

## **When the Sky is Falling, Does Shoplifting Really Matter?**

**By Caroline Kochman, Executive Director, National Association for Shoplifting Prevention (NASP)**

As my colleague and I sat and contemplated the perils of what may lie ahead with the news of Merrill Lynch, Lehman Brothers and AIG, my colleague clicked on a CNN website only to see the headline: “The Sky is Falling!” – shown with a picture of a stockbroker looking up at a tall Wall Street building, presumably about to collapse.

After we picked ourselves up off the floor in our uncomfortable laughter, we looked at each other and asked, does the work we do really matter now? Does anybody really care about shoplifting? In the scope of the problems facing citizens, businesses and communities, **should** anybody really care?

And as we came back from our momentary haze of gloom the answer was a resounding YES! Shoplifting is too important an economic and social issue to let it fall by the wayside, in good times or bad. In fact, now more than ever is the time to address shoplifting especially for those typically honest kids and consumers who may be pushed by hardship to try their hand at it.

A recent NASP survey asked hundreds of judges, prosecutors, diversion, probation and law enforcement officers if they thought shoplifting was a Gateway Crime – “a crime with little or no consequence which acts as an initiator to other criminal behavior.”

79% of these justice professionals said “yes”, adding that in their experience shoplifting is a gateway to greater acts of shoplifting as well as more serious crime. And I should note that this number is up 7% in just 3 years; from 72% in 2005 to 79% in 2008.

What does this mean? I’m not 100% certain. What I do know is that in the scope of criminal activity in communities, addressing shoplifting has fallen quite low on the totem pole. But if in the opinion of justice professionals across the nation, shoplifting is often the starting point to future criminal behavior – employee theft, burglary, robbery, fraud, embezzlement, ORC - the importance of proactively addressing shoplifting becomes much clearer.

One way criminal and juvenile justice professionals are addressing the shoplifting problem is by utilizing shoplifting offender education programs provided by NASP to reduce delinquents’ propensity for repeat offenses. Over the last 7 to 10 years education programs have become widely accepted and utilized by court systems as a mechanism to handle non-professional shoplifting offenders. The justice community has found offender-paid education programs a cost-effective mechanism to effectively handle these cases.

While this method for addressing shoplifting has been proven effective in court documented studies, its downfall is that it can only be utilized by criminal justice when and if retailers apprehend and prosecute offenders. This is not to say that every retailer must apprehend and prosecute all shoplifters in their stores in order to effectively address shoplifting. That is simply not practical or even true.

Today, there are many effective actions retailers can take which do not require prosecution. For example, retailers are the only stakeholders in the shoplifting problem that can identify offenders and therefore, have a unique opportunity to distribute parent support or education pamphlets to youthful or consumer offenders at apprehension to help reduce repeat offenses.

In addition, community members look to retailers as the victims, to give them the barometer of how “big a deal” shoplifting really is in their local community. As a local retailer you can set the tone for community action. Shoplifting and other criminal activity will always rise to the level acceptable to the community.

When retailers are proactive in addressing shoplifting it sends an important message to community members and offenders that criminal behavior, on any level, will not be tolerated in your store or community and that no crime, however small, pays. There are many ways that a retail company or individual employee can be pro-active in helping to reduce the shoplifting problem even when they don’t prosecute as a rule. It can be done at little or no cost and it can be as simple as:

- Distributing Parent Support Pamphlets to the parents of youth apprehended in your stores
- Volunteering to serve on local court-sponsored victim impact panels, community boards and teen courts
- Utilizing community awareness posters to provide public awareness and education about shoplifting prevention
- Hosting awareness training for criminal & juvenile justice professionals
- Offering the courts the opportunity to have offenders participate in a security tour of your store
- Volunteering to speak at local crime prevention classes
- Helping to fund local law enforcement or justice agency shoplifter education programs
- Supporting local and/or national shoplifting prevention campaigns

While these initiatives may seem “out of the box” compared to mainstream LP initiatives, we must not disregard the impact that these actions have in reducing crime in the community. Restorative Justice Principles state that when “community norms denounce harmful behavior it reinforces productive behavior;” and that the more connected a potential offender feels to their community, the more likely they are to restrain impulses that would be disapproved by the community.

In this waning economy, where NASP has *already* seen a nationwide increase in referrals of consumer shoplifting offenders and where loss prevention departments are being directed to find creative ways to reduce losses on less of a budget, it seems that these simple yet effective initiatives’ time has come.

Please do not hesitate to contact NASP for more information about volunteering, community awareness posters, education pamphlets & community problem solving or to let us know what you are doing that works! We can be reached at 516-932-0165 or [justice@shopliftingprevention.org](mailto:justice@shopliftingprevention.org).