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Stolen goods and hidden costs: Why shoplifting is on the rise in Singapore

Shopkeepers interviewed said that although they have hired more workers and installed surveillance cameras to combat shoplifting, challenges such as manpower constraints and high footfall make it difficult to fully address the problem.



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Nearly 4,000 items were stolen from a store in Singapore last year. (Illustration by Nurjannah Subandi)

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Madam Hoe Wan Ping's days as a store leader often kick off on a stressful note: Doing a rough stock check for missing items.

Each time she scans the shelves and spots something that has mysteriously disappeared, her heart sinks because this means that it has likely been stolen.

And if the items are highly valuable, such as branded products, the 54-year-old would

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have to cover the cost with her colleagues at the retail store selling cosmetics, toiletries and skincare products, due to company policy.



"Just a few days ago, I noticed two testers (of a cosmetic product) had gone missing. People even steal testers these days. Unbelievable," she told CNA TODAY when we met at her workplace in Ang Mo Kio on Jan 15.

Mdm Hoe vividly remembers one of the most serious cases, which occurred in 2022. Three bottles of a branded facial treatment essence worth more than S\$400 were stolen.

"We chased after the suspect, and my colleague was even bitten by him during the confrontation. After he was caught, I found out he had also stolen electronic products from the supermarket nearby," she said.

Similarly, at Mustafa Centre in Little India, CNA TODAY learnt from talking to security personnel that shoplifting cases occur "almost every day," though they do not call the police for every incident.

"Some people say they forgot to pay, while others claim it was completely accidental," one staff member said.



Based on the security personnel's observations, most suspects appear to be under 30, although occasionally older individuals get caught too.

When asked about commonly stolen items, the staff member noted that they range widely, from food and perfumes to cosmetics and clothes. "Whatever they like, they take."

Over at a convenience store in Toa Payoh, its manager Victor Lim, 60, said that most shoplifters he has encountered are men and women in their 40s and 50s.

However, he believes that not everyone who shoplifts does so out of necessity.

"Some people are dressed very well and have the means to pay, but somehow they just want to take two cans of beer or some packets of S\$3 sour plum without paying," Mr Lim said.



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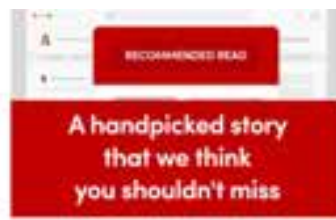


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Business owners and shopkeepers who spoke to CNA TODAY said that they have all put in place measures to address the persistent problem of shoplifting, including installing more closed-circuit television (CCTV) cameras and hiring more workers to monitor suspicious behaviour.

However, many of them acknowledged that these measures have their limitations. During periods of high footfall, it remains challenging to keep track of everyone in the store and the stocks while also serving customers.

Some shops also display items outdoors to attract more sales, which adds another layer of difficulty in maintaining oversight.

There are some who feel that CCTV cameras alone are not enough to deter shoplifters. Despite the cameras being highly visible and signs clearly informing customers that they are under surveillance, shoplifting incidents still occur regularly.

The latest crime statistics in Singapore are not available yet, but the police's annual crime brief of 2023 highlighted that [shop theft cases were on the rise](#) for the third year in a row.

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There were 3,939 cases of shop theft in 2023, marking a 21.4 per cent increase from the 3,244 cases in 2022. There were 2,652 cases in 2021 and about 2,500 cases in 2020.

The mid-year crime brief of 2024 had equally worrying statistics. From January to June last year, 2,027 cases were reported – a rise of 178 cases compared to the 1,849 reported during the same period in 2023.

Additionally, shop theft remained one of the top offences among youth arrested in the first half of last year.

The police attributed the rise in shop theft cases mainly to more incidents reported at supermarkets and personal care and wellness shops. More than half of the cases involved losses below S\$50.





A shoplifting victim warning against shop theft seen inside Mawlaya Centre. (Photo: CNA/Maria Ling)

Supermarket chain Sheng Siong's sustainability report 2023 noted a consecutive rise in the number of thefts for each store, from 3.09 in 2021 to 3.64 in 2022 and 4.91 in 2023.



The report also stated that the company's primary approach has always been to work with the police to deter shop theft.

"Having our store employees donning special vests helps to enhance our staff presence to deter and detect shop theft while providing assistance to customers in a non-intrusive manner," it said.

CNA TODAY understands that Sheng Siong supermarkets have also integrated facial recognition technology into their CCTV cameras to enhance security. The technology can highlight the faces of customers in the supermarket who have been caught shoplifting before, so that workers can be more alert about their presence.

Over at Watsons Singapore, managing director Irene Lau said that the health and beauty products chain has seen a 20 per cent rise in theft incidents over the past year.

"We are currently reviewing proposals from various vendors and testing proof-of-concept solutions to determine their effectiveness in our stores," she told CNA TODAY. Watsons did not provide more details of these proposals and solutions.



With [more shoplifting cases reported](#), the police are urging retailers to take part in the Shop Theft Awareness for Retailers (Star) programme. Under this initiative, the police work with retailers to analyse their stores' vulnerabilities and introduce prevention measures.

Sheng Siong and Watsons are among the retail partners on board, along with companies such as NTUC FairPrice supermarket chain, Sebhora beauty products chain, Popular

bookstore, Prime Supermarket and Mustafa Centre shopping complex.

The programme has encouraged retailers to increase CCTV use in their stores. The police said that with more cameras installed, retailers can review footage and file reports against shoplifters anytime.

"With the prevalence of CCTV cameras, offenders will be caught eventually, even if they manage to leave the store with the stolen items," the police added.

The offence of theft in dwelling carries a jail term of up to seven years and a fine.

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AN INESCAPABLE PROBLEM FOR RETAILERS

Nearly 4,000 shop thefts were reported to the police in 2023, but CNA TODAY's conversations with business owners in different districts suggested that the actual figure could be higher.

This discrepancy arises because many business owners and workers, already strapped for manpower and time, often lack the capacity or do not find it necessary or worthwhile to file police reports, which they frequently describe as time-consuming.

Mr Subhash Majumder, 50, who runs a grocery store in Little India, has never reported a case to the police in his 14 years of operation, due to time constraints.

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This is despite shoplifting cases happening frequently at his shop, especially on Sundays.

Mr Subhash's shop has eight CCTV cameras and a large TV screen at the entrance, clearly showing that the entire store is under surveillance. He also hires extra workers to monitor the store during peak periods.

Even so, he lamented that these steps have done little to prevent theft.

"Sometimes, people give excuses. They apologise and say they forgot to pay. Just a few days ago, someone stole milk powder and on the same day, he planned to return to Bangladesh," Mr Subhash said.

"My brother caught him and he (spun a sob story) to make us feel sorry for him."



Mr Subhash Majumdar, 50, owner of Rajshree Enterprise, a minimart in Little India. (Photo: CNA/Maria Ling)

Mr Kenneth Ng, 50, who manages a shop selling homeware in Chinatown, has encountered repeat offenders, including an elderly resident who frequently visits his store to steal scissors "out of habit".

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"From CCTV checks, we know it's her, so when she walks past, we stay extra alert and keep an eye on her. Even though we had informed her family, there was nothing much they could do," the third-generation owner of the business said.

There is also little they can do to prevent the theft of small, inexpensive items, which occurs often. Someone even stole the knob from the lid of a stainless steel mug recently, Mr Ng added.

"Even with CCTV, it's hard to pinpoint the exact time of the theft, and reporting such small losses to the police feels pointless."

Stores selling jewellery and fashion accessories also face the same predicament.

Sales and human resource manager Queenie Teo, 30, who oversees various outlets under her company's brand islandwide, shared similar challenges in dealing with shoplifting, adding that CCTV cameras are not entirely effective at preventing these incidents.

She had a hunch that if a staff member were specifically hired to monitor the CCTV for 11

hours daily, theft cases would likely be uncovered daily.



"We don't hire anyone specifically to do that. Each shop operates for about 11 hours a day, so it's difficult to identify theft cases unless there are clear signs or reports," Ms Teo told CNA TODAY when we met at her company's outlet at Bugis Junction mall.

"In most cases, we find out about theft when the same individuals target other stores or when we review footage of past incidents."

Asked about the frequency of reporting detected theft cases to the police, Ms Teo said that it varies according to the seriousness of the crime. Still, most people caught are usually let off with a stern warning as long as they return the items.

"The most recent case we had to report to the police was at Causeway Point (mall in Yishun). It involved kids crawling under the cloth that was covering our kiosk to steal during closing hours," she said.

"My staff came in the next morning and noticed many missing items. We found out about the kids' actions after checking the CCTV footage. We had to report that case because it's a big no-no."

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On the other hand, Ms Lau from Watsons Singapore said that all theft incidents at its outlets are immediately reported to the police for proper investigation and follow-up.

"The items stolen vary, but high-demand products are often targeted. Shoplifting tends to spike during busier periods such as school holidays and festive seasons when stores are crowded and opportunities for theft increase."

ARE RISING COSTS WORSENING THE PROBLEM?

Shop theft can be particularly difficult to tackle, since it is driven by a range of factors that make it challenging to address.

1. INFRASTRUCTURE LOOPHOLES

From an infrastructure standpoint, security and retail experts interviewed by CNA TODAY suggested that the rise in self-checkout counters may be a contributing factor.

Mr Khairul Rudy Sidhu, honorary secretary of the Association of Certified Security Agencies, said that although these systems are designed to streamline the shopping experience and reduce operational costs, they also create opportunities for theft.

This is particularly more prevalent in supermarkets and grocery stores, where the

systems depend heavily on customers' integrity.

Mr Khairul, who is also managing director of Aardvark Security Services, added: "This could lead to unintentional or deliberate mis-scanning of items, making it harder for stores to detect and prevent losses."

Adjunct Professor Lynda Wee of Nanyang Business School said that when self-checkout counters started being used more widely in supermarkets around two years ago, many customers were still adjusting to the new technology.

"But as time passes, people become more familiar and confident with the system. This has led some of them to figure out ways to 'game' the system and get away with pilfering."

Mr Khairul said that self-checkout-enabled theft is a problem worldwide, not just in Singapore, with even major grocers such as Walmart in the United States having removed these systems at certain stores to address issues related to shoplifting.



A wall-mounted monitor showing views of the multiple surveillance cameras in Rajbhari Enterprise, a Walmart in Little India. (Photo: CNA/Nuria Ling)



Photos of customers committing shop thefts seen at a Venus Beauty outlet. (Photo: CNA/Nuria Ling)

2. MANPOWER AND COST CONSTRAINTS

In Singapore, Mr Khairul noted that with the roll-out of the Progressive Wage Model – a wage structure designed to lift lower-wage workers' salaries – many companies

including grocers are facing higher operating expenses.

To mitigate these costs, grocers often turn to self-checkout systems, which help reduce manpower expenses.

At the same time, they are hesitant about investing in more advanced technology to enhance security.

"One of the major challenges with traditional CCTV management is the sheer volume of footage. Someone needs to sift through 24 hours of footage to spot a suspect," Mr Khalrul said.

"Analytics technology can help reduce the workload by 70 per cent, but this implementation comes with added costs and grocers are mostly unwilling to invest in it."

Mdm Hoe, the store leader in Ang Mo Kio, also expressed concern about manpower constraints. She said that most of the time, only two people including herself are manning the store.

"There's a lot of pressure. With just two of us working, it's stressful when one goes on a break because one person can't do everything.

"If customers ask questions, it becomes difficult to keep an eye on everything that's going on in the shop," she added.

3. INDIVIDUAL MOTIVATIONS AND AFFLICTIONS

As shoplifting cases rise, one might wonder whether the increasing cost of living is a contributing factor.

However, the answer is not clear-cut, with shopkeepers telling CNA TODAY that they generally do not see rising costs as the main cause.

They often observe that the items being stolen are non-essential goods. They also encounter people who appear to steal "out of habit".

Based on interviews with criminal lawyers and forensic psychologists, there are three common reasons people steal: They steal because they need the items, they want to seek thrills or they have mental health conditions.

Associate Professor Ferlin Jayatissa from the Singapore University of Social Sciences said that to better understand the impact of the cost of living on shop theft cases, it is crucial to consider not just the number of cases but also the items being stolen.

"Theft of basic necessities from supermarkets or department stores could suggest a link to financial hardship. If people are stealing potato chips or snacks, it may be linked to thrill-seeking rather than necessity."