

# Shoplifting

## From anger to boredom, many pressures lead kids to steal

FOR HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS:  
A WEEKLY SPOTLIGHT ON NEWS AND ISSUES

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Her mom won't let her wear lipstick ... all the girls at school do ... she couldn't get any money ... her mom grounded her for talking back ... she stormed out to the drugstore and stole a bright red one.

That's a story that Jane Earle, a counsellor at the Youth Justice Society in Halifax, hears all the time in the classes she leads for kids caught shoplifting.

Whether it's fair or not, teens are often associated with shoplifting, a crime that costs retailers millions of dollars a year.

Students hanging out at the Eaton Centre in downtown Toronto said that everyone shoplifts at some point.

"When you're a kid you do it because someone dares you, and then when you get away with it you do it for a while," said Jamie, 16.

"But when you get into high school it's less cool. People stop doing it or hide the fact they do it."

When asked, many teens said they thought stealing was a horrible thing to do, "because people work so hard for what they have and it's not fair to rip it off," said Sahara, 14.

John, 16, said he hates the reputation teens have for stealing.

"The salesperson is always following us around the store, it makes me mad enough to take something," he said.

In several Canadian cities, police are giving youth who steal an opportunity to avoid criminal charges by completing programs like Earle's, where they learn about the impact of theft and come up with a way to make up for what they have done.

Images of star actress Winona Ryder being detained by mall security guards and charged with shoplifting show teens how embarrassing the process is, Earle said, but that won't necessarily stop them.

"It's probably a deterrent, but there are so many pressures that lead kids to steal," Earle said. "Talking them out is the only way to deal with them before they wind up with a criminal record that could severely restrict their lives."

Cynthia Huspeka, who runs a similar program at the West Scarborough Neighbourhood Community Centre, sits kids down in groups and gets them to talk in detail about their crimes.

## Getting caught

- Many stores automatically turn young thieves over to police. The next phone call is to parents.
- Officers can issue a warning and let young thieves go, refer them to a shoplifting program or charge them.
- If charged, teen thieves get the full treatment - mug shots, fingerprinting, often in front of their parents.
- It could take up to a year to get a court date.
- If convicted, teens could be sentenced to community service. Jail terms are rare.
- Convicted shoplifters might not be able to work with children, travel outside the country or get Canadian citizenship.

Often youth say they steal out of anger, she said. "They've been denied something at home and say 'fine, I'll go get it myself.'"

One girl, Huspeka said, admitted she stole because she wanted her parents to pay more attention to her.

"That's often the case with kids who are caught and then police find lots of money in their pockets."

Others want to live on the edge, and say they do it because they're bored and stealing gives them a boost of excitement, Earle said.

Huspeka gives homework where kids write out answers to questions about the theft.

"They come in with a lot of bravado at first and say peer pressure had nothing to do with it, they do what they want. But in the assignment, most write that they wouldn't have stolen if they had been on their own," she said.

David Wiebe, of the Burnaby, B.C. Rotary Club, has commissioned a movie about youth and peer pressure that features a shoplifting scenario. He said in doing research for the film, which the National Crime Prevention office in Ottawa plans to distribute across the country, kids told him it's easy to get sucked into a shoplifting scheme.

"Their friends go to the mall, start stealing or daring each other to and nobody wants to be a geek and go home, so they just go along with it," he said.

Lots of kids do it. In 2001, Toronto police charged 891 boys and 621 girls for theft under \$5,000, said youth crime officer Lisa Hodgins.

Many don't realize that they can get in trouble with police for just being at the scene of a shoplifting crime and not doing anything to stop it.

"It doesn't matter if your friend did it and you just held the bag or the door, you were involved and you can be charged," Earle said.

Under the new Youth Criminal Justice Act that takes effect next spring, police have the option to charge and prosecute teen thieves or send them to a shoplifting program.

There, kids learn about the consequences of being convicted. (Criminal records can bar people from jobs and travelling to other countries.) They also read about how stealing hurts shop owners and their employees.

Then they come up with a way to make up for their crime. Some do community service, some do random acts of kindness and record them in a journal. Teens could also work on overcoming other problems in their lives that may have led them to steal. Some attend anger management, employment or drug programs.

Both Earle and Huspeka said 80 per cent of kids who complete their shoplifting programs do not repeat the crime.

### Items commonly stolen

- Makeup
- CDs
- Jewelry
- Small electronic devices such as CD players and headphones
- Clothes
- Toys
- Food and other small items that easily stuffed in a pocket

### Costs

- Store theft equals \$2 billion - estimates the Retail Council
- Many stores, such as Shopko, raise prices to recoup their theft.

