

# Between the Aisles

## A Closer Look at Shoplifting Trends

November 2024

With the holiday season upon us, shopping at store locations throughout the nation will increase. Bigger crowds are a welcome sight for retailers, but they also amplify concerns about shoplifting and the safety of the shopping experience for consumers and employees alike.

This report builds on a previous Council on Criminal Justice (CCJ) [shoplifting report](#) and CCJ's ongoing [crime trends reports](#) by exploring recent trends in shoplifting for the nation's three largest cities—Chicago, Los Angeles, and New York. It also examines seasonal trends for a sample of 23 cities and takes a closer look at shoplifting data available from the FBI.

### Key Takeaways

- Data collected through the fall of 2024 for Chicago, Los Angeles, and New York suggest that **shoplifting levels remain higher** than pre-2020 rates. Chicago, in particular, experienced notably elevated rates of reported shoplifting through the first 10 months of this year. In 2023, rates were 10% lower in Chicago, 87% higher in Los Angeles, and 55% higher in New York than in 2019.
- Over the past several years, **shoplifting rates were higher** in November and December than they were during earlier months of the year, coinciding with increased in-person retail activity. Because shoplifting rates in a 23-city sample for the first half of 2024 are higher than in 2023, it is likely that the reported shoplifting rate for the full year will rise from 2023 to 2024.
- Two national sources of law enforcement data on reported shoplifting—both available from the FBI—**show different trends**. Statistics from the Summary Reporting System (SRS) suggest that reported shoplifting in 2023 was the same level as in 2019. However, rates from the National Incident-Based Reporting System (NIBRS), show that

shoplifting was 93% higher in 2023 than it was in 2019.

- It is unclear why there is **a sizable difference between these two sources**. One possibility is that law enforcement agencies recently added to the group providing data through NIBRS reported disproportionately higher levels of shoplifting, even after adjusting for an increase in population coverage. Clear guidance from the FBI on the limitations of the data and the implications of using certain sources of FBI crime data is needed.

## Glossary

- **Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS)**: A bureau within the Office of Justice Programs (a component of the U.S. Department of Justice) that serves as the nation's principal source for criminal justice statistics. BJS is responsible for collecting, analyzing, publishing, and disseminating information on crime, criminal offenders, victims of crime, and the operation of the criminal justice system at all levels of the government.
- **Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI)**: The principal federal law enforcement agency of the U.S., tasked with investigating and enforcing federal laws, protecting the country against terrorism and cyber threats, and upholding national security. The FBI operates under the jurisdiction of the U.S. Department of Justice and conducts investigations into a wide range of criminal activities. It also provides intelligence and support to other federal, state, local, tribal, and international law enforcement agencies.
- **National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS)**: A survey developed by the Bureau of Justice Statistics and conducted annually by the Census Bureau that serves as the primary national data source on criminal victimization. The survey collects information from approximately 240,000 individuals in 150,000 U.S. households representative of the nation's demographics. Participants, aged 12 and above (excluding those homeless or in correctional facilities), are interviewed about their experiences with criminal victimization, including frequency, types, and impacts. Data cover non-fatal personal crimes (e.g., assault, robbery, sexual assault) and household property crimes (e.g., burglary, motor vehicle theft), along with reporting to law enforcement.
- **National Incident-Based Reporting System (NIBRS)**: A comprehensive system for collecting and reporting incident-level data on crimes reported to law enforcement in the U.S. Part of the Federal Bureau of Investigation's Uniform Crime Reporting Program, NIBRS is the successor to the Summary Reporting System, which provides limited

information on a select number of crimes. NIBRS captures information on a wide range of offenses, including details such as victim demographics, offender characteristics, and the relationship between victims and offenders.

- **Summary Reporting System (SRS):** A component of the Federal Bureau of Investigation's Uniform Crime Reporting Program that collects monthly summary information on eight major crime categories: homicide, rape, robbery, aggravated assault, burglary, larceny-theft, motor vehicle theft, and arson. While still in use by some agencies, the SRS has been sunsetted and replaced by the National Incident-Based Reporting System, which captures more detailed information on each criminal incident. Historically, more agencies submit offense data using the SRS than NIBRS. SRS agencies can submit optional supplemental property crime details, including the specific larceny types (e.g., shoplifting, theft from motor vehicles, purse snatching, etc.).
- **Uniform Crime Reporting (UCR) Program:** A program operated by the Federal Bureau of Investigation that generates crime statistics using data on crimes reported to federal, state, local, and tribal law enforcement agencies. Law enforcement agencies voluntarily report their crime data to the FBI, which aggregates and analyzes the information to produce comprehensive crime reports, including the annual Crime in the U.S. publication.

## Introduction

The Council on Criminal Justice released its [first report on shoplifting](#) in November 2023. To date, the report remains the most comprehensive look at shoplifting, covering specific city trends, the value of goods stolen, and other characteristics of the crime. Since then, the Council has provided updated shoplifting statistics for a sample of cities through its [crime trends report series](#).

This report provides an update on shoplifting trends for the nation's three largest cities—Chicago, Los Angeles, and New York. It also reexamines shoplifting data from the Council's [mid-year crime trends report](#), focusing on reported shoplifting during November and December, historically the months with the highest number of shoplifting incidents. Lastly, the report examines shoplifting data available from the FBI using data from two of its sources: the Summary Reporting System (SRS) and the National Incident-Based Reporting System (NIBRS). For longer-term larceny and shoplifting trends, please see CCJ's [larceny fact](#)

[sheet](#).

The city-level data provided in this report were obtained from online portals of city police departments that provided monthly incident-level data. Because these data rely on incidents reported to law enforcement, they almost certainly undercount total shoplifting. Potential factors influencing counts include changes in retailers' anti-theft measures and changes in how retailers report shoplifting to law enforcement, which could reflect their perceptions of the extent to which local police or prosecutors will apprehend suspects and pursue criminal charges.

While this report focuses on law enforcement data, such agencies are not the only source of shoplifting information. Surveys of the general public and data from retailers also produce valuable information on shoplifting.<sup>1</sup> Retail organizations such as the National Retail Federation, the Retail Industry Leaders Association, and the Loss Prevention Research Council release periodic reports on theft, organized retail crime, and inventory loss (commonly referred to as "shrink"). Because these organizations use different methodologies to measure shoplifting and various forms of theft, comparisons with law enforcement data may yield inconsistent results. The findings presented here should be viewed with these considerations in mind.

The crime incident data for this report were obtained within days of the end of the study period. As a result, these figures may—and often do—differ from data subsequently published by individual police departments. The findings also may differ from other counts released later by the FBI as part of its national crime reporting program. In addition, the figures may differ from those in other CCJ reports because the data may have been collected on different dates.

### **A Note on Los Angeles Data**

On March 7, 2024, the Los Angeles Police Department adopted a new records management system to begin reporting NIBRS data to the FBI. While the city continues to provide incident-level data (the data used in this report) using its prior reporting system, the number of criminal offenses in this dataset dropped substantially after the transition to NIBRS. There were over 17,000 total criminal incidents logged in February 2024; by June, that number dropped to about 8,000 incidents. This indicates that the shoplifting data presented for Los Angeles are an undercount of all shoplifting reported to the police.

## Recent Trends in Shoplifting

Figure 1 displays the most recent reported shoplifting rates from the three largest cities in the United States: Chicago (with data through Oct. 26, 2024), Los Angeles (through Oct. 28, 2024), and New York (through Sept. 30, 2024). The three cities generally followed a common pattern, with reported shoplifting rates dropping in 2020 during the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic, and then rising beginning in 2021 or 2022.

- In **Chicago**, the rate of reported shoplifting remained below pre-2020 levels throughout 2023. However, from January to October 2024, reported shoplifting in the city is 46% higher than during those same months in 2023. In fact, reported shoplifting in the first 10 months of 2024 was higher than in all 12 months of each of the preceding six years.
- For **Los Angeles**, shoplifting was 87% higher by the end of 2023 than in 2019. Though reported shoplifting has been lower from January to October 2024 than during those same months in 2023, shoplifting is likely undercounted due to the city's adoption of a new reporting system in March 2024 (see above for note on Los Angeles data).
- **New York** follows a different trend, with reported shoplifting increasing 48% from 2021 to 2022 before falling slightly in 2023. Despite that dip, shoplifting was 55% higher in 2023 than in 2019, before the pandemic began. This year, the shoplifting rate in New York from January to September was slightly higher (3%) than during the same period in 2023.

### Figure 1. Shoplifting Trends for Chicago, Los Angeles, and New York

Retail industry data consistently show that November and December feature higher sales than the rest of the year.<sup>2</sup> It is likely that this increased retail activity results in more shoplifting and more shoplifting reports to law enforcement during these months. Figure 2 shows the average monthly shoplifting rates from 2018 to 2023 in 23 cities, comparing rates for January to October to those for November and December of each year.

For most years, the average monthly shoplifting rate for November and December is slightly higher than for the rest of the year. In some years, however, it was considerably higher; the average shoplifting rate for November and December in 2023, for example, was 14% higher than the other months of the year, the largest difference seen during the time frame. As noted in the Council's mid-year crime trends report, the shoplifting rate during the first half of

2024, on average, was 24% higher than it was during the same period in 2023. The general trends presented in CCJ's mid-year report, and the results in Figures 1 and 2, suggest that the year-end 2024 shoplifting rate could be higher than in 2023.

## **Figure 2. Shoplifting Trends in 23 Cities, Comparing January to October with November and December**

### **A Closer Look at FBI Shoplifting Data**

The U.S. has two general measures of crime: the UCR program, comprised of the SRS and NIBRS, which are published by the FBI, and the National Criminal Victimization Survey (NCVS), published by the Bureau of Justice Statistics. Since the NCVS is a household survey on victimization, it does not capture crimes such as shoplifting, in which the victim is a business. The UCR Program, on the other hand, does capture business victimization, including shoplifting. Through the UCR Program, the FBI provides two sources of shoplifting incidents reported to law enforcement—the SRS and NIBRS. In the most recent data releases, these sources show vastly different shoplifting trends.

Figure 3 shows the number of shoplifting incidents reported through the SRS. By this measure, the number of shoplifting incidents decreased from 2019 to 2020 and dropped again in 2021. The number of shoplifting incidents then increased from 2021 to 2022 and increased again in 2023, eventually returning to 2019 levels.

## **Figure 3. Shoplifting Levels Using SRS Data**

### **How the SRS Shoplifting Numbers Were Generated by the FBI**

The incident numbers were generated by calculating the share of total larceny incidents resulting from shoplifting and other forms of theft. The shares were determined by agencies that submitted supplemental property crime information to the FBI. In 2019, 16,554 agencies submitted offense data through the SRS (or NIBRS) to the FBI, and 13,848 agencies submitted supplemental information that contained detailed information on larceny types. In 2023, the number of agencies reporting to the SRS or NIBRS stayed roughly constant (16,334 agencies), but the number of SRS-only reporting agencies that submitted detailed

information on larceny types increased to 15,298. The number of agencies that submitted the supplemental information also included NIBRS-reporting agencies.

Figure 4 shows the rate (per 100,000 population) of shoplifting incidents reported by the FBI using law enforcement incidents only submitted through NIBRS.<sup>3</sup> In contrast to Figure 3, which shows the number of shoplifting incidents reported to the SRS in 2023 being comparable to 2019, examining NIBRS data tells a different story. According to NIBRS data, the shoplifting rate was 93% higher in 2023 than in 2019, rising from 159.3 per 100,000 population in 2019 to 308.8 in 2023. The largest difference between the SRS (Figure 3) and NIBRS data (Figure 4) can be seen in the change from 2019 to 2020.<sup>4</sup> In the SRS, there is a 16% decrease in reported shoplifting; NIBRS data show a 45% increase during this timeframe.

(Note: Rates, rather than incident counts, must be used when analyzing NIBRS data, even across short periods, because the number of NIBRS-reporting law enforcement agencies has increased over time. In 2019, 8,497 agencies submitted NIBRS data to the FBI; by 2023, this value had nearly doubled to 16,334 law enforcement agencies.)

#### **Figure 4. Shoplifting Rates Using NIBRS Data**

It is unclear why such a substantial difference in reported shoplifting exists between these two sources, although each system uses a different process, which could contribute to the divergent trends. As noted above, the number of law enforcement agencies—specifically those representing large, urban jurisdictions—submitting NIBRS data doubled from 2019 to 2023. In 2019, only 46% of law enforcement agencies representing jurisdictions with a population of 250,000 or more people were submitted to NIBRS; by 2023, 86% of these large-city agencies were submitting data. The changing composition of NIBRS-reporting agencies may have contributed to the increase seen in Figure 4, even when adjusting for increases in the population covered by a NIBRS-reporting agency. Using agencies that consistently reported data to NIBRS from 2019 to 2021, [a Council analysis of shoplifting](#) found that the number of shoplifting incidents followed a pattern similar to that shown in Figure 3, decreasing both in 2020 and 2021.

The FBI cautions against comparing trends between the SRS and NIBRS because many agencies transitioned to NIBRS, but no reason is provided.<sup>5</sup> While that caution is understandable, the bureau could reduce confusion by offering more guidance on which

figures are preferable and attempting to paint a clearer picture of shoplifting trends. As noted in the CCJ Crime Trends Working Group’s [recommendations](#) to improve the nation’s crime data infrastructure, the reliability of crime trends data is a matter of “high-stakes consequences.” Crime statistics that are used to inform public debate and shape policy must be accurate and unambiguous. If NIBRS is not only the future but also the present of crime data reporting in the U.S., providing general statements is insufficient. With the official transition from the SRS to NIBRS in 2021, it is the responsibility of the FBI to clearly communicate the implications and applicability of using data from different collections.

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## **Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup> For findings of a recent shoplifting survey see: Davis, M. & Shepard, D. (2024, July 2024). “More than 1 in 5 Americans have shoplifted, with grocery and department stores the easiest targets.” Lending Tree. <https://www.lendingtree.com/debt-consolidation/shoplifting-survey/>

<sup>2</sup> Business and Industry. U.S. Census Bureau. Table available at:



[https://www.census.gov/econ/currentdata/?programCode=MARTS&startYear=1992&endYear=2024&categories\[\]=44000&dataType=SM&geoLevel=US&adjusted=0&notAdjusted=1&errorData=0#table-results](https://www.census.gov/econ/currentdata/?programCode=MARTS&startYear=1992&endYear=2024&categories[]=44000&dataType=SM&geoLevel=US&adjusted=0&notAdjusted=1&errorData=0#table-results)

<sup>3</sup> FBI Crime Data Explorer. Federal Bureau of Investigation.

<https://cde.ucr.cjis.gov/LATEST/webapp/#/pages/explorer/crime/crime-trend>

<sup>4</sup> The counts presented in the SRS can be turned into rates to compare to the NIBRS data. When the SRS counts are transformed into rates, the disparity between the SRS and NIBRS remains unchanged. Counts are maintained in Figure 3 since that is how the FBI presented the information.

<sup>5</sup> Methodology note from the [FBI's Crime Data Explorer](#): "Please be aware that, due to changes in the reporting practices of some agencies, figures may not be comparable to previous years' data. This may be especially noticeable as agencies transition from reporting offenses via SRS to reporting offenses via NIBRS." One possibility is that due to the [hierarchy rule](#), there might be an increase in some non-homicide offenses. However, it is not apparent that this is what is intended by this statement.