

Sticky fingers

Shoplifters are the omnipresent crook

By JAMES HAMILTON
Battalion Reporter

In Texas, as throughout the nation, shoplifting is a massive and growing problem. Last year, more than 4 million shoplifters were apprehended and prosecuted in Texas while more than 140 million separate incidents of shoplifting occurred.

Surveys conducted in large cities such as Houston and Dallas indicate that one out of every 12 customers in retail stores is there to steal.

The Bryan-College Station area has also had its share of shoplifters. In 1976, there were 48 arrests for

shoplifting in College Station. In 1977, there were 68 arrests, and in 1978 there were 70.

Through the first two months of this year, 32 arrests were made,

which indicates that 1979 will be a record year for shoplifting in the city.

"The stores around here are getting tired of it," said Capt. Bernie Kappella of the College Station Police. "Most of the stores are getting perturbed about shoplifters and are willing to prosecute."

"Some of the stores, especially the neighborhood stores, operate on very small profit margins," he said. "So when something is stolen from them, they really get hurt. Many of the stores are fighting back."

June Lusk, security manager of K-Mart Discount Stores, said she does not tolerate shoplifters.

"If I catch a shoplifter, I prosecute," she said. "I want them in jail. If the shoplifter is a minor, then we handle it through the probation department," she said. "But even with minors I prosecute as far as the law will let me go."

"The year before last at this time, a shoplifter would be sent to city court and would be fined \$52.50. About two years ago this month, Judge (Kenneth M.) Robinson took the bench. Now the fine is \$203.50, which I am delighted about," she said.

Despite the tighter laws and stronger penalties, Lusk said that shoplifters are stealing more now than they ever have before. She said the average value of a shoplifted item was \$2 four years ago. Today the average price is \$28.

"The shoplifting business is really on the way up," she said. "I can't see anything that's going to stop it."

Lusk said the average shoplifter at K-Mart is middle-class, aged 13-19, and female.

"Women or girl shoplifters outnumber the male shoplifters 20 to 1," she said, adding that about 2 percent of all shoplifters are Texas A&M University students.

Many of the shoplifters Lusk apprehends are women carrying large bags with them, she said. "They usually have nothing in the bags but our merchandise."

She said K-Mart's most frequently stolen items include cosmetics, shoes and other clothing.

Shoplifters sometimes wear stolen clothing out of the store and will hide merchandise in jackets, coats and baby strollers, Lusk said.

"One night at about 9:25, five minutes before closing time, I noticed a young lady going toward footwear. She was carrying a baby that was wrapped up in a blanket. I just had this feeling that something was going on. I have that feeling a lot."

"I walked back there and saw her put a pair of shoes under the baby's blanket. I walked up to her and said, 'I'm security. Can I help you?' She started running."

"As she ran out of the store with eight behind her, she dropped shoes — three pair — from the back of the store clear to the front."

To teach its employees about shoplifters and their methods,

K-Mart uses a program of films and lectures. Capt. Kappella sometimes demonstrates to the employees how shoplifters steal merchandise.

"A little more than half of the shoplifting in this area is done by juveniles who steal a candy bar or something else negligible," Kappella said.

Contrary to Lusk's figures, he said as many as 35 percent of all shoplifters are college students.

"When a person is caught shoplifting," Kappella said, "the store personnel will try to get a statement from him. If the store wants to press charges, we transport him to the police station where we make out an arrest record."

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\$203.50. He then has two options: To appear in court, plead guilty or not guilty and let the judge decide what happens, or to not show up and forfeit the bond.

"They have the option if they post their bond," Kappella said. "If they don't post a bond, they sit in jail until the case comes to court."

When the stolen merchandise is valued between \$5 and \$20, the theft is called a Class B misdemeanor which carries up to a \$500 fine or six months in the county jail. If the stolen merchandise is valued between \$20 and \$200, the theft is a Class A misdemeanor. The penalty for that is up to \$1,000 or one year in jail, or both.

"If we catch a shoplifter, we don't care who it is — we'll prosecute," said Keith Steffey, general manager of Gibson Discount Center. "But we don't catch many here."

Steffey said Gibson's most frequently stolen items are cosmetics, fishing lures, clothing and small appliances.

Kappella said, however, that professional shoplifters seldom frequent the Bryan-College Station area, although he has seen "rings" of juveniles caught for shoplifting.

"Professional shoplifters have been known to drive stores out of business by stealing so much the stores can't operate," he said.

"There have been women who carried TV sets out of stores between their legs. We've caught people carrying hams like that," Kappella said.

"Some shoplifters have been known to calmly walk into stores, pick up televisions, and walk right out with them. They usually aren't accosted by anyone because the store employees assume they

caught the televisions," he said.

Ted Huggins, general manager of J.C. Penney Inc., said he would "prosecute" and all shoplifters, regardless of age.

When shoplifters steal, the store's profit drains that result from lifting.

In some stores, this price can be as high as 5 cents per item. Last year's price increases due to tail theft, if equally distributed among all adults in the United States, would be \$137 per person.

Sears Roebuck and Co. has J.A. Wharton said he prosecuted adult shoplifters and juvenile authorities handle minors. In the last three years, Wharton has been involved in about 500 cases.

"We would investigate cases of shoplifting each year," Wharton said.

He said the shoplifting problem Sears has declined since the installation of an electronic sensor device that alerts the store when a customer leaves without he didn't pay for it.

"We've found that shoplifting can't be categorized by race or age levels," he said. "We've found that many of the middle and upper class people have a tendency to shoplift. The younger set are more tempted to take radios, but we've also had shoplifters old to the same."

Like K-Mart and Penney's, Sears has a program to teach its employees how to detect shoplifters. "The easiest way to catch shoplifters is to watch their eyes, but it's not always possible," Wharton said.

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"Some shoplifters work in teams they can cover each other," Wharton said. "I have heard many reports of shoplifting."

"The teen-age kids usually just wanted to see if they could get away with it," Lusk said. "The middle-aged people say, 'I don't know what took it. I just wanted it.'"

Very little shoplifting seems to be done out of need. About 70 percent of all shoplifters have enough money with them to pay for the items, Kappella said.

"They always tell us, 'Well, for it, now. Just give us a chance. Steffey said, "One time, we caught a teen-ager with a cap in his hand. He had the money on him. I guess he was just trying to see if he could get away with it."

Kappella said many stores in the area make their merchandise inaccessible to the public — and shoplifters. Store owners sometimes put down on aisle visibility by displays and other things they put up," he said.

Retailers should have an area outside their stores where customers would have to check packages," he said.

"Shoplifters sometimes go into stores with staplers and tags," he said. "They open up one item, place a more expensive item inside it, and then reseal it. They also use items with false bottoms."

Kappella said there are no stores in this area using cameras.

"One of the problems is that we've got the attitude of a small town here," he said. "Too many store owners still think, 'well, it's not going to happen to me.' But it does."

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