable behaviour of the victim, and organised his own behaviour to match this. As in other aspects of social life, the criminal prefers to operate within a framework of predictability and constancy of expectations: not to think he knows the future puts him at a disadvantage. Without predictability, few crimes occur, or must fail. This would happen for example if the potential victim of the would-be crime refuses to participate in the charade which might have finally been categorised as a breach of the criminal law through, let us say, taking a different route while carrying the weekly takings to the bank.

In so far, then, as criminologists do have some sort of obligation to suggest means of crime prevention, it is the case that an easier way to formulate the problem is not to focus solely on attempting to suppress criminal activity *per se*, through the use of direct technical counter-measures (such as bigger locks), but instead to consider focusing on victim prevention, which would logically achieve the same objective and do this more easily since the behaviour of potential victims is more easily guided than is the behaviour of criminals. That is accepting the premise that most crimes can only occur if there is a suitable victim. Schur (1965) has ably discussed the relatively few crimes without victims in a book of the same name.

Theft in general, and the reasons why people should steal from others, is a fascinating area to consider. Usually attempts to untangle it analytically have revolved around the examination of thieves alone, most frequently being even more limited through

only looking at captured thieves and their qualities and reactions, and expecting to find patterns or clusters in their activity which will allegedly show why crimes are committed. This of course is as logically fallacious as assuming that an examination in a laboratory of a lead weight removed from a grandfather clock will facilitate an understanding of Time.

Self-evidently there are certain things about criminals which we need to know, and it is perfectly valid to scan for patterns and clusters in classifications derived from these things. However, and this is still a much neglected area in criminology, it is also necessary to ask questions about the cultural context within which crimes occur, and to ask why some people are selected as victims rather than others.

I have decided to examine the crime of shoplifting as an illustration of this approach, reasoning that studies so far produced have tended to focus exclusively on the shoplifting offender and his personal motivation, and for that matter his personality, rather than on the victims of shoplifting, and the crime-form proper, how the criminal event is occurring, not just in terms of *modus operandi* but also in terms of the location of the criminal event in social space.

With shoplifting, taken as a sub-type of theft generally, there is every reason to suppose that there are thousands of 'causes of crime'. People can do this thing for very many different reasons, in the same way that they can ride a bicycle for many different reasons. How much further is our knowledge of this (or for that matter any other crime) likely to be advanced by attempting, and of necessity failing, to produce a complete list of all the reasons why members of an advanced and complex industrial society, plentifully stocked with transferable private property, might from time to time steal some of this from other members? I am arguing that we might want to take this as far as we could, and then turn to other avenues for insights, rather than doggedly adhering to just one approach disguised in a variety of novel ways. Even if the list of reasons could be produced, it would be staggering in its length, and would very probably disclose little other than that humans can do things for countless different reasons.

What I have aimed to do in the study that follows is to try and take the crime-form of shoplifting to pieces, and to examine other inputs which feed into it which have hitherto not been discussed, in the

process deliberately ignoring for the most part the motives of the offender in order to see how far our knowledge of this crime is furthered through concentrating on event and victim. If we were just searching for motives, then the task would be more complicated than the one I have described, not least because the examination must be retrospective. It must deal with the past as recorded, imperfectly, by the memory of the criminal, who can and may misrepresent himself and his motivations and actions in part due to legal pressures. For such reasons I make no apologies for deliberately refusing to deal with shoplifting offenders as a central focus, choosing instead to examine the scene of the crime, the criminal event and the victim.

To understand modern shoplifting as it now occurs, it will be necessary to place it in its cultural setting. We must consider how and why shops in the particular form that they take in this society have developed over time, and what the significance of shopping generally is, as a social phenomenon, and who actually engages in it and how. It is also necessary to consider the community reaction to theft generally, and the social and moral responses the community makes to it, as well as how the crime of shoplifting itself has changed over time (if indeed it really has), including such ancillary questions as how social response to it has altered and so on.

In talking about a crime-form it is crucial to put it into chronological perspective too. It is not possible to comment usefully on a current level of a crime without also considering what future levels *could* be and why, and what past levels *were* and why. Only in this way is it possible to see the how and why of the present. A present orientation alone is not going to be helpful, since, leaving aside pressure to react emotionally, it would give no perspective on what the rate and rationale for that crime was, and what it could grow to be over time. More significantly, pure present orientation involves a complete abrogation of the scientific right to predict.

In the case of examining the history of a crime, both social and economic, there are difficulties of access to reliable data: information may have been reported initially in a distorted or condensed form, or in some way rationalised by the original author; in the case of making estimates about probable future trends one might have thought that there was minimal hard data. This latter does indeed seem to be the case as long as the investigator persists in concentrating on the offender alone, which is a selected choice rather than a

data-determined one. The fact that it may be difficult to obtain such information does not mean that we should not at least *try*.

Speaking generally, if the crime, taken to include victim, event and offender, is the focus, then the peripheral inputs to this focus must be examined closely to shed light on the final outcome. The alternative is to try and examine the outcome without reference to the inputs and the total cultural context within which it occurs. The result of this is that such an examination tends to focus more and more exclusively on the characteristics of the offender, and ultimately tails off in unsupported generalisations.