

Preventing Robbery

A Guide for Retailers

The Definition of Robbery

A person is guilty of robbery if he or she steals and immediately before or at any time of so doing, and in order to do so, uses force, or puts or seeks to put any person in fear of being then and there subjected to force. In summary, robbery is stealing aggravated by violence.

You Can Help Prevent Robbery at Your Premises

This page provides information about crimes committed against retailers. It offers practical advice about what you can do as a retailer to deter and prevent robberies at your premises. The page offers ideas and options and these can of course be discussed in more detail with your local crime prevention department.

What is the scale of the problem?

Recorded Crimes

Home Office crime statistics do not separately identify robberies against retail premises.

The Criminal Statistics for England and Wales do however show that the total number of robberies (including those committed against retailers) was 57,845 in 1993 and that the numbers have grown by some three-quarters since 1989.

Most robberies take place in metropolitan areas. Over four out of ten take place in London's Metropolitan Police District and in London retail outlets account for 45% of all commercial robberies. The overall risks are also above average in the West Midlands, Greater Manchester, Merseyside and West Yorkshire.

Surveys

The first Commercial Crime Survey by the Home Office shows that – when compared to other forms of commercial premises – retailers face high risks of robbery.

The British Retail Consortium's (BRC) annual survey of crime against retailers showed that – in 1993 – there were 6 robberies for every 100 retail premises. There were some 14,400 robberies against retailers and the average loss (excluding those from post offices) was £1,287 per incident. Recoveries after robbery are very low.

Of course the physical consequences of robbery can be much more damaging than the financial. Staff in retail outlets are quite frequently physically assaulted – and have sometimes been killed – during robbery attacks. And the fear and anxiety these incidents create can continue well after the incident itself. The BRC surveys do not separately count the number of retail staff hurt during robberies, but these victims are amongst over 14,400 retail staff known to have been subjected to physical violence in 1993, and over 100,000 subjected to threats of violence.

Off-licences are most at risk from robberies, and other shops at particular risk are

grocers and chemists. These sorts of businesses are open later than most other types of retail outlet, and this almost certainly adds to their risk.

Repeat Attacks

Police forces are becoming increasingly concerned about how often crime are committed against the same places or individuals. The data in the BRC survey from single outlet businesses shows that, once a shop has experienced robbery, the risk of repeat attack is three times higher than for any other shop.

The Main Types of Retail Robbery

From the police point of view, robbery covers a wide range of incidents from playground 'bullying' to armed robberies at banks and building societies.

From your point of view as a retailer, the crime takes a wide variety of forms, but most incidents can be grouped into one of the following types.

Violent till snatches

The target in these attacks is the cash in the till. They are sometimes carried out by amateurs and often involve a single offender. If you run a small shop with few staff you are particularly vulnerable but these robberies also take place in larger stores.

Organised Robbery

The target here is usually more than the cash in the till: for example, cash in the safe or entire high value stock. These robberies involve a considerable show of force usually with more than one offender 'taking over' part or all of the store. The offenders commonly have weapons such as knives, pickaxe handles, baseball bats, they may even carry firearms. In some cases the target is the cash takings at the time they are being handed over to a cash collection company.

Attacks on 'Cash in Transit'

These incidents target staff who are not using a cash collection service, and are taking cash to the bank themselves (usually to deposit in the night safe). Again, there are normally several offenders involved most commonly armed with knives.

In this booklet we deal mainly with ways of preventing the most typical robberies outlined above. There are two other types of crime affecting retailers, that could be classed as robbery, and that you should be aware of. These are when staff are intimidated or forced into committing theft by outsiders, and when managers or key holders are forced to return and let thieves into a shop outside normal hours. Your local crime prevention officer can advise you about the kind of precautions to take in these circumstances.

What Can You Do About It?

Not all the following practical suggestions will apply to your business. The risk of a robbery occurring at your shop will depend on a number of factors – some of which are beyond your control. These factors will include the goods your shop sells, the local crime rate, whether you stay open late, what staff you have, and how busy your street is. For example an off-licence in a high crime area, which stays open late, has young staff, and is located on an isolated back street is going to be more vulnerable than a furniture store that opens 9 to 5, is staffed by experienced adults and is

constantly overlooked by passers-by. You need to weigh up these factors and then choose the most appropriate prevention measures for your shop from those given in this booklet. Your local crime prevention officer will be able to help you assess the risk for your shop.

Train Your Staff

You will need to involve your staff in your robbery prevention plans, and to train them carefully in the use of any equipment or system you install. However, be aware that advice to staff – if not handled carefully – can raise unnecessary anxiety; training also needs to reassure.

- **Reporting Suspicious Circumstances**

By training your staff to be vigilant and to report their suspicions, potential robbers may be deterred either immediately before carrying out a robbery or when 'casing' in the premises. You are also more likely to gather useful evidence for the police.

- **Handling cash**

A cost-effective way of making robbery more difficult is to train staff in cash handling routine such as not leaving till drawers open longer than absolutely necessary, ensuring there is more than one member of your staff at hand when money is moved, and counting cash in a secure area in the store.

- **Limiting the impact of a robbery**

You should make sure that your staff know what to do in the event of a robbery. Firstly, they are less likely to get hurt if they co-operate with the robbers' demands; they must keep still and not make sudden movements or risk their lives by 'having a go'. On a more positive note, train them to observe details about the robbers such as hair and eye colour, height, build, clothing, sound of voice or accent. This significantly improves the chances of detection, makes staff feel less 'helpless' and gives them confidence that they are fighting back.

If your premises are robbed, bear in mind the trauma your staff are likely to have suffered. Get advice about professional counselling, and refer those affected to your local victim support scheme. The police will be able to give you the telephone number.

- **Using a check sheet**

If you provide staff with a check sheet for recording details of offenders and the offence immediately after it has taken place, you greatly improve the quality of the evidence available to the police.

Remove the target: Cash and Stock

- **Cash in the Till**

Keep as little cash as possible at all times by regularly transferring it to somewhere more secure. Use stickers or posters to tell potential robbers that you only ever have a small float in the till. (This can be a useful preventive measure in its own right.) Larger shops often use sophisticated ways of clearing cash regularly, for example using vacuum tubes.

- **Encourage Non-cash Transactions**

If your business involves a high turnover of cash it is going to be a more attractive target. In this case try to encourage the use of credit accounts to limit the amount of cash on the premises. Again, make sure you advertise the fact that very little cash is kept in the till.

- Use of cash-carrying specialists This option will not necessarily prevent a robbery taking place, but it puts your cash into the hands of companies that are better equipped to protect themselves.

- **Banking routines**

There are a number of practical routines that deter robbers from attacking when you take money to the bank. Cash carriers should remove badges or uniforms identifying them as shop staff and, if possible, make the journey with a companion; they should not carry cash in a store carrier bag; and, of particular importance, they should vary the route and the time they go to the bank, and be vigilant at the night safe.

Making it More Difficult for the Robbery

Protect Cash

Some of these preventive measures may make access to cash more difficult for robbers but may equally put your staff, and sometimes customers, more at risk if they cannot comply with a robber's demands. Seek advice from your local crime prevention officer.

- **Anti-grab Till Screens**

By installing solid screens around the till drawer you make it difficult for anyone other than the till operator to reach in when the drawer is open.

- **Limiting Opening of the Till**

The way some Epos tills are programmed can limit the time that a till drawer remains open and accessible to a thief.

- **Floor to Ceiling Screens**

Some retailers with vulnerable businesses in high risk areas have resorted to installing solid floor to ceiling screens between the customers and staff.

- **Secure Cash Handling Areas**

If you have a business where large amounts of cash are collected then you should give special attention to the cash handling area. Consider installing video surveillance cameras, reinforcing the doors, walls and ceilings, using 'one way mirrored' and bullet resistant glass and putting in entry control mechanisms.

- **Counter 'Caches'**

Another useful method is to install a small safe or 'cache' under the till, securely built into the counter. In this way you can regularly take cash from the till and drop it into the 'safe' so that neither till operators nor robbers can get at the money. If you adopt this method you should make it clear through posters and stickers that you have a counter safe.

- **External access safes**

Safes built into external walls accessed by cash collection companies from outside your building will reduce the risk of robbers harming staff or customers.

- **Making safes inaccessible to staff**

By using time-lock safes that can only be opened at specific pre-set times, or by making cash collection companies the sole key holders to your safe, staff cannot hand cash over during a robbery. These safes can be fitted with roller-trap lids (as used in bank night safes) so that staff can deposit cash but not remove it. To deter

potential robbers you need to use notices or posters to advertise the fact that you and your staff have no access to the safe.

- **Separate key holders**

You can also reduce the chance of a successful robbery by ensuring that different staff are responsible for holding different keys, particularly by separating the shop key holder and the safe key holders. For this to have any deterrent effect potential robbers need to be told of this policy.

- **Store Layout**

Design your store lay out to make it less attractive to robbers: for example, position cash desks so that robbers cannot keep all the staff in their line of sight, or are unable to back out or escape without obstruction. Robbers will be put off by a large number of possible witnesses, so ensure that the window display and shop fittings allow a clear view of the shop interior from the street, so that your cash desk is easily visible to passers-by. Take care positioning your till: if it is too far back it will not be visible from outside the shop, but if it is too close to the door it may attract robbers because they can dash in and out quickly.

- **Decoy Money**

If you comply with a robber's demands by handing over cash bags filled with low denomination coins ready for just such an emergency you may get away with only minimal loss during a robbery.

- **Staff Numbers**

Evidence suggests that the more staff you can afford to have in the shop the greater the deterrent against robbers.

- **Late Opening**

If you are in a high risk area, you are more vulnerable to attack if you keep late opening hours, because of the cover darkness provides; the fewer the number of passers-by and the fewer shops open for robbers to target. If you are a late-opener you could try to organise that other retailers open late as well.

- **Closed Circuit Television**

Consider installing closed circuit television cameras to record all who enter the store or the vulnerable areas of your shop. If you make it clear to everyone that you use them you may deter robbers. To increase the chances of video evidence being used to get a conviction, you need good quality equipment and recordings need to be date and time 'stamped'. It would help if you site cameras low enough to get a clear rather than a foreshortened picture.

- **Alarm Systems**

Panic alarms can be linked via an intruder alarm system to summon police assistance. These can be activated by foot or hand switches, or within till drawers by, for example, removing the last note from a money clip. Again, you must make it clear to potential thieves that this kind of alarm is in place. Ask your crime reduction officer for advice. Also consider installing less sophisticated alarms ('doorbells' or personal attack alarms) that can summon help from the public, other parts of the store or other shops.

- **Security Staff**

The presence of trained, uniformed security staff is likely to deter less 'professional' robbers but the cost can make sure such an option impracticable and you must ensure that these staff are properly recruited and trained.

- Dye and Smoke

You may find it useful to purchase a special cash-carrying case or bag that gives off smoke and spray dyes which are set off if a robbery is attempted.

- Air Lock Entry System

If your premises are located in a high risk area, you may consider installing double entry doors which allow staff to restrict entry. Robbers can be effectively trapped in the 'air lock' between the doors.

- Electric Lock Release

Some high value stockists, such as jewellers and certain antique shops, may prefer an alternative approach: you use only one door but keep it locked and admit customers via a buzzer and electric lock release.

- And if it happens...

Remember that if there is a robbery at your shop, the statistics show that there's a higher risk of its happening again. So you will need to use the advice in this booklet to rethink your defences and your routines.

For a copy of *Your Practical Guide to Crime Prevention* contact the Crime Reduction Officer at your local police station or write to:

Crime Prevention Publicity
Home Office
Room 155
50 Queen Anne's Gate
London SW1H 9AT