

Merchants seek stiffer shoplifting penalties

But some legislators, judges, police disagree

By Tim Richard
staff writer

Police, city attorneys, judges lawmakers — all should crack down on shoplifting, "the most expensive crime in the nation," according to a Pontiac-based drug-store chain.

But at least one sheriff and some liberal state legislators are cool to a crackdown on a crime whose average take is \$14 in merchandise.

"Shoplifting has increased to where it now equals 8.6 percent of the national retail sales or \$24 billion annually," according to William Krupka, a Detroit policeman for 25 years before becoming assistant vice president for corporate security of Perry Drug Stores Inc.

His boss, company President Donald Fox, said drug chains nationally earn an average of 2 percent on sales, and his own firm is at 1 percent. Thus, shoplifting losses are triple the stores' earnings.

"WE GOTTA have jails to put 'em in," responded Oakland County Sheriff Johannes Spreen as store officials last week unveiled their proposals to a luncheon meeting of businessmen, police officials and the media.

"I'm being sued by inmates' lawyers, and they're winning. I'm under (federal) court order to get 'em out of jail," said Spreen, referring to an order to reduce jail overcrowding and improve

conditions. "We've had to tell police not to arrest women."

A hero to merchants is state Rep. Joe Forbes, D-Oak Park, who introduced a legislative bill to stiffen shoplifting penalties and broaden merchants' rights to apprehend suspects. "I couldn't get a hearing on it," Forbes said in a telephone interview. "Having been a businessman myself, I'm sympathetic."

Successfully opposing the bill for five years were liberal Democrats Perry Bullard of Ann Arbor and Lyn Jon-Gall of East Lansing and the American Civil Liberties Union. "It becomes a class system philosophy," said Forbes. "They see the poor and black getting arrested."

Forbes said he prefers other programs to help the poor instead of going easy on shoplifting.

The bill would have made it a felony to steal property of more than \$100 retail value. In order to detain a suspect, a merchant would not be required to see the theft but to have "reasonable grounds" for suspicion. The merchant could not be held liable if an arrest were made. To recover civil damages, the merchant would not have to win a conviction on the criminal charge.

KRUPKA SAID the "prototype shoplifter" is no longer the 18-year-old middle-class high school girl. He gave this description:

"Shoplifters (in 1982) were almost equally divided between the sexes." • People in the 17-39 age bracket accounted for more than half the arrests. The other half were minors and people of 40 or more.

"The American shoplifter today may be one who is mature, educated and well-dressed." Far from being needy, shoplifters may be bored, frustrated or desirous of "beating the system."

"They see the poor and black getting arrested."

America's value system is changing — for the worse. Research in a Chicago department store showed one shopper in 12 had stolen something. Shoplifting is increasing because people are discovering only one in 1,250 shoplifters ever go to jail for that offense (although they may be jailed for drugs or weapons charges).

ALTHOUGH SHOPLIFTING may not rank bank robberies and street crimes in its gross economic impact, Krupka said, it's not taken seriously yet by the law enforcement network.

"Judges are reluctant to imprison

shoplifters because of the crowded conditions of our jails.

"City attorneys will not prosecute cases involving less than \$5 or \$10 of merchandise."

"Police officers give shoplifting low priority because of these attitudes," he said.

A retailer prosecutes, not out of vindictiveness but to curb losses that raise costs and prices. In fact, said Krupka, "he frequently ends up with a greater loss because he has to pay employees waiting in court to testify."

In 1983, he said, Perry stores ap-

prehended and prosecuted an average of 250 shoplifters per month — 102 percent more than the previous year. "We have sharply reduced shoplifting losses in our stores with tight and efficient security measures. We also are apprehending shoplifters in greater numbers," he said.

FOX SAID his company last year paid out 225 rewards to citizens (at \$25 each) for information leading to conviction of shoplifters.

This year the firm will recruit people for in-store "honest patrols" to assist in arrests and convictions.

The firm supported establishment in Michigan of a "Shoplifters Anonymous" program similar to one in Pennsylvania for first-time offenders.

State makes loan to research park

A \$7.7 million financial pact will trigger business development in an 820-acre research park northeast of Ann Arbor, according to private developers, government and University of Michigan officials.

The Ann Arbor Technology Park, on US-23 within two miles of the U-M North Campus, is the product of a two-year planning effort by Wood and Co.,

an Ann Arbor-based development firm, and the U-M.

When fully developed, at the end of 15 years, the park will have an estimated value of more than \$250 million and employ more than 12,000 persons.

THE \$7.7 MILLION line of credit is the first land development loan made by Michigan's state retirement system. It will be used to install utilities, roads,

lighting and landscaping.

"This massive undertaking will greatly expand the area's economy," said Rex E. Jensen, president of Wood and Co. "While this project is well-planned, it is the financing that makes it a reality."

The U-M provided planning assistance to the park and continues to participate in a committee that will select

tenants and monitor the park's development.

"We believe the Ann Arbor Technology Park will be a focal point for interaction between the U-M and private enterprise," said James F. Brinkerhoff, U-M vice president and chief financial officer. "The park offers a potential for U-M students, faculty, and researchers to both assist and learn from high-technology firms."

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