

Retail Crime: Recurrent Trends and Triggers

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Introduction

Due to chronic levels of under reporting, official sources of crime data no longer accurately reflect the true picture of retail crime, if they ever did. This can make it challenging for businesses to plan and ensure that they are fully prepared for surges in crime. Criminology expert, Professor Emmeline Taylor, outlines what we know about the seasonality of criminal behaviour and when to invest in enhanced risk mitigation strategies for your business.

While crime can often appear random and unpredictable, there is a large body of evidence to suggest that for most crime types there are established patterns. Crime, like any social phenomenon, is influenced by the environment within which it occurs and so it follows that factors such as season, weather, location, and political events, all impact on its occurrence.¹ However, recent years have presented some disrupting events, such as the pandemic, and low levels of reporting make it difficult to establish trends and patterns in crime.²

¹ Catlett C, Cesario E, Talia D, Vinci A. Spatio-temporal crime predictions in smart cities: A data-driven approach and experiments. *Pervasive and Mobile Computing*. 2019, 53:62-74. doi: 10.1016/j.pmcj.2019.01.003

² For example, it has been estimated that just 2.4 per cent of shoplifting incidents in England and Wales are reported to and recorded by the police. Taylor, Taylor and Unsworth (2024) 'The Politics and Pitfalls of Policing High-Volume Crime', *The Political Quarterly*. <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/1467-923X.13432?af=R>



Seasonal Trends

Analysis into the various factors that influence crime rates at specific times of the year has been carried out since the 1800s. This body of research has produced a broad consensus that summer months (hotter temperatures and longer daylight hours) produce more violent crimes and that winter months (cooler temperatures and shorter daylight hours) produce more property crime. Both of these crime types can have significant impacts on the retail sector. For example, the UK, USA and Australia are all experiencing heightened levels of violence towards their store employees as well as elevated levels of theft, antisocial behaviour and criminal damage. Understanding the reasons for fluctuations in crime is important to underscore the formulation of any risk mitigation strategy.

Official Data on retail crime trends is unreliable

Due to a significant number of retail crime incidents not being reported to the police, using police recorded data to measure trends is problematic. For example, in the UK it has been estimated that just 2.4 per cent of thefts are reported to and recorded by the police. Further illustrating this, police recorded crime statistics for England and Wales lost their National Statistics accreditation in 2014 following an assessment which found evidence that the quality and consistency of the underlying data may not be reliable.

Many other countries face similar problems with inconsistent definitions of crime across jurisdictions, variation in recording and publishing practices.

The Crime Triangle

The Crime Triangle (also referred to as the 'Routine Activities Theory') has been widely used in criminology to understand why and how crime fluctuates at certain times.



According to the theory, three things must be present for a crime to occur:

1. a motivated offender,
2. a suitable target, and
3. the absence of a 'capable guardian' (i.e. someone or something that signals to an offender that they will be caught and punished if they commit a crime).

At its most basic, the theory states that if a motivated offender finds a suitable target in the absence of capable guardianship, then a crime will be committed.

When thinking about the seasonality of retail crime and the factors that can underly surges in violence and theft, the theory shows how population movements, policing activities, and political and social events can all impact on the likelihood of crime occurring. As such, it suggests that the summer months result in an increase in crime largely due to an increase

in public activities: tourism, school vacation, longer daylight hours and public drinking, all provide a greater opportunity for potential offenders to encounter 'suitable targets' (whether a retail store or an individual).

Another explanation for the seasonal variation in crime is the '**Temperature/Aggression theory**'. This theory suggests that hot temperatures create more aggression in the general population; people feel more agitated in hot weather and may also be more likely to engage in behaviours that are known to correlate with crime such as drinking alcohol and being in public spaces for extended periods. This can create a recipe for violent and destructive behaviours in and around retail premises, both interpersonally and with regards to the theft and/or damage of property.

Other influences relating to increasing crime over the summer months include influxes of tourism to some locations which can boost the population of offenders and opportunities.³

Tourist hotspots, crowded public transport, and bustling streets are known to result in increased levels of many types of theft including pickpocketing, bag-snatching, and mobile phone theft, but tourism can also impact negatively on shops through heightened levels of theft, antisocial behaviour and aggression. As visitors feel more relaxed and less bounded by everyday concerns, this can lead to them engaging in behaviours while on vacation that they wouldn't do at home. For example, shops in some European cities report increased theft of alcohol and grocery items, whereas restaurants report an increase in 'dine and dash' offenders who leave without paying for their meal.

In a similar way to holiday tourism, special events such as large sporting tournaments and festivals can result in increased shop theft and other retail crimes. These events result in sudden changes to the population, can create a carnivalesque atmosphere that relaxes the inhibitions of attendees, as well as while placing pressure on security and law enforcement resources (capable guardians).

³A study conducted in Italy found that a 1% increase in the number of tourists leads to a 0.018% increase in total crime. Biagi, B. and Detotto, C. (2014). 'Crime as tourism externality', Regional Studies. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/46459443_Crime_as_Tourism_Externality



Christmas and the Holiday Season

The items that are typically stolen from stores can also change in accordance with the time of year. For example, confectionary might be more desirable for thieves in the run up to Easter and Christmas as opportunists steal it for their own use and professional thieves see an uptick in demand from those buying stolen goods. Shop theft has been found to be more prevalent during the holiday season, especially around Christmas and New Year's. Some of the reasons this occurs include:

Career criminals will know that as January approaches, the demand for stolen goods will diminish and so they will look to **steal more** in the months prior to make up for the lull in their 'sales'.

Increased Footfall:

Stores experience an increase in customer traffic during the holidays which statistically elevates the likelihood of theft.

Merchandising:

As stores attempt to drive sales through enticing displays and additional lines, these appeal as much to criminals as they do honest customers.

Increase in Demand for Stolen Goods:

The holiday season can drive an increased demand for stolen goods as those willing to purchase them are looking for a range of goods from grocery and alcohol to serve up at festive meals, to apparel and health and beauty items to give as gifts. Similarly, the gift-giving expectations can put people under significant pressure to find suitable gifts which might make individuals who are already inclined to steal, or who take advantage of opportunities to do so, even more likely to engage in shoplifting.

Distractions:

With more people, more events, and more chaotic stores, employees can be distracted. Thieves are aware of this and take advantage.

Career Criminals:

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Political Volatility and Civil Unrest

There is a long history of the retail sector bearing the brunt of civil unrest and political protest. For example, the 2011 England riots saw mass looting, arson attacks on businesses and extensive criminal damage across major cities. These scenes were repeated in 2024 with widespread rioting leading to many businesses closing and boarding up their stores to protect themselves from looters and opportunistic thieves.

In the USA, following the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis in 2020, widespread protests across more than 140 cities across the USA, saw shopfronts smashed, businesses looted and set alight. Although most protests were peaceful, those that involved criminality resulted in the 'most expensive damage in insurance history' and unfortunately resulted in many independent businesses permanently closing. While civil unrest is often unpredictable and is typically triggered by an unanticipated event, the clear existence of ongoing social turbulence in many countries suggests that it could quickly flare up and spread. In the USA, it has been predicted that the upcoming contentious presidential election could potentially spark more civil unrest and protests. Retail LP professionals can hope for the best but should start preparing for the worst, particularly as the election coincides with the busy run up to Christmas.⁴

⁴ Wolfe, C. (Spring 2024) 'The Looters are Coming', Loss Prevention Magazine.



When and how can businesses mitigate seasonal risks?

Criminal risks to the retail sector follow established patterns relating to season, tourism, largescale events and the run up to Christmas. Against these more predictable trends there are other factors that are known to create surges in violence and theft in and around stores such as political unrest. It's important for businesses to be proactive in ensuring a base level of protection. From my own research, I have noted how many businesses have a reactive LP strategy and this can often result in them suffering more serious impacts. A reactive response might mean that the right security products are not available in the quantities needed at short notice. For example, the Red Sea shipping crisis has caused hundreds of vessels to avoid the Suez Canal, one of the world's most important waterways, and take a lengthy detour, vastly increasing transport times and freight costs. This issue is particularly acute for bespoke security solutions tailored specifically to ensure continuity in brand identity or to respond to a specific issue impacting on stores in a particular region.

Taken together, the cyclical nature of criminality, international social volatility, and the ongoing challenges with the global supply chain, retailers should look to invest now ahead of the Christmas holidays. This is particularly relevant for the UK and US markets that are experiencing an unsettled political climate.



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Emmeline Taylor is the host of the podcast Retail Crime Uncovered, sponsored by Sekura Global.

