

Home Office Police Research Group Briefing Note



SHOP THEFT: IMPROVING THE POLICE RESPONSE

Crime Detection and Prevention Series Paper 76

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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 the 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 their 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 the impact of the initiative in relation to re-offending, officer time and crime reporting rates.

Key findings

Re-offending - although one cannot exclude the possibility that those who choose to attend the scheme are those who are least likely to re-offend anyway, the evidence from this study is that the scheme is having a real impact on re-offending rates for first time offenders.

Table 1 below shows that at 13%, the re-offending rate for those attending the RTI was much less than for offenders dealt with in other ways, including those receiving a 'normal' caution.

Table 1. Re-offending rates for the different courses of action

Action	Number of offenders	Percentage re-offending 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%

1. Technical note: re-offending 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 re-offending period of nearly 2 years, and for others only 2 months. However as the RTI group are being compared to the group who received 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.

Since most offenders on the scheme are first-time offenders, it may be that because the scheme appears to be so successful - this group of offenders might be less

likely to re-offend whatever the method of disposal. This was not found to be the case. For first-time offenders who attended the RTI, the rate of re-offending was just 3% compared with 35% for first-time offenders dealt with in other ways. The scheme did not benefit offenders with previous records - their re-offending rates were above 70% whether they attended the RTI or were dealt with in other ways.

Officer time - the average amount of time spent by officers dealing with RTI offenders was found to be half that spent on dealing with shop theft offenders in the conventional way and their time is spent on more productive activities. The savings come from not being tied up processing each offender in custody. The actual caution for RTI offenders, however, is a more lengthy affair.

Table 2 compares the time spent by officers dealing with offenders on the RTI compared with a division in another force which dealt with offenders in the normal way.

Table 2. Average times spent dealing with a shop theft offence		
	Milton Keynes (RTI offenders)	Comparison division
Average total time (mins)	124	255
Average time spent at shopping centre (mins)	65 *	13
Average time spent in custody (mins)	0	202
Average time spent on caution (mins)	16	5
* includes a few cases where suspect had to be taken into custody		

Reporting rates - the scheme has encouraged more reporting of shop theft. Stores are now keener to call the police when a small amount has been stolen, or the offender is young because they feel that the matter will be dealt with in a more appropriate and effective

way. Police officers are more likely to put offenders on the scheme who may before have simply received an informal warning.

Points for action

The conclusion from this study is that the scheme is being effective in reducing both re-offending and the amount of unproductive time spent by police officers in dealing with shop thieves. It is therefore recommended as an example of good practice in policing shop theft.

The following points are made to further improve the scheme:

- ❑ 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 where they learn how to recognise and resist peer pressure to offend;
- ❑ 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;
- ❑ to ensure the scheme meets PACE requirements, it is important to continue the de-arrest procedure at the shopping centre's security suite. After arrest, questions are asked of the offender to determine eligibility for the scheme after which the offender is immediately de-arrested so that the process can continue with an appropriate adult being present. It is also important to ensure that an officer of Inspector rank or above always gives the caution. Taking fingerprints and photos before the caution rather than after would bring the scheme more in line with PACE requirements.