

On-line Arrest Reporting System for Shoplifting



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This Command College Independent Study Project is a FUTURES study of a particular emerging issue in law enforcement. Its purpose is NOT to predict the future, but rather to project a number of possible scenarios for strategic planning consideration.

Defining the future differs from analyzing the past because the future has not yet happened. In this project, useful alternatives have been formulated systematically so that the planner can respond to a range of possible future environments.

Managing the future means influencing the future--creating it, constraining it, adapting to it. A futures study points the way.

The views and conclusions expressed in the Command College project are those of the author and are not necessarily those of the Commission on Peace Officer Standards and Training (POST).

One of the most common nonviolent crimes facing law enforcement today is shoplifting. Shoplifting is an expensive problem that ends up costing U.S. consumers and businesses billions per year. Businesses pay the costs of lost merchandise and security-related expenses and pass these costs on in the way of higher retail prices to consumers.

Shoplifters represent every age group and income level. Anyone who enters a store could be a potential shoplifter, whether the person is a professional thief or an “amateur” stealing property on an impulse or a whim. Professionals steal for a living while amateurs steal for many other reasons (thrill seeking, drug habit, peer pressure, etc.). In either case, prevention is the best avenue by which to deal with the potential shoplifter. Unfortunately, the prevalence of the crime also means a number of those leaving stores with stolen property will be apprehended in the act. That is normally where the police become involved.

The police spend countless hours investigating, processing and prosecuting those responsible for shoplifting crimes, the police and their retail partners are often swamped with obligations at the expense of devoting valuable time to retail sales and public safety in other arenas. There has to be a better way. In fact, there is.

The Stockton, California Police Department has created a leading-edge program to transition the hours now spent on shoplifting arrests and reporting to an on-line arrest reporting system used by retailers to document crimes, write incident reports and transmit information to the police to facilitate the prosecution of shoplifters. The program is unique, but could be easily adapted by any agency wishing to transform its cumbersome reporting processes to one that streamlines the reporting, reviewing, processing and prosecution or resolution of simple shoplifting cases.

Law Enforcement and Retail Partnerships

Every law enforcement department has a responsibility to make sure those arrested for shoplifting are held to answer for their crime. Police agencies also have a responsibility to use the resources available to them in the most efficient and ethical manner. This may seem simple and relatively straightforward as it relates to this topic; however, in reality, it becomes increasingly difficult to apply this simple theory in an ever-changing and complex world.

In 2004, Stockton police officers handled 1031 shoplifting calls, which took on average 157 minutes each to complete. This is an inordinate amount of police officer time when compared to the amount of merchandise loss to the retail store (sometimes as little as \$1-\$2) and the punishment from prosecution (probation time or perhaps one day in jail, unless there is a prior conviction which may bring a 30-day jail sentence). This police officer time does not necessarily include completing the written crime report that is required. It also does not include the time spent by security staff waiting for an officer to respond to the store for the offender; time they could spend conducting more loss prevention.

Technological advancements in the area of computers, interoperability and access to real-time data have provided a window of opportunity for law enforcement to partner with private entities to do things never before considered. Implementing an on-line arrest reporting system for shoplifters at retail stores has helped alleviate processing time of offenders and response and report writing time of police officers for simple shoplifting cases. Using technology to streamline the arrest and processing of shoplifters, police officers can utilize their time more productively and effectively.

The city of Stockton has no intention of ignoring a criminal act, no matter how small, so how to best treat the incident became the focus of our attention. The time needed for responses to minor crimes like shoplifting arrests ranged from a few minutes to several hours of an officer's time (specifics; data). The expense related to these responses, combined with the depletion of the patrol team staff, indicated further reductions in service had to be made to more effectively allocate staff to higher priority incidents.

Merely reducing service levels would create frustration for both the police and security staff working to prevent losses as officers tried to balance their needs against others requiring their presence. Store security staff was troubled by lengthy delays, and at times no response to service requests for an officer to take a report. We did not have an on-line reporting system in place, and security staff spent time talking to a phone tree to determine if an officer was responding at all. Getting lost in a phone tree and waiting for police response added a layer of victimization to the retail stores who had already suffered due to a criminal act.

Our studies showed very few retail establishments expected an immediate response for the arrest, but they did expect the police to take a report and try to prevent them from being a victim again in the future. In addition, most stores needed a police report to file a claim with their insurers. With these considerations in mind, Stockton sought to mitigate the time consumed by officers at shoplifting calls, satisfy the need for official documentation of the crime and to complete all steps necessary to prosecute those responsible for crime. On-line reporting was seen as the best way to serve all three goals.

The Stockton Solution

Stockton's on-line shoplifting reporting system provides faster and more efficient processing from the time of incident to prosecution. Security staff is able to get automated feedback regarding the status of their case. It has alleviated processing time of offenders and response and report writing time of police officers for simple shoplifting cases. Freed from the old practices of shoplift investigation and reporting, police officers can utilize their time more productively and effectively. This benefits the community by getting patrol cars back into the neighborhoods and improving police response to criminal activity. It can also alleviate the amount of time spent by security staff waiting for police officers to arrive at any particular locale to investigate thefts from retailers. For the merchant this means their security staff can devote more time to loss prevention, spending more time on their floors.

The Police Department trains loss prevention officers to apply and operate within the Department's policies and procedures to complete the arrest and release process for shoplifting suspects. The program allows store security to process arrestees faster than previous methods (an average of only 36 minutes from arrest to release) and relieves the police from the responsibility to expend valuable time plodding through a cumbersome process of written reports. For the purposes of prosecution, though, the change is transparent. All arrested for shoplifting are processed and prosecuted by the District Attorney's office in the same manner as with the previous procedure.

In a traditional policing model, a person is arrested by store security and detained in the security office. The police are called and can take hours to respond. All the while, store security is "sitting on" the suspect while others may be stealing from the store. In many cases, store security fills out a preliminary report for their employer. The responding officer, however, has to complete the "official" report. The police also must catalog and preserve evidence, book any property, and in most cases take the individual to the main police facility and cite them to appear. With the on-line system, the reports, evidence disposition and the citation issues are completed as a part of one integrated process. The store doesn't have to wait for a lengthy response, alleviating the need for an officer to respond, and officers can stay on their beats without having to handle a case that can be handled more efficiently.

Considerations for Implementation

Law enforcement agencies interested in the program should consider the following lists of information. Agencies will find they have the ability to impact their time spent on shoplifting cases by partnering with local retail security personnel. The following outline depicts the eligibility for the program; the loss prevention officer's responsibilities and a summary of the responsibilities of police officers, dispatchers and records personnel in bringing the program together.

A typical scenario of a shoplifting arrest in Stockton usually entails security taking a suspect into custody and holding him/her in the security office for an officer to arrive. Once the officer arrives, the officer checks the suspect to make sure he/she is eligible for release on a citation and promise to appear. The evidence is handled and the report is written for security by responding officers. The on-line shoplifting program, however, allows security staff to handle the entire encounter, arrest, records check, report, evidence disposition and release without the response of a police officer if the following criteria is met:

Loss prevention officer responsibilities when taking a suspected shoplifter into custody

- Verify the identity of the suspected shoplifter
- California driver's license/identification card
- Picture identification card
- Independent confirmation

- Telephone call to parents of juvenile suspects
- Investigative questioning
- Identifying marks/tattoos confirmed through the Police Records Section
- Follow store policies for cases where the business does not seek criminal prosecution and a patrol officer is not needed
- For cases where prosecution is desired, complete the on-line report and include a detailed narrative
- Contact the Police Records Section by telephone and give them the store and loss prevention officer's information. Wait for the return phone call from the Police Records Section and give them the suspected shoplifter's name and date of birth
- Get the case number from Police Records personnel, which shall be placed at the top of the narrative section of the on-line report

Suspect's Eligibility for the Program (as determined by Loss Prevention Officer)

■ Confirmed Identification

- California driver's license
- California identification card
- Picture identification card
- Independent confirmation
- Parent of juvenile suspect
- Investigative questioning
- Identifying marks/tattoos that are confirmed through Police Records

■ Criminal History

- No misdemeanor or felony warrants
- Active parole
- Prior theft-related crime convictions with one day served (i.e. robbery, petty theft, grand theft, burglary, theft with a prior conviction, stolen vehicle, carjacking, etc.)
- NOTE: Juveniles cannot be charged with petty theft with prior convictions

■ Permanent Address:

- Must live within a 55-mile radius of Stockton

■ Others:

- Suspect must have the ability to understand the nature of the steps being taken
- Suspect must not be under the influence of alcohol and/or drugs
- Suspect must be cooperative and non-combative

For Cases Qualifying For The Program:

- Take a digital photograph of the suspected shoplifter and loss prevention officer and attach it to the Shoplift Program Release Waiver form

- Take a digital photograph of the suspected shoplifter with the recovered property (Property and photograph will be retained by the store)
- Take two fingerprints (one from each hand) of the suspected shoplifter and attach them to the Shoplift Program Release Waiver form
- Explain shoplifter's obligation to respond to the district attorney's notice to appear letter or a warrant will be issued
- Have the suspected shoplifter read and sign the Shoplift Program Release Waiver form

For Cases Not Qualifying For the Program :

- Take a digital photograph of the suspected shoplifter with the recovered property and another photograph with the loss prevention officer for identification purposes (property and photographs will be retained by the store)
- Ensure the on-line report is accurate and complete
- Submit the report electronically on-line to the Stockton Police Department Records Section
- Release the suspected shoplifter to the Stockton Police Department Patrol Officer

Law enforcement agencies should form a focus group to discuss the technological and policy issues that are required to undertake an on-line shoplifting program. In most cases, an officer assigned to a report review function should be able to handle the review process and referral to the district attorney. Pamphlets and power point presentation can assist you to recruit your local business to participate. Stockton's experience is retailers will be anxious to join this program, and will readily approach the police once they are aware it exists.

Patrol Officer

- Respond to the store
- Review the loss prevention officer's on-line report for the elements of the crime
- Transport the suspected shoplifter to the police department for processing
- Fingerprint and photograph the suspected shoplifter at the police department
- Book the suspected shoplifter into the San Joaquin County jail or release on a notice to appear from the police department
- Complete a supplemental arrest report using the case number given to the loss prevention officer

Records Personnel

- When contacted by a participating business, get the business and loss prevention officer's information and call the business back using phone number on file with the police department
- Create a call history and assign a case number to be given to the loss prevention officer

- Conduct a RMS, warrant, and criminal history check of the suspected shoplifter
- Advise the loss prevention officer either:
 - “The subject qualifies for the Shoplifting Store Release Program,” or
 - “The subject does not qualify for the Shoplifting Store Release Program. I will notify Dispatch so that an Officer will respond to your location.”
- DO NOT give the reason if the suspected shoplifter does not qualify
- Notify the Command Center to dispatch an officer to the store

Case Reviewing Officer

- Ensure on-line reports are reviewed
- Organize a four-hour training program for personnel from the participating businesses with instruction on report writing, identification of suspects, use of report program, and other related topics needed by the participating businesses
- Review submitted reports to identify any need for additional training
- Maintain a list of participating businesses and personnel assigned to those businesses that have completed the training program
- Schedule training with participating businesses from new personnel training

Results

The on-line reporting system for shoplifting in the stores we have partnered with has streamlined reporting, reviewing, processing, and prosecution or resolution of simple shoplifting cases. The system has provided faster and more efficient processing from the time of incident to prosecution. Additionally, security staff is able to receive automated feedback regarding the status of their case. It has alleviated processing time of many of the offenders and response and report writing time of police officers for simple shoplifting cases has decreased more than 42 percent since we began the program in June, 2005.

Conclusion

With the staggering losses to shoplifting and the tremendous amount of time law enforcement spends responding to these types of calls, an on-line reporting system can provide your agency relief. The partnerships with the local retail stores will enhance your customer service to them and the others in your jurisdictions that so frequently have to wait for police assistance. The officers on the street and the retail stores already involved have praised the program. The time saved by everyone has undoubtedly saved thousands of dollars per store and hours of officers' time spent on the beat, rather than processing a shoplifter who really would otherwise qualify for a citation and a court date.

If you are interested in learning more about the on-line shoplifting program at the Stockton Police Department, please feel free to call 1-209-937-8377 or access the Stockton PD website at <http://user.govoutreach.com/stockton/>

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