

Crime Detection and
Prevention Series
Paper 76

Shop Theft

Improving the police response

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Police Research Group: Crime Detection and Prevention Series

The Home Office Police Research Group (PRG) was formed in 1992 to carry out and manage research relevant to the work of the police service. The terms of reference for the Group include the requirement to identify and disseminate good policing practice.

The Crime Detection and Prevention Series follows on from the Crime Prevention Unit papers, a series which has been published by the Home Office since 1983. The recognition that effective crime strategies will often involve both crime prevention and crime investigation, however, has led to the scope of this series being broadened. This new series will present research material on both crime prevention and detection in a way which informs policy and practice throughout the service.

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Foreword

Shop theft is often seen as a minor crime, but in many ways its effects are more serious. It is often the first crime that young people commit and it is important that at this first contact with the police every effort is made to prevent them reoffending. Police officers report spending a high proportion of their time dealing with shop theft incidents; time which could be more beneficially spent on other duties. Also retail crime affects almost half of the shops in England and Wales. The costs to these shops and indirectly to consumers are worryingly high.

The scheme evaluated in this report attempted to reduce both the reoffending rate of first-time shop thieves and the amount of time police officers spent dealing with them. This report provides evidence that, in both respects, the scheme is a success and its example of good practice in this area should be disseminated as widely as possible.

S W BOYS SMITH
Director of Police Policy
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Executive summary

In May 1994, the Milton Keynes division of Thames Valley Police introduced their Retail Theft Initiative (RTI). This division covers the large shopping centre in Milton Keynes. The aim was to prevent first-time offenders arrested for shop theft from re-offending, and to reduce the amount of 'unproductive time' spent by police in processing these cases of shop theft. Between May 1994 and December 1995 (the study period) nearly 50% of the 885 incidents of shop theft notified to Milton Keynes resulted in an offender being placed on RTI.

In many respects, the RTI is similar to 'Caution Plus' schemes which have been run around the country. The initiative is designed to complement and build upon the usual caution given to first-time shop thieves. It concentrates on first-time offenders, is entirely voluntary, and offenders receive a formal caution regardless of whether they attend the RTI.

The RTI consists of a number of modules designed to show those arrested for shop theft the consequences of their actions, both for themselves and others, and to improve the ability to resist offending in the future. One-to-one interviews are conducted to establish the motive for offending, and a programme of the most relevant modules is drawn up for the offender (and parent/appropriate adult) to attend. These modules include interviews with store managers, sessions with representatives from the youth service about leisure activities, group work to learn how to recognise and resist peer pressure to offend, and other more individually tailored action (for example, for offenders suffering from physical or mental illness). At the end of the programme, a formal caution is given which includes going over what the offender has learned from the scheme.

This study examined three areas in which the scheme could be expected to have had an impact – reoffending, officer time and crime reporting rates.

Re-offending – the reoffending rate for those attending the RTI was 13% compared with 64% for non-RTI offenders. This rate was lower than for cautioned offenders (30%) and for first time offenders (35%) who did not attend the scheme. Although one cannot exclude the possibility that those who choose to attend the scheme are those who are least likely to reoffend anyway, the evidence from this study is that the scheme is having a real impact on re-offending rates.

Officer time – the average amount of time spent by officers dealing with RTI offenders was found to be half that for officers in a comparison division who dealt with shop theft offenders in the conventional way. Despite this, RTI officers spend much more time on the caution.

Reporting rates – comparison of recorded shop theft incidents over the past five years between Milton Keynes and other areas, together with a questionnaire survey of store suggests that the RTI has encouraged more reporting of shop theft offenders to the police.

This report goes on to consider ways in which the scheme might be improved:

- in order to meet PACE requirements, it is important to ensure that an officer of Inspector rank or above always gives the caution, and to continue the de-arrest procedure at the shopping centre's security suite. Taking fingerprints and photos before the caution rather than after would bring the scheme more in line with PACE requirements;
- the scheme should continue to focus on first time-offenders, who respond best to it;
- there is scope for improving the attendance of older offenders on the scheme, by developing new modules more relevant to their needs;
- the targeting of individuals to modules could be improved. In particular, more teenage offenders would benefit from being referred to the protective behaviours module;
- there is potential for targeting aspects of the RTI on schools which account for a large proportion of offenders. The most relevant aspect of the RTI to consider extending in this way is the protective behaviours module.

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1. Introduction

Shop theft is a crime which has a major impact on both stores and the police service. According to the Home Office Commercial Victimization Survey, which asked retail and manufacturing premises directly about their experiences of crime, in 1993 there were 5.8 million incidents of theft from shops in England and Wales. Nearly 50% of shops had reported at least one shop theft incident. It is also a problem which affects some shops more than others: a third of victims had more than ten shop theft incidents over the year (Home Office, 1995a).

Although only a proportion of these crimes come to the attention of the police (in 1993 there were 275,607 recorded incidents of theft from shops) this still means a lot of work for the police. Patrol officers who are called in to deal with a shop thief will often find a good part of their working day is taken up with interviewing and paperwork. This is especially true when dealing with the 37% of offenders who are juveniles (Home Office, 1995b) and therefore require all the procedures for contacting appropriate adults.

In many cases, shop theft is the offender's first offence and, partly because of this, nearly 60% of cases are dealt with by cautioning. Nationally, it is estimated that 6.3% of offenders who have been cautioned for shop theft go on to be convicted of an offence within two years (figures from the Home Office Research & Statistics Department), although this figure does not take into account repeat cautioning.

Milton Keynes division in Thames Valley Police decided in 1993 to make a concerted effort to reduce both reoffending by shop thieves and the amount of time officers had to spend dealing with these cases. The centre of Milton Keynes is a large self-contained shopping centre which lent itself well to a targeted approach.

The scheme that was devised was similar in many respects to other 'caution-plus' schemes that have been run around the country. The main aim is to work with offenders, and particularly first-time offenders, to show them the consequences of their actions, both for themselves and others, and to equip them with the ability to resist offending in the future.

INTRODUCTION

Interest from both the Retail Action Group, an associate group of the Crime Prevention Agency Board, and from the force itself in having the scheme evaluated led to this study by the Police Research Group. The study began when the scheme had been running for 18 months, and its main considerations were:

- had the scheme reduced the reoffending rate?
- was officer time spent on shop thieves reduced?
- did the scheme breach the PACE Act's Codes of Practice?

This report aims to answer these questions and provide guidance on how the scheme can be most effectively targeted.

2. Description of the scheme

The Retail Theft Initiative (RTI) was introduced in the Central Milton Keynes division of Thames Valley Police on 9 May 1994. Its stated aim was “to work with those who have been arrested and who admit involvement in shop theft in Milton Keynes Shopping Centre.” Terms of reference for the scheme were drawn up, these being:

- “To work with individuals and educate them to;*
- realise that shop theft is not a victimless crime,*
 - realise the consequences of their actions on themselves, the shops and others, and*
 - be capable of, and understand how to resist reoffending.*

To enable those who persistently reoffend or those in danger of persistently offending to be identified in order that initiatives or action could be considered and where appropriate concentrated to maximum effect.

To maximise on time management to allow the time spent with ‘offenders’ to be quality time spent effectively and allow patrol officers to return to uniform patrol duties at the earliest opportunity.”

From the outset repeat offenders were excluded from the scheme, but those with Court convictions a number of years previously would be considered individually on merit. This exclusion criterion has been reviewed in recent months and some repeat offenders have been included on the scheme, often on the recommendation of the area’s Juvenile Panel.

Basic data were kept on each offender and from January 1995 this was significantly upgraded; there is now a considerable amount of data available for analysis. The team also conducted a short (January - June 1995) evaluation study which included ‘satisfaction surveys’ of offenders, their parents and agencies involved in the scheme. The results from that study were used to ‘fine tune’ some aspects of the scheme.

What actually happens?

When a suspected shop thief is apprehended in the Milton Keynes Shopping Centre he/she is taken to the centre’s security suite, which is equipped with a quiet office for interviewing, and an officer is called in the normal way. When the officer arrives he/she arrests the offender and checks that the offender meets the six basic criteria for inclusion on the scheme. These are that:

DESCRIPTION OF THE SCHEME

- the offender admits the offence;
- the offender's personal details are correct;
- the offender does not have a previous record;
- the offender is not violent;
- the offender is not part of an organised team; and
- the offender lives in, or near, Milton Keynes.

If all these criteria are met, the offender is eligible to go on the Retail Theft Initiative and is then de-arrested. The patrol officer will at this point contact juvenile offenders' parents by 'phone and inform them of the situation. If the offender agrees to attend, this is then usually the end of the patrol officer's involvement. Occasionally if a particularly young offender has been apprehended, and there is no appropriate adult to accompany them home, it is still necessary to take the offender back to the police station. The offender is given a letter telling him/her to attend on a particular Wednesday evening and a brief outline of what the scheme entails. For juvenile offenders, the RTI coordinator also sends a letter to the offender's home address.

All sessions take place on Wednesday evenings between 6pm and 9pm at Milton Keynes police station and, for juveniles, a parent or appropriate adult is also always present. In the first session, all new attendees are seen together (usually a group of about 5 offenders) and the scheme is explained in more detail. It is explained that the outcome of the scheme will be a formal caution, just as they would receive if they chose not to attend the scheme, and that the scheme will probably take three to four weeks to complete. It is also explained that it is normal procedure for fingerprints and photographs to be taken after the caution has been given. Each attendee, and their parent or appropriate adult where applicable, is then asked whether they wish to continue on the scheme or simply receive the caution.

For those who continue, the next step is a one-to-one interview with an officer. During the interview the officer goes back over all the details of the offence and tries to find the motive for offending. From this he/she draws up a programme of the most applicable modules for the offender to undertake. This interview usually lasts about half an hour, but can take longer if the offender is particularly difficult or nervous. The tone of the interview is very much dictated by the offender's attitude.

Most offenders then have an interview with a store manager. The store managers work on a rota system, which means that each manager will attend about once every 6 months. The manager explains the effect of shop theft on stores, their staff and the customers.

Many juvenile offenders mention that they offend out of boredom, and for this reason, sessions with the youth service are often included in the programme. These are group sessions which take place without parents or appropriate adults. Their purpose is to show the offenders what activities are available to them, and hopefully to get them interested in a suitable group or pastime.

Another commonly prescribed module is the 'protective behaviours' session. Again this is a group session without adults. It is run by an officer from the scheme's team. The concept is to help those offenders who are pressured by their peers into offending. The officer leads a discussion in how to recognise the danger signals when they could be about to be pressurised and how to get out of the situation without 'losing face'. A police officer runs this module mainly for historical reasons, and passing this function on to another body is under consideration.

Fewer offenders are offered a talk by the prison service than attend the other modules because this talk is considered to be very hard hitting and therefore only suitable for more hardened offenders. The prison service only attend once a month, and usually see about 10 offenders in the 12-17 year age group. In this module the offenders are shown a video and are told about prison life and how a prison record could affect their future prospects.

For some offenders, their personal circumstances make these modules unsuitable and a more individual approach is needed, for example some offenders are suffering from physical or mental illness, have suffered a bereavement or are living in extreme poverty. For these individuals, police involvement is not appropriate, and although a formal caution must be given, they are put into contact with counsellors or the 'befrienders' agency.

The final session for all attendees is the formal caution which is given by an Inspector in full uniform, although on occasion a uniformed Sergeant has taken on this duty. Legally, the caution does not differ from that given to offenders who have not been on the scheme, but the caution does include going back over the lessons that the offender has learnt from the scheme. It is after the caution that fingerprints and photographs are taken.

Penetration of the scheme

Over the study period (May 1994 to December 1995) 885 incidents of shop theft were notified to Milton Keynes division. Of these, 422 resulted in the offender being placed on the RTI. Fifty participants (12%) dropped out of the scheme for various reasons.

3. Potential problems with PACE

The Police and Criminal Evidence Act (PACE) has definite rules which relate directly to several aspects of the RTI scheme. Firstly, whilst at the security suite, it is important that the offender is de-arrested before arrangements are made to initiate the scheme (section 30). There is no appropriate adult present during these initial questions, but as the offender is almost immediately de-arrested and the process is begun again at the station with an appropriate adult, this problem is extremely short-lived. There is of course additional paper-work involved with this arrest- de-arrest process, but this should not be used as an excuse to leave out this step.

Section 61 of PACE deals with taking suspects' fingerprints, and in effect requires that they are taken before the caution is given. As the scheme is run at present, an improvement could be made by bringing practice into line with this PACE requirement. The scheme does not require that fingerprints and photographs are taken, and objecting does not interfere in any way with the rest of the scheme. However, it would not present any problem to PACE for this aspect to be insisted upon, provided the fingerprints were taken before the caution was given.

The final point which should be made is that Home Office Circular 18/1994 on cautioning states that cautions should normally be given by an officer of Inspector rank, or above, in full uniform. It is therefore recommended that this duty is not delegated to an officer of Sergeant rank.

4. Impact on reoffending

Over the entire study period, May 1994 to December 1995, the reoffending rate for those who went on the scheme was 13%, and for those who were dealt with in other ways it was 64%. Obviously there are a number of other possible reasons for this enormous difference in reoffending apart from simply whether or not an offender went on the scheme, and the following examines some of these.

Other courses of action

There are a number of courses of action if an offender is not being put onto the scheme, and the reoffending rates for these different actions vary too. The offender may be cautioned, charged, bailed or remanded in custody. Table 1 below shows the reoffending rates for each of these courses of action.

Table 1 Reoffending rate for the different courses of action

Action	Number	Percentage reoffending ¹
Attended RTI	422	13%
Dropped out of RTI	50	16%
Dealt with in other ways	355	64%
normal caution	26	30%
charged	236	70%
bailed ²	42	50%
remanded	51	59%

Reoffending figures for all other courses of action are at least twice those for the RTI scheme.

¹ Reoffending figures were taken from the RTI database, custody records and PHOENIX. They cover the period 9 May 1994 until the end of February 1996. For some offenders this gives a potential reoffending period of nearly 2 years, and for others only 2 months. However as the RTI group are being compared to the group who receive cautions etc *over the same time period* this should not affect the analysis. To ensure that there were no major differences in the dates of offending between the two groups, an ANOVA test was run. This showed that the dates of offending were similar for the two groups ($f=.734, p=.392$)

² Offenders who are bailed or remanded may go on to be either cautioned or charged, unfortunately it was not possible to discern which of these disposal routes was used for bailed and remanded offenders.

The low reoffending rate for those who dropped out of the scheme might, at first glance, reinforce the theory that the low reoffending rate for the scheme as a whole is due to some degree to self-selection: a low reoffending rate was achieved even though the offenders did not complete the scheme. However some of these 'drop outs' did attend nearly all of their modules. Of those remaining, many dropped out because they moved away from the area, and in these cases any reoffending data would not show up on Central Milton Keynes' database. Because there is such a wide variety of reasons for dropping out of the scheme, and such small numbers are involved, the reoffending rate for this group is less reliable.

Age

Figures 1 and 2 show the age profiles for offenders who chose to go on the scheme, and those who chose not to or were excluded from the scheme. The peak age of offenders whether or not they attended the scheme was 15 years, however the mean ages differed (18 years for those who went on the scheme and 25 years for those who didn't), this was largely due to the fact that very few over 40s chose to attend.

Figure 1: Age of offenders who went on the RTI scheme

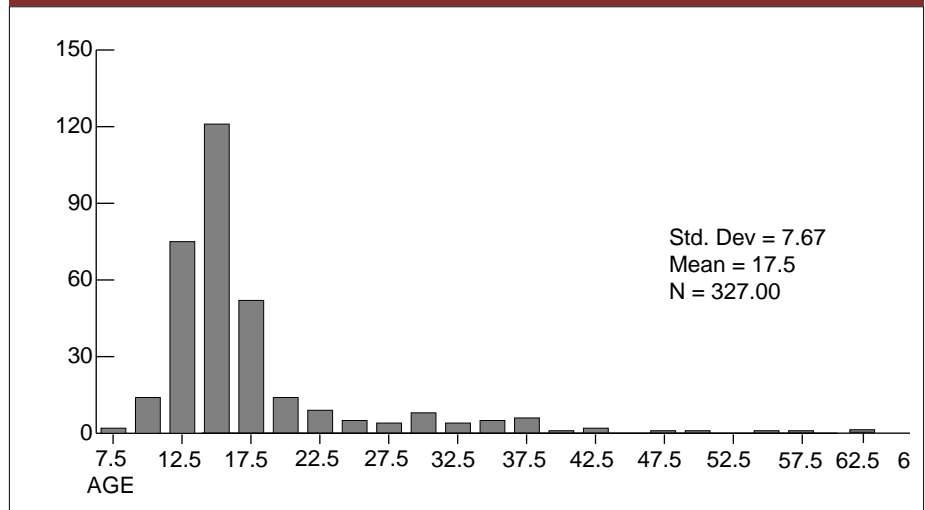
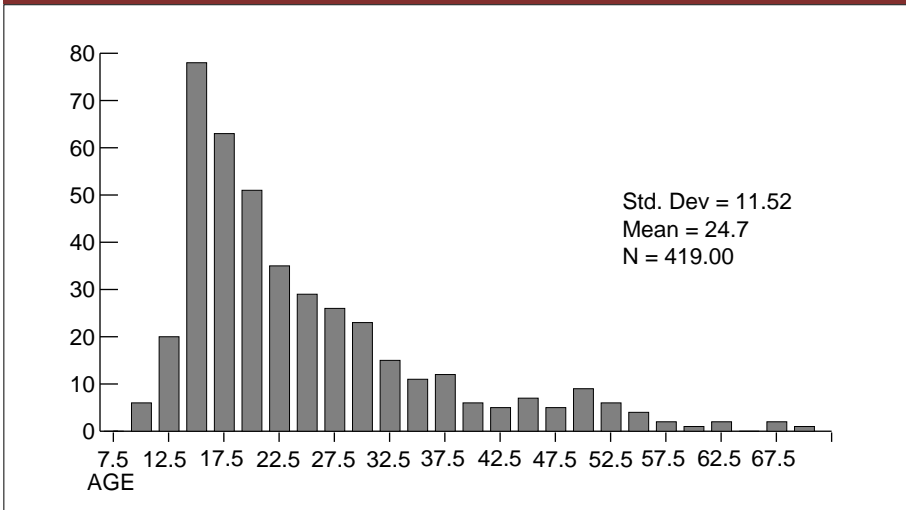


Figure 2: Age of offenders who were dealt with in other ways



Figures 3 and 4 show the age distributions for reoffenders and non-reoffenders. The mean age for reoffenders was 24 years and for non-reoffenders was 20 years. The actual distributions however, were very similar.

Figure 3: Age of reoffenders

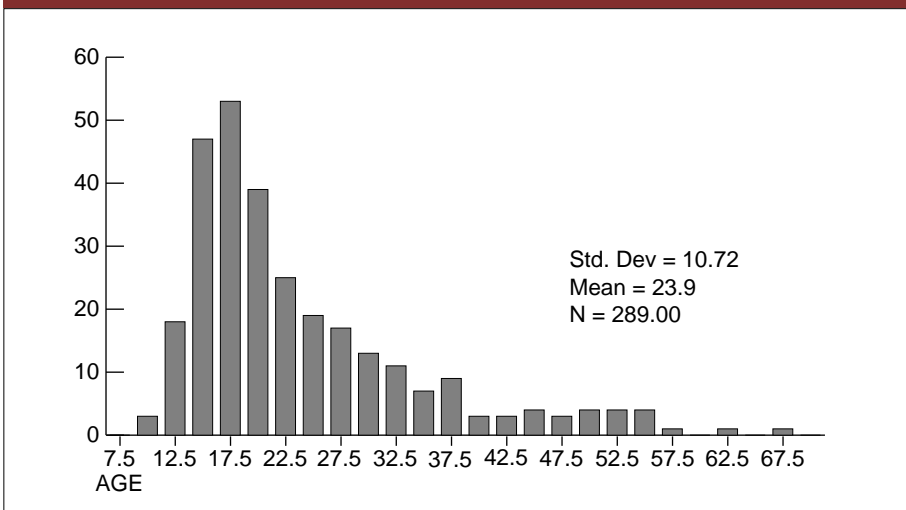
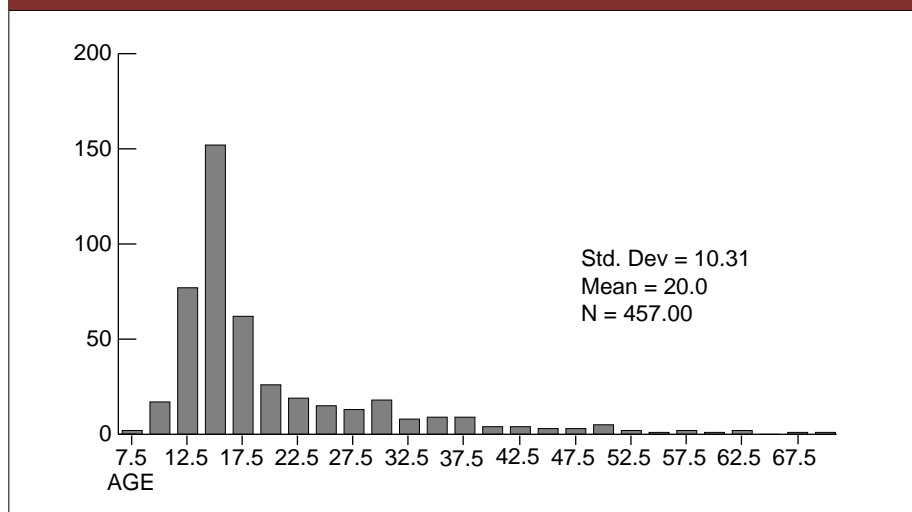


Figure 4: Age of offenders who did not reoffend



When the effects of age and attendance on the scheme were considered on reoffending rates, a chi-square statistical test showed that the only factor affecting reoffending was attendance on the scheme. In this study, age did not play a part in reoffending.

Previous convictions and cautions

It is important to know how effective the scheme is for first-time offenders and for offenders with previous convictions or cautions. This information can be used to ensure that the scheme is properly targeted. Although the scheme was set up to specifically exclude offenders with previous convictions and cautions, some such offenders have been put onto the scheme and their progress can therefore be monitored.³

The results are quite definitive in directing the scheme towards first-time offenders. Table 2 below shows the reoffending rates for those who went on the scheme and those who did not and whether a previous conviction or caution was recorded.

³ Because some previous record data is missing, the reoffending rates used in this section differ from the overall reoffending rates. The rates here should not be taken as: for offenders on the RTI scheme; 12% and for offenders not on the scheme; 62%

Table 2 Reoffending rates for RTI attendees and offenders with a previous record

	Non RTI scheme		RTI scheme	
	Number	Percent reoffending	Number	Percent reoffending
Previous record	294	71%	34	74%
No previous record	102	35%	239	3%

As can be seen, for offenders who had a previous record, the scheme had no effect in producing lower reoffending rates; they remained at over 70%. But for first-time offenders, reoffending was lower; 3% as compared to 35% for those not on the scheme.⁴ This difference in reoffending rate could have been influenced by the two selection processes necessary for an offender to be accepted onto the scheme. The first officer at the scene makes a decision on whether the offender is suitable for the scheme, and then the offender chooses whether or not to attend. These factors may mean that those who are less likely to reoffend anyway are those who end up attending the scheme, but the difference in the reoffending rate is large and at face value suggests that the scheme may be effective.

What parts of the scheme are most effective in reducing reoffending?

The scheme has several constituent parts, and not all are suitable for all offenders. At the initial interview, once the reason for offending has been ascertained and any mitigating circumstances have been taken into consideration, the interviewing officer decides how many parts of the scheme would be of value to the offender. Table 3 below shows how many offenders took part in each ‘module’ and how many subsequently reoffended.

⁴ Statistical tests showed that reoffending was affected significantly by the absence of a previous record, inclusion on the RTI scheme and these two factors together (ANOVA p=.00 in all cases). However there was a high degree of intercorrelation between inclusion on the scheme and absence of a previous record, as would be expected since being a first-time offender is a pre-requisite to being accepted on the scheme

Table 3 Reoffending rates for each module of the RTI

Module	Number attending	Percent reoffending	Number not attending	Percent reoffending
Initial interview	468	14%	6	17%
Store manager	338	13%	136	15%
Youth service	136	9%	338	16%
Prison service	265	14%	209	14%
Protective behaviours	99	10%	375	15%

The numbers not attending the initial interview are too small to draw any conclusions from, and as this is an essential part of the scheme, it seems likely that these 6 cases are simply a data entry error. Although there does seem to be some especial benefit in the youth service and protective behaviours modules, statistical analysis did not find any significant benefit in these over the other modules.⁵ The prison service reoffending rate looks slightly higher than the others, but this could well be because only the more difficult cases are seen by the prison service.

Motivation and offending

For some offenders on the scheme (51%), a code has been recorded for their motivation for offending. As these reasons tend to vary with age, table 4 below shows the reason given by age category.

⁵ Multivariate analysis of variance for 1 to 4 way interactions, $p > .2$ in all cases.

Table 4 Motivation for offending by age

	under 10	11-15	16-20	21 and over	TOTAL	Percentage
Threat/coercion /peer pressure	3	70	16	3	92	35%
Greed	4	45	23	11	83	31%
No clear motive	3	18	12	7	40	15%
Lack of money	-	9	10	13	32	12%
Illness	-	2	3	8	13	5%
Family breakup	-	2	-	1	3	1%
Bereavement	-	2	-	-	2	1%
TOTAL	10	148	64	44	266	100%
Percentage	4%	56%	24%	17%	100%	

NB. Only one motive was recorded for each offender

As can be seen in the above table, the largest group are teenagers who say that they were under some kind of pressure to commit the offence. In fact these 86 offenders make up 32% of the entire sample. From the section on the effectiveness of the various modules of the scheme, it can be seen that only 20% of the group (all ages) were put onto the protective behaviours course.

Following this finding, a comparison was drawn between the reasons given and the modules that offenders were put onto. No correlations were found, which suggests that despite recording motives, there is still some work to be done by officers in tying-up individuals' requirements. It is also suggested that more teenage offenders would particularly benefit from the protective behaviours module which has already been seen to be effective in reducing reoffending. That said, it is recognised that the offender always has the right to refuse to attend certain modules and this may have affected the percentage 'take-up' for some modules.

The influence of motivation on reoffending was also considered, and a clear link was found.⁶ Table 5 below shows the number and percentage who reoffended for each 'motive'.

⁶ Chi-square tests for all groups p=.05.

Table 5 Reoffending rates for each motivation category

	Reoffended		Didn't reoffend	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Threat/coercion/ peer pressure	3	3%	89	97%
Greed	9	11%	74	89%
No clear motive	4	10%	36	90%
Lack of money	8	25%	24	75%
Illness	2	11%	11	85%
Family breakup	0	0%	3	100%
Berevement	0	0%	2	100%
TOTAL	26	10%	233	90%

In the 'lack of money' category, 8 offenders were over 21. This group are checked on carefully by the scheme's officers and to be included in this category the reason must be found to have some truth. The fact that the reoffending level is high here is not surprising as according to the officers, these offenders do indeed have so little money that reoffending may seem to them the only viable option.

Special groups

The RTI database allows analyses to be performed which can show particular areas, or groups of offenders which may warrant special attention. For example, the estate on which offenders live is recorded, and from this it can be seen that five estates account for 32% of all offences, with one estate accounting for 12%. The sociological reasons for this may be complex and difficult for officers to confront. There are however, other groupings which do lend themselves to some action.

One example is the school that young offenders attend. There are five schools which account for most of the offences (46%) and one which accounts for 20%. These schools would be prime candidates for crime prevention officer visits, or group talks from officers trained to give 'protective behaviour' advice.

Although juveniles make up the largest proportion of offenders, there is still a large number of older offenders and the reoffending rate for this group is fairly high. As was seen in figures 1 and 2, older offenders are usually reluctant to attend the RTI scheme, although they are usually eligible to attend, the majority not having previous records. Table 6 below shows how few over-16 year olds who had left school chose to participate in the scheme.

Table 6 Reoffending rates for older offenders

	RTI	Non-RTI
Reoffended	22% (18)	65% (123)
Did not reoffend	76% (58)	35% (66)

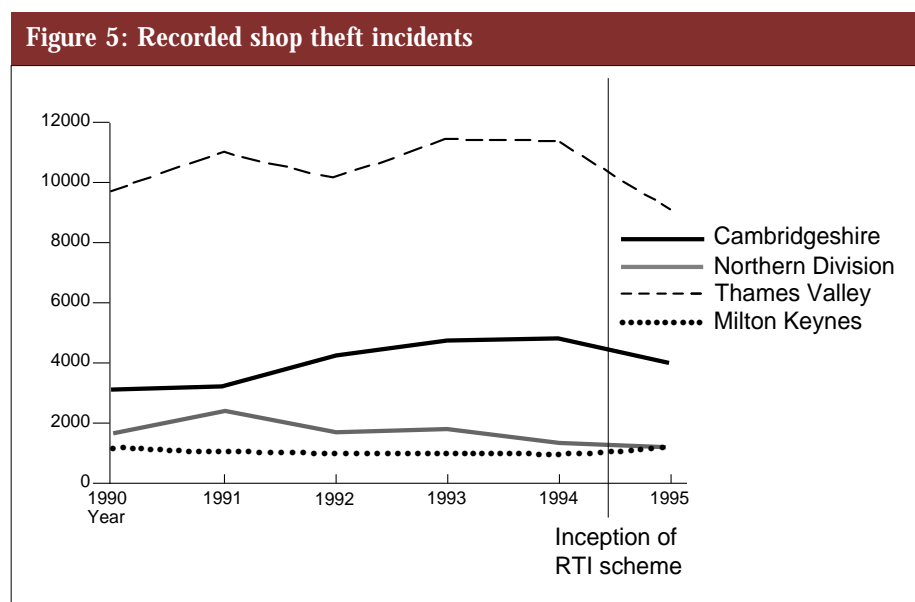
Those who choose to go on the scheme are a self-selected sample and, as such, may be more likely to respond well to it. This noted, the reoffending rates still are very much better for attendees than non-attendees. As only 29% of this group of older offenders do participate in the scheme, it could be considered that some modifications to make the scheme more suitable and more appealing to older offenders would be useful.

Within this group, employment status was also recorded and only 27 offenders (11%) were found to have been employed. It seems therefore that any effort put into devising new modules for older offenders should be directed towards unemployed offenders.

One problem which could be encountered, were this group to be targeted, is that of the incentive to attend the scheme. With juvenile offenders, the incentive is likely to come from parents who want help with preventing their child reoffending. For older offenders, when they are told that a caution will be given in any case, there may not be any incentive to attend the scheme. Perhaps modules which deal with areas such as money management could be devised which would offer some tangible benefit to the offender. Consideration should also be given to incentive if the scheme is being considered for other offences.

5. Impact on reporting rates

The RTI is popular with the agencies who contribute to it, as several questionnaire studies have shown.⁷ One effect of this popularity is that stores now are more keen to call the police when a small amount has been stolen, or the offender is young. They are now convinced that the matter will be dealt with in an appropriate and effective manner. Also, police officers are more likely to put offenders onto the scheme who may before have simply received informal warnings. For these two reasons, more offenders appear in the force's crime statistics. Figure 5 below shows the effect this has had on recorded crime levels. Comparisons are made with Thames Valley as a whole, Cambridgeshire Constabulary as a whole, and the control area (see next section) - Northern Division of Cambridgeshire Constabulary which covers the Queensgate shopping centre.



As can be seen, from the time the scheme started the level of recorded crime in the Milton Keynes centre has virtually remained constant. However, all other areas have seen a reduction in reported shop theft.

To see whether the scheme has had an effect on stores' perceptions of how to deal with shop theft, a questionnaire was sent to stores in the Milton Keynes Shopping Centre which participate in the scheme, and to stores in a control shopping centre.

⁷ The evaluation study is available from the RTI team at Milton Keynes Central division of Thames Valley Police.

The control site chosen was Queensgate centre in Peterborough - a shopping centre of similar size to Milton Keynes which serves a similar sized population. This area is covered by Northern division of Cambridgeshire Constabulary.

Although 20 stores in the Queensgate centre replied to the questionnaire, the responses were often that there was no problem with shop thieves in that particular store. The most information that can be gleaned from the 12 stores that gave full responses is that on average 3.5 offenders are released from each store per week because they were very young, very old or the amount stolen was very small. Other stores indicated that they would be lenient in these cases, but so far had not caught anyone in these categories. In contrast, only one incident where the police had not been called was recorded for the stores in the RTI scheme. This case involved a very young shop thief. (The four main department stores in Milton Keynes replied to the survey.)

Although these data seem to indicate that stores which participate in the RTI are more likely to call the police, the numbers are really too low for this to be a firm conclusion.

6. Impact on officer time

One of the key objectives from the outset of the RTI scheme was to reduce the amount of officer time spent on shop theft offences, in particular the waiting in custody suites for appropriate adults.

To see if officer time is saved by the scheme, a comparison between Milton Keynes division and another similar division was needed. Officers working on the RTI scheme already record the amount of time spent on each offender and the first officer at the scene records his/her time. As a comparison, officers at Northern division of Cambridgeshire Constabulary kept a log of the amount of time spent on shop theft incidents over a 2 week period (which included three Saturdays).

The differences between the two divisions in officer time spent on shop thieves are quite dramatic as can be seen in Table 7 below. The times shown for officers at Milton Keynes include all time spent on the scheme.

Table 7 Average times spent dealing with a shop theft offence		
	Northern division	Milton Keynes division (RTI attenders)
Average total time (mins)	255	124
Average time spent at shopping centre (mins)	13	65 (includes few cases where suspect had to be taken into custody)
Average time spent in custody (mins)	202	—
Average time spent on caution (mins)	5	16

As can be seen, the average time spent on each shop thief on the RTI is about half that for shop thieves dealt with more conventionally in the Cambridgeshire division. Perhaps of equal importance is that the average time spent on cautioning shop thieves on the RTI is more than three times that for the comparison division. Obviously a caution lasting over a quarter of an hour is more likely to have an effect than one lasting 5 minutes, and the cautions observed spent some time discussing the lessons the offender had learned from the scheme.

These two points together show how the scheme has been effective not just in reducing officer time, but in converting wasted time (especially waiting in custody) into productive time. In 42% of the Northern division cases, the officer cited that the long time spent in custody was due to waiting for an appropriate adult, and 59% of cases resulted in an informal warning rather than a formal caution.

7. Summary and conclusions

The main objectives of the Retail Theft Initiative were to reduce reoffending and reduce the amount of officer time spent dealing with shop thieves. Despite the caveat that the low reoffending rates may be due in part to self-selection by those who agree to attend the scheme, it does appear that on both counts, it has met its objectives. When all other factors which can be measured, such as previous records, age, method of disposal, employment status, are taken into consideration, the RTI scheme attendees still have a lower rate of reoffending than offenders who did not attend the scheme. In addition, the average amount of time officers spend on each shop thief is very much less than when dealt with in the usual way, and the time they do spend is used more productively.

The next main consideration must be how to target the scheme most effectively. Several areas suitable for targeting have been identified in this evaluation study, perhaps the most important being the question of including or excluding offenders with previous records for shop theft.

The scheme as it was originally set up specifically excluded offenders with a previous record. Reoffending is ten times lower for first-time offenders who attend the scheme, but no better at all for repeat offenders. It is recommended that as many first-time offenders as possible are recruited onto the scheme, but that the scheme excludes repeat offenders unless there are exceptional circumstances.

The next area which merits some attention is the age range covered by the scheme. Although the age range of offenders on the scheme matches fairly well the age range of shop thieves in general, there is scope for improving the attendance of older offenders. The data have shown that there is a large number of offenders over the age of 16, who would be eligible for the scheme and would stand a good chance of being helped by it. Unfortunately at present the scheme is very much slanted towards younger offenders and therefore some new modules would be needed. When devising any such modules, it should be borne in mind that the majority of this group are unemployed.

Although the scheme was designed as a package of modules, there is no discernable link between the reasons offenders give for their offence and the modules they attend. In particular, not all offenders who cite peer pressure as a motive are placed on the protective behaviours module. This should be remedied. At least 85% of teenagers would potentially benefit from attending. Further thought should therefore be given to how the scheme could be tailored to meet individual needs.

A large proportion of offenders appear to live in one of five key estates and attend one of five schools. Although it is difficult to see what action the police could take in relation to the housing estates that would impact on shop theft, there is potential for targeting the five schools. It is recommended that the very effective protective

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behaviours module is taken into schools, either by a member of the RTI team or the community liaison officer.

The team were particularly concerned that some aspects of the RTI scheme may breach parts of the PACE act. The only areas which merit any particular attention are the de-arrest process at the security suite and the actual caution. Although these are usually carried out correctly it should be noted that the de-arrest process is essential and it would be unwise to continue the practice of delegating the caution to a Sergeant.

8. Recommendations

The overriding recommendation which arises from this evaluation study is that the scheme is effective in its two main objectives and this example of good practice should be disseminated as widely as possible. The following points should be considered as 'fine-tuning' only, but could contribute to making the scheme even more effective.

- The scheme should only accept offenders with no previous record for shop theft.
- Modules for older offenders should be devised, with particular attention being paid to the problems associated with being unemployed.
- More effort should be put into tailoring the programme to the offender's reasons for offending. In particular, more offenders who cite peer pressure as a reason for their offence should receive the protective behaviours module.
- The protective behaviours module should be taken into schools, in particular the five schools which account for the largest proportion of offenders.

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