



A Research Initiative of The Texas A&M University System at Tarleton State University

**Flash Robberies:
A Brief Report of Current Trends in
Retail Theft
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Contents

Introduction.....	2
The Social and Economic Problem	2
Contributing Factors to Flash Robberies.....	3
Recommendations.....	4
Summary	5

Introduction

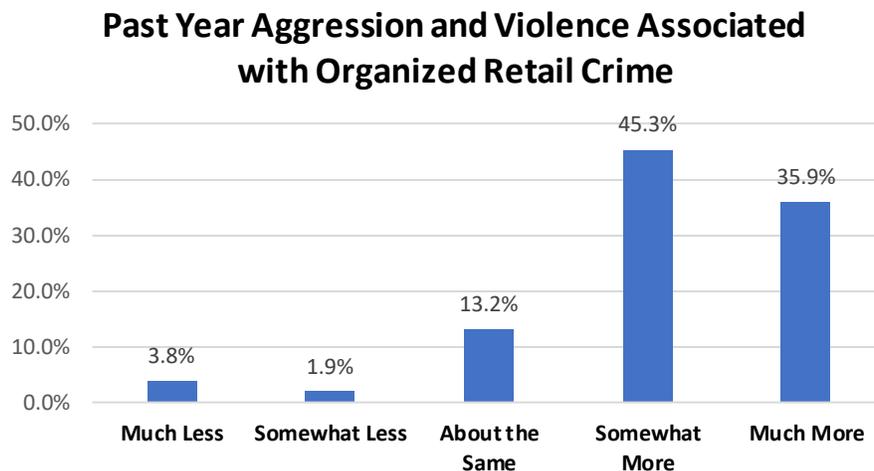
Several recent high-profile retail theft incidents have raised awareness of the trend of mass burglaries. These have colloquially acquired the term of flash robberies, or the shorter term, flash robs. Flash robberies have increased concerns regarding public safety and the economic impact, not merely of the retail industry, but also of the general economy.

The Institute for Predictive Analytics in Criminal Justice (IPAC) has issued this brief reporting outlining the problem and contributing factors, as well as noting potential actions that could be taken to mitigate the impact of flash robberies.

The Social and Economic Problem

The recent flash robbery of the Westfield Topanga Shopping Center in Canoga Park, California, startled the local community and gained national notoriety, as masked criminals entered en masse and brazenly stole \$300,000 in merchandise and exited the store within moments (Rosenbaum, 2023).¹ This appeared to be a highly-orchestrated event designed for minimal time spent in the retail space and maximum profit to the criminals. Further, the retail industry indicates that the problem with theft is less about individual operators, and more about an organized retail crime network (Andrew Blankstein, 2023).² The National Retail Federation 2022 Report indicates that more than 80% of retailers reported contact in the past year with organized retail crime —see Figure 1.

Figure 1-Past Year Aggression and Violence Associated with Organized Retail Crime



Data Source: National Retail Federation 2022 Report

The Topanga flash robbery was just the most recent exemplar of the flash robbery trend and provided visibility to what the retail industry says has been a growing problem for several years. Flash robberies

¹ [Up to \\$300K stolen in "flash mob" robbery at Westfield Topanga Shopping Center in Canoga Park - CBS Los Angeles \(cbsnews.com\)](#)

² Blankstein, A., Antonio Planas, and Sam Brock (2023, August 14). Retrieved from [Organized crime or gangs could be behind a \\$300K L.A. 'flash rob,' police say \(nbcnews.com\)](#).

tend to occur in large urban areas. Two cities in Texas made the top ten list in the past year — Houston, ranked #4, and the Dallas metroplex, ranked #10 (National Retail Federation, 2022).³

Flash robberies have generated social and economic problems—a concern for public safety and negative economic impact to retailers and the broader economy.

The Social Problem

First, the social problem. With regard to the threat to public safety, awareness of flash robberies generates an erosion to the feeling of safety in public spaces (Westside Current, 2023).⁴ Combining flash robberies with the public’s awareness of threats to safety which arise from mass shootings, as well as the concerns for public gathering in the post-pandemic world, may generate less confidence in occupying public spaces.

This erosion of public safety may result in fewer customers to retail stores and could contribute to declining retail profits. Further, as customers increasingly turn to online retail options increases, this reduces the number of people in public retail space. For those engaged in the criminal activity, fewer customers also translate to fewer witnesses (Phillipi, 2021).⁵

The Economic Problem

The economic problem results from the loss of profits due to the theft of merchandise, known in the retail industry as *shrinkage*. According to a 2022 report from National Retail Federation, the latest full year of data indicates that approximately \$94 billion of goods lost to theft (National Retail Federation, 2022).⁶ In an integrated economy, problems in one sector can naturally impact other sectors, thus the struggles in the retail economy generate problems for other sectors of the economy. Consequently, retailers may be forced to raise prices in order to recover some of the losses due to shrinkage (CNBC, 2023).⁷

Contributing Factors to Flash Robberies

There may be a number of contributing factors that unintentionally conspire to create conditions where flash robberies occur. According to the American Society for Industrial Security (ASIS), a number of confluent factors make flash robberies possible including, depleted police forces, social media, reduced criminal penalties, criminal prosecutor policies, and even the COVID pandemic.⁸

- **Police Department Labor Force.** A tight labor market, employers offering flexible work schedules and remote work opportunities, and a political culture of scrutiny calling to defund police departments, may reduce the attraction to the law enforcement career. This, in turn, can

³ National Retail Federation. (2022). *The State of National Retail Security and Organized Retail Crime: 2022 Retail Security Survey*. Washington, D.C. National Retail Federation.

⁴ [Suspect in Glendale Flash-Mob Burglary Arrested, Cited, Then Released | News | westsidecurrent.com](https://www.westsidecurrent.com/news/suspect-in-glendale-flash-mob-burglary-arrested-cited-then-released)

⁵ Phillipi, J. (2021, December 13). Retrieved from [Robbed in a Flash: Assessing Risk for Mass Smash and Grab Incidents \(asisonline.org\)](https://www.asisonline.org/robbed-in-a-flash-assessing-risk-for-mass-smash-and-grab-incidents).

⁶ National Retail Federation. (2022). *The State of National Retail Security and Organized Retail Crime: 2022 Retail Security Survey*. Washington, D.C. National Retail Federation.

⁷ [They don't want the goods, they want the money: Gerald Storch on retail thieves reselling online \(cnbc.com\)](https://www.cnbc.com/2023/01/17/they-dont-want-the-goods-they-want-the-money-gerald-storch-on-retail-thieves-reselling-online.html)

⁸ Phillipi, J. (2021, December 13). Retrieved from [Robbed in a Flash: Assessing Risk for Mass Smash and Grab Incidents \(asisonline.org\)](https://www.asisonline.org/robbed-in-a-flash-assessing-risk-for-mass-smash-and-grab-incidents).

decrease the effectiveness of police departments that have limited resources to deploy to address crime trends like flash robberies.

- **Social Media.** These provide social platforms for bad actors to coordinate criminal efforts.
- **Political and Prosecution Issues.** Legislative changes in criminal penalties and any changes in prosecution policies could also lessen the anxiety of those inclined to participate in a flash robbery. Several academic criminological theories contribute to the understanding of how people become involved in criminal activity—among them two are noteworthy.
 - **Durkheim’s Anomie.** Emile Durkheim suggests that sociologically and economically, societies can devolve into a state of anomie, or lawlessness, due to division of labor, which works to disintegrate society, and rapid social change (Zembroski, 2011).⁹ Durkheim suggests as societies disintegrate, there is an accompanying loss of compliance with social norms and laws.
 - **Granovetter’s Threshold Model of Collective Behavior.** Sociologist Mark Granovetter argues that the dynamics of group behavior depends upon the various thresholds of participation in criminal behavior (Granovetter, 1978).¹⁰ Some will have higher thresholds governing their participation in group behavior, some lower. Some actions may lower one’s threshold for participation in criminal activity including reduced legal consequences or higher group participation rate. That is, in a group of people, the more that are willing to engage in criminal behavior, the more likely it is that even those with higher thresholds will participate, especially if the chances of being detected are minimal through wearing masks, untraceable merchandise, or if the consequences for being detected are minimal.
- **COVID Masking.** As noted in the ASIS report, the wearing of a mask upon entry into public space, even by criminals, is now acceptable since the pandemic encouraged the wearing of masks to prevent transmission of disease (Phillipi, 2021).¹¹ Thus, while masks are useful to prevent disease transmission, they also serve to conceal identities.
- **No Data Collection.** It should also be noted that there is no specific classification for flash robberies in the National Incident Based Reporting System (NIBRS), which is the official criminological database of the FBI.¹² That is, theft from a retail space would be classified as a burglary under FBI reporting parameters. Thus, there is no mechanism within the FBI database to specifically track flash robberies or distinguish them from any other type of burglary or robbery. Therefore, in order to accurately follow the trend, a network of communication (such as listservs between retail or police departments) must be used to share intelligence.

Recommendations

As the contributing factors are from various sources, any approach to resolution will require efforts from many sources.

- **Local Government.** Local governments, who set police budgets and actively manage police departments, should work to attract high-quality candidates into law enforcement. Effort should

⁹ Zembroski, D. (2011). Sociological Theories of Crime. *Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment*, 240-254.

¹⁰ Granovetter, M. (1978). Threshold Models of Collective Behavior. *American Journal of Sociology*, 1420-1433.

¹¹ Phillipi, J. (2021, December 13). Retrieved from [Robbed in a Flash: Assessing Risk for Mass Smash and Grab Incidents \(asisonline.org\)](#)

¹² [National Incident-Based Reporting System \(NIBRS\) | Bureau of Justice Statistics \(ojp.gov\)](#)

be to set responsible budgets and hold police departments accountable to address significant problems within their respective communities. While flash robberies may currently be a national and mostly large urban trend, the resources to address it come at the local level.

- **Legislation.** Lawmakers should review laws related to penal codes and criminal penalties to consider raising penalties for flash robberies and may need to consider defining these events such that they can be distinguished from other burglaries or robberies.
- **Prosecution.** District Attorneys should consider the alarming rise in flash robberies and build into their prosecution decision matrix appropriate calculus to address the threat that flash robberies pose to the public safety and to the local economy.
- **Data Collection.** A national database to effectively record flash robberies would help police departments and researchers better understand the gravity of flash robberies and provide practitioners with the tools to improve management of resources directed at this problem.
- **Retailers.** Retail owners could reduce the threat of flash robberies by participating in general crime prevention methods, particularly those endorsed in CPTED (Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design). Examples of this include hardening the target, strategic product placement, improved ability to trace merchandise, etc.

Summary

While this report is not exhaustive in explaining the contributing factors to flash robberies, nor in its breadth of resolution, it is designed to generate thoughtful reflection on the matter with a view toward reduction of flash robberies.



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