

Calls for clampdown as retail crime spirals out of control

The riots in Dublin on 23 November 2023 shocked the nation for their violence and intensity as well as the speed with which they spread across the city, with retailers and employees trapped within their premises for fear of attack by those intent on robbing and causing damage. Derek Nagle checks out the long-term emotional and financial costs.

In the wake of the riots, the Joint Committee on Enterprise, Trade and Employment, chaired by Maurice Quinlivan TD, who himself worked in retail for 19 years, met on 13 December 2023 to debate the issue of shoplifting and the rising levels of assaults against retail workers.

Tara Buckley, Director General of the Retail, Grocery, Dairy and Allied Trades Association (RGDATA), was one of the debate's participants. A survey on retail crime undertaken by her organisation found that 93 per cent of its members have been victims of shoplifting and 40 per cent have been victims of fraudulent activity.

Of those surveyed 25 per cent said they had been subjected to violent robberies in their stores, with weapons being used in over one quarter of these crimes. These included firearms, knives, syringes, hammers, crowbars, bottles and even axes.

"Retail theft is most certainly not



With retail crime spiralling out of control in Dublin, it is costing retailers an estimated €1.62 billion every year, according to the Irish Small and Medium Enterprises Association.



Retailers are spending significantly more on security, such as CCTV, due to shoplifters.

a victimless crime. Shop owners, staff and customers are victims. Staff and owners in shops deal with criminals who are often aggressive, sexist, racist and who use weapons and threatening behaviour. The average cost to the 3,500 shops, forecourt stores and supermarkets that RGDATA represents throughout Ireland is over €40,000 per store," she notes.

CONSISTENT SENTENCING

Buckley believes that the huge rise in retail crime in this country is because serial shoplifters and organised gangs think they can get away with carrying out retail thefts with little or no consequences for them. She also feels there is a serious problem with gangs of youth offenders who believe they are "untouchable and are very aggressive and brazen" about stealing from retailers.

"The courts need to be more consistent on sentencing policies for retail crime, especially for repeat offenders. RGDATA members are extremely frustrated with the courts. Shop owners put a lot of time and effort into providing evidence, making statements and appearing in court and the offenders usually walk free and are back in the shop robbing it again while laughing in the shop owner's face," she says.

Retail crime costs retailers an estimated €1.62 billion every year, according to the Irish Small and Medium Enterprises Association. The Global Retail Theft Barometer also shows that Ireland has the highest cost per capita when it comes to retail crime (€339.31) –

significantly more than both second and third placed countries, Iceland and Denmark.



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RETAIL CRIME

CRIME PREVENTION STRATEGY

In December 2023 An Garda Síochána rolled out a nationwide programme known as 'Operation Táirge' as part of its crime prevention and reduction strategy, supporting operational activity aimed at detecting and preventing Organised Retail Crime (ORC).

ORC usually refers to situations where several persons are acting together, targeting retailer outlets to steal significant quantities of goods to resell back into the retail supply chain through the black market. It can also involve 'refund fraud' to make a financial or material benefit.

ORC is usually co-ordinated and well-organised by people who recruit others to commit theft from retailers. Stolen goods are then sold to a 'fence' who either sells them at a certain location or in some cases may sell them online in an activity that has come to be known as 'e-fencing'.

Several arrests have been made across the country since Operation Táirge was set up. Almost immediately after the launch a woman in her 50s was arrested and detained in connection with 11 incidents of alleged theft from retail premises in Athy, Kilkenny, Maynooth, Newbridge, Portlaoise and Wexford.



In relation to 'naming and shaming' of persistent shoplifters by posting their images on social media, Arnold Dillon, Director of Retail Ireland and board member of IBEC believes that data protection issues need to be considered.



More visible Gardaí on the streets is a very significant factor in the security discussion, and retailers say that this is a deterrent, claims IBEC's Arnold Dillon.

Shortly after this, two men in their 20s and 40s appeared before the Courts of Criminal Justice in Dublin charged with a spate of robberies which included violence and knives. In one instance petrol was even poured onto the counter of a retail premises to cause fear and intimidation.

Under the National Detection Improvement Plan, 'Operation Táirge' aims to support those working in retail to report a crime. Using an intelligence-led approach to identify criminals who engage in retail crime, the programme works with high-risk retailers to enhance prevention, investigation and prosecution. It also works with retailers to help strengthen their security to prevent them from becoming victims of criminality.

Led by the Organised Retail Crime Tasking and Co-ordination Group within An Garda Síochána, the operation will support each Garda region to monitor and respond to emerging trends in their area. Organised retail crime may also involve an international dimension; therefore, the co-ordination group will maintain its close working relationships with counterparts including the UK and Northern Ireland.

SPENDING MORE ON SECURITY

Arnold Dillon, Director of Retail Ireland and board member of IBEC (Irish Business and Employers Confederation), says that there's a major and acute stress on retailers when they're trying to deal with other costs across the board.

"However, they must spend significantly more on security due to shoplifters. More visible Gardaí is a very significant factor in this discussion. Retailers say that this is a deterrent. It's an ongoing and daily challenge," he points out.

Dillon makes reference to the Retail Crime Forum which meets more frequently since last year's Dublin riots and involves An Garda Síochána and the Minister for Justice Helen McEntee and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment Simon Coveney.

"The ongoing contact with An Garda Síochána is both positive and constructive. Co-ordinating intelligence is very important to ensure repeat offenders are subject to the full force of the law so increasing the deterrent needs to be looked at," he says.

'NAMING AND SHAMING' SHOPLIFTERS

There have been reports in other regions of retailers 'naming and shaming' persistent shoplifters by posting their images on social media, but Dillon believes that data protection issues need to be considered here.

Tara Buckley of RGDATA notes that the Data Protection Commissioner has objected to individuals' images being publicised and that a statutory measure to enable this deterrent to be exercised would be helpful.

She feels that whilst local retailers have a lot of sympathy for An Garda Síochána, who are forced to deal with the same aggressive criminals on a daily basis, there is a frustration that retail theft is not taken seriously enough.

"The Gardaí need to be more responsive to reports of retail crime and the courts need to hand down sentences that will give a clear message to criminals that this type of crime is taken seriously and there are consequences for those who rob shops or abuse shop staff" she says.



NATIONWIDE OPERATION TARGETS ORGANISED RETAIL CRIMINALS Under 'Operation Táirge' Gardaí work on reducing organised retail crime by:

- Using an intelligence-led approach to identify criminals engaging in retail crime.
- Disrupting the most prolific groups in operation through the use of organised crime legislation and proceeds of crime legislation.
- Working with retailers to strengthen their security and prevent them becoming victims of this criminality.
- Supporting those working in retail to report a crime.
- Identifying and targeting the areas where ORC black markets operate, and their leadership.
- Working with high-risk retailers to enhance prevention, investigation and prosecution.
- Deterring people from becoming involved in organised retail crime by raising awareness of the consequences of committing such offences.

Speaking at the launch of the nationwide operation last December, Justice Minister Helen McEntee said: "Under the National Detection Improvement Plan, An Garda Síochána will provide a reliable and effective and consistent response to retail-related incidents, and ensure that high visibility and targeted patrols are effectively implemented. This will help to provide a safe and unhindered shopping experience for members of the public.

"The Gardaí will work with high-risk retailers to educate them on

Organised Retail Crime behaviours and to help them identify suspicious activity, act on it, make it known to investigating Garda members."

Minister of State for Business, Employment and Retail, Neale Richmond TD said that the intelligence-led operation targets the most prolific perpetrators of retail crime. "It will support workers and assist businesses in preventing such crime and act as a deterrent by raising awareness of the consequences of this type of criminality. We are sending a clear message that there is no place for retail crime in Ireland."

Chief Supt Padraic Jones, Garda National Community Engagement Bureau, said, "Organised retail crime poses a significant threat to the viability of Irish retailers including Irish SMEs which are a core element of Ireland's economy. 'Operation Táirge' has been established as part of the Garda Crime Prevention and Reduction Strategy to reduce the detrimental impact which criminals can have on retail businesses when they steal their goods.

"We want business owners and staff to feel protected and safe from this kind of criminality, and we will continue to work closely with them in whatever way possible. Most essential is that we utilise our ongoing intelligence gathering to target and take out these groups – they're no longer operating under any radar, and they will be caught."