Shoplifting Trends: What You Need to Know

Methodology

The analysis, entitled Shoplifting Trends: What You Need to Know, examines recent trends in shoplifting in cities across the United States. The data in this report are drawn from two sources: incident-level data taken directly from law enforcement agency or city websites and data from the National Incident-Based Reporting System (NIBRS). All analyses which examine shoplifting January 2018 to June 2023 use incident-level data from police department or city websites. The largest city in the sample was New York City, with 8.4 million residents. The smallest was Chattanooga, Tennessee, with just under 182,000 residents. The mean population for all included cities was approximately 1.1 million residents; the median was roughly 474,000 residents. Study cities were selected based on the availability of incident or monthly-level shoplifting data on their online portals. See Table S1 for sample cities. Since shoplifting is not a Part I major offense, not all cities that post crime data online identify shoplifting incidents.

The values may differ from data published by individual police departments due to data updating over time and from official counts released by the FBI. In addition, data may differ from those used in previous CCJ reports because they are based on a different number and mix of cities. For the most up-to-date information for a specific city, please visit its website.

NATIONAL INCIDENT-BASED REPORTING SYSTEM DATA

At the time of the analysis, NIBRS data was available only through 2021. The FBI is undergoing a shift to its data collection and reporting methods – shifting from a Summary Reporting System (SRS) to the incident-level NIBRS. However, not all law enforcement agencies have made this transition. In 2019, 8,497 agencies reported NIBRS data; by 2021, that number had increased to 11,794. The sample for the NIBRS analysis includes 3,812 local law enforcement agencies who reported 12 complete months of NIBRS data from 2019-2021. See Table S2 for a breakdown by city population. It is also worth noting that not every agency appears in every NIBRS analysis for every year since some agencies (particularly small agencies) can report zero shoplifting incidents or a small number of incidents and not provide the other data needed for the analysis. Visit the FBI's Crime Data Explorer for more information.

NIBRS data were accessed from: Kaplan, J. (2023). Jacob Kaplan's concatenated files: National incident-based reporting system (NIBRS) data, 1991-2021. Ann Arbor, MI: Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research [distributor]. https://doi.org/10.3886/E118281V8

NOTES ON FIGURES AND TABLES

Figure 1: Sample of 24 cities showing average monthly shoplifting rates.

Figure 2: Sample of 24 cities showing city-level shoplifting counts and rates.

Figure 3: Sample of 24 cities examining changes in shoplifting from January to June 2019 to January to June 2023.

Figure 4: Sample of 24 cities displaying annual shoplifting counts from 2019-2022 and for 2023 (January to June).

Figure 5: Sample of 24 cities showing average monthly larceny and non-shoplifting larceny rates.

Figure 6: Sample of 24 cities examining the average change in property crime levels relative to January 2018.

Figure 7: Selection of the three largest cities that experienced shoplifting increases from the first half of 2019 and the relative change in property crime from January 2018.

Figure 8: NIBRS sample of cities showing shoplifting values by percentiles. Values are adjusted to 2022 dollars.

Figure 9: Sample of five cities displaying changes in the share of felony shoplifting of total shoplifting. This measure is discussed in detail below.

Figure 10: Eight city sample showing the number and share of assaults that occur in a retail location.

Table 1: NIBRS sample of cities showing the percentage of other offenses that co-occurred during a shoplifting incident.

Table 2: NIBRS sample displaying the number of individuals involved in shoplifting incidents.

MEASURING ORGANIZED RETAIL THEFT

The first challenge in measuring organized retail theft is developing a definition. Although existing definitions vary, organized retail theft is typically defined as coordinated efforts between many people in which theft is for financial gain, not personal use. Stolen items are intended to be resold on a black market. The conspiratorial nature of organized retail theft makes it nearly impossible to measure using NIBRS or other crime data collection efforts. To illustrate:

- In 2021, the FBI reported 2,967,229 larceny offenses (NIBRS only)
- For the same year, the FBI reported 89,625 Stolen Property Offenses (NIBRS only)
- Stolen Property Offenses are defined as "Receiving, buying, selling, possessing, concealing, or transporting any property with the knowledge that it has been unlawfully taken, as by Burglary, Embezzlement, Fraud, Larceny, Robbery, etc."

The stolen property offenses are the closest crime category available to measure organized retail theft because these offenses involve either multiple parties knowing that goods were illegally obtained or that stolen goods are being sold. If we assume that all stolen property offenses were the result of larceny, that suggests that about 3% of larcenies were committed with the intent to resell stolen items.

NIBRS is not an ideal system to measure organized retail theft. A National Academies of Science report highlights the challenges of measuring organized retail theft and similar offenses. One such challenge was cooperation from businesses. When a business reports large-scale victimization, this may signal vulnerability and diminish its competitive advantage. Additionally, the report highlighted a database created by the FBI and several retail groups that would better track organized retail theft. However, after multiple versions, the system experienced numerous problems and appears to be abandoned.

Retail industry data also has shortcomings. Transparency is the biggest challenge with retail industry data. In NIBRS, users can identify when each reported crime incident occurred and for property crimes, users can see the value stolen or damaged during an incident. Industry data does not include this level of granularity. Additionally, industry data focuses either on surveys addressing the perception retail theft is a problem or on the dollar value of stolen goods. While these are valuable sources of information, the total number of incidents is an important – and missing – piece of information. Lastly, while some industry sources attempt to attribute a share of loss (or shrink) related to acts such as shoplifting, they cannot reliably measure the percentage of external (shoplifting) versus internal (employee) theft. While retailers have improved their methods for identifying internal theft, they may not be able to identify when goods are stolen. Given all these challenges, the actual level of organized retail theft is unknown.

EXAMINING CRIMES THAT CO-OCCUR WITH SHOPLIFTING

As noted above, the number of shoplifting incidents presented in Figure 8 is smaller than the number of incidents presented in Table 1 due to limitations of NIBRS data related to co-occurring crimes.

EXAMINING FELONY SHOPLIFTING

Five cities in this report (Los Angeles, Memphis, New York, San Francisco, and St. Paul, Minnesota) had data indicating whether a shoplifting offense was a felony or misdemeanor.[1] In the data, this is indicated by the value of goods stolen, or attempted to be stolen, during a shoplifting offense. The felony threshold is determined by state-wide penal code. Some shoplifting offenses may be considered felonies in some circumstances even in which the value of the goods taken do not exceed the felony threshold, such as multiple convictions.

In this report, however, felony offenses are reported as denoted by the value of the goods taken to reflect city data which typically do not contain information on prior offense history of the defendant, and which may not reflect whether or not a shoplifting incident was determined to be an organized retail theft incident. For this reason, the current analysis may underestimate rates of shoplifting that could be charged as felony offenses. For the five cities in this report, felony thresholds were as follows:

- Los Angeles & San Francisco: California state felony threshold at $950
- Memphis: Tennessee state threshold at $1,000
- New York City: New York state threshold at $1,000
- St. Paul: Minnesota state threshold at $1,000

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[1] In 2020, the Cook County (Chicago), Illinois State's Attorney directed prosecutors to charge shoplifting cases as misdemeanors when the value of goods was below $1,000. However, the Illinois felony threshold is set at $500 and incident-level data from law enforcement agencies continue to use the $500 threshold. Therefore, felony shoplifting data for Chicago could not be included in the analysis.

Supplemental Materials

Table S1: 24-City Sample and Offense-Specific Data Availability

City	Shoplifting	Larceny	Burglary	Robbery	Motor vehicle theft	Felony shoplifting	Store assaults
Austin	X	X	X	X	X		X
Boston	X	X	X	X	X		
Chandler	X	X	X	X	X		X
Chattanooga	X	X	X	X	X		
Chicago	X	X	X	X	X		X
Cincinnati	X	X	X	X	X		X
Colorado Springs	X	X	X	X	X		
Dallas	X	X	X	X	X		X
Denver	X	X	X	X	X		
Lincoln	X	X	X	X	X		
Little Rock	X	X	X	X	X		
Los Angeles	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Memphis	X	X	X	X	X	X	
Minneapolis	X	X	X	X	X		
Nashville	X	X	X	X	X		X
New York	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Pittsburgh	X	X	X	X	X		
Raleigh	X	X	X	X	X		
San Francisco	X	X	X	X	X	X	
Seattle	X	X	X	X	X		
St. Louis	X	X	X	X	X		
St. Paul	X	X	X	X	X	X	
St. Petersburg	X	X	X		X		
Virginia Beach	X	X	X	X	X		

Table S2. NIBRS Sample by City Size

City Size	Number of Cities	Percent of Sample
1,000,000+	2	0.1%
500,000 - 999,999	15	0.4%
250,000 - 499,999	18	0.5%
100,000 - 249,999	91	2.4%
50,000 - 99,999	187	4.9%
25,000 - 49,999	374	9.8%
10,000 - 24,999	788	20.7%
2,500 - 9,999	1,468	38.5%
under 2,500	869	22.8%
Total	3,812	100.0%

Figure S1. Larceny Rates for New York State (without New York City) and New York City, 2000 - 2022
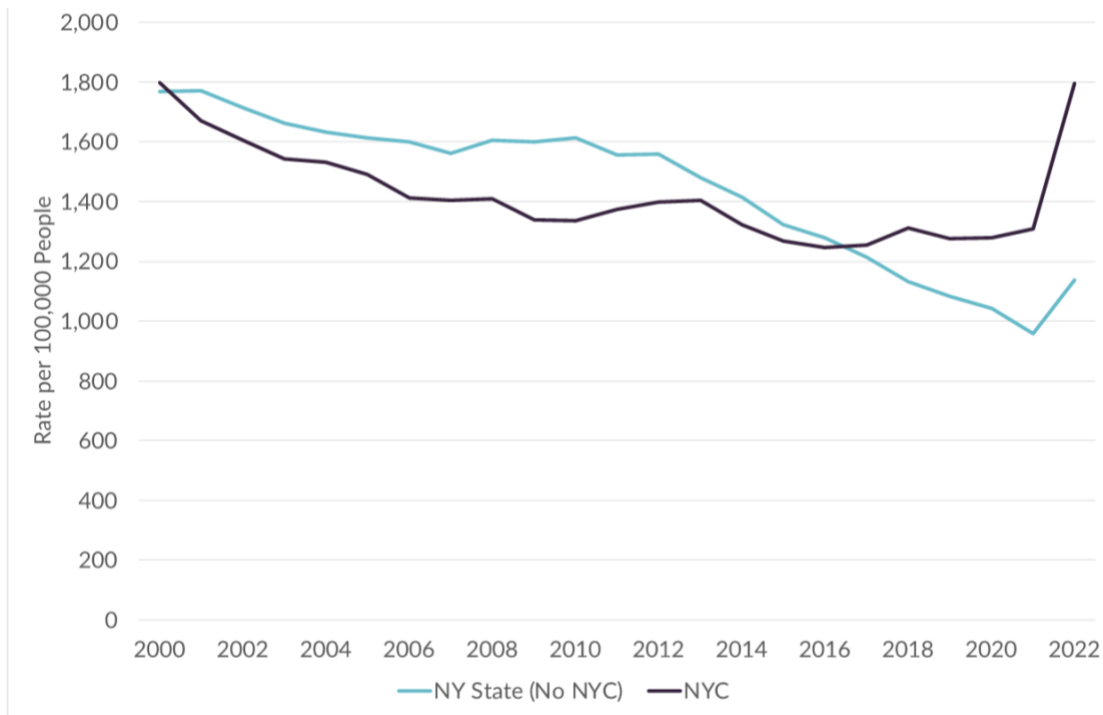
**Table S3: Average Value of Stolen Goods per Offense, by Type of Larceny**

Pocket-Picking	$1,233
Purse-Snatching	$634
Shoplifting	$306
Theft from Motor Vehicles (excluding accessories)	$1,053
Motor Vehicle Accessories	$873
Bicycles	$724
From Buildings	$1,616
From Coin-Operated Machines	$816
All Others (excludes motor vehicle theft)	$2,926
Average Across All Types	**$1,482**

Note: Adapted from Crime in the United States, 2020, Table 23.

ESTIMATING THE VALUE OF SHOPLIFTED GOODS

The number of shoplifting incidents presented in Figure 8 is smaller than the number of incidents presented in Table 1 due to limitations of NIBRS data (see above for NIBRS sample details). When multiple property offenses co-occur within a single incident, stolen or damaged property is associated with the incident rather than the specific offense. For instance, if a person shoplifted a watch from a store but also robbed a customer, the value of the goods is associated with the incident rather than the shoplifting and the robbery. Because of this, the analysis only contains incidents where shoplifting is the only offense. Missing incident data will not affect the final results because the percentage of co-occurring property crimes is less than 0.5%.

Figure S2. Median Shoplifting Value by City Size
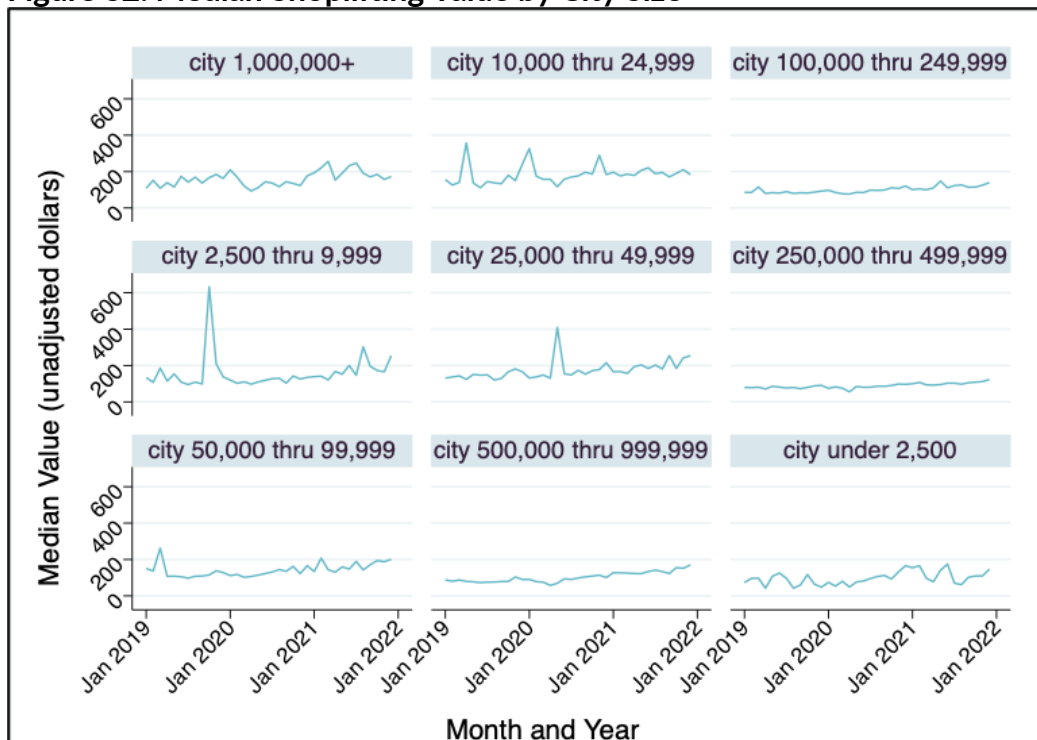
EXPLORING SHOPLIFTING "MOBS"

Figure S3 shows the percentage of unknown number of offenders for shoplifting incidents by city size. Since Table 2 showed an increase in the unknown number of offenders per incident from 2019 and 2020 to 2021, it was possible that this missingness was concentrated in a few cities. After visually examining several large cities, that did not appear to be the case. As Figure S3 presents, missingness on the number of offenders increased for many cities around the middle of 2020 and, for others, it increased closer to the end of 2021.

Figure S3. Percent of Unknown Number of Offenders by City Size
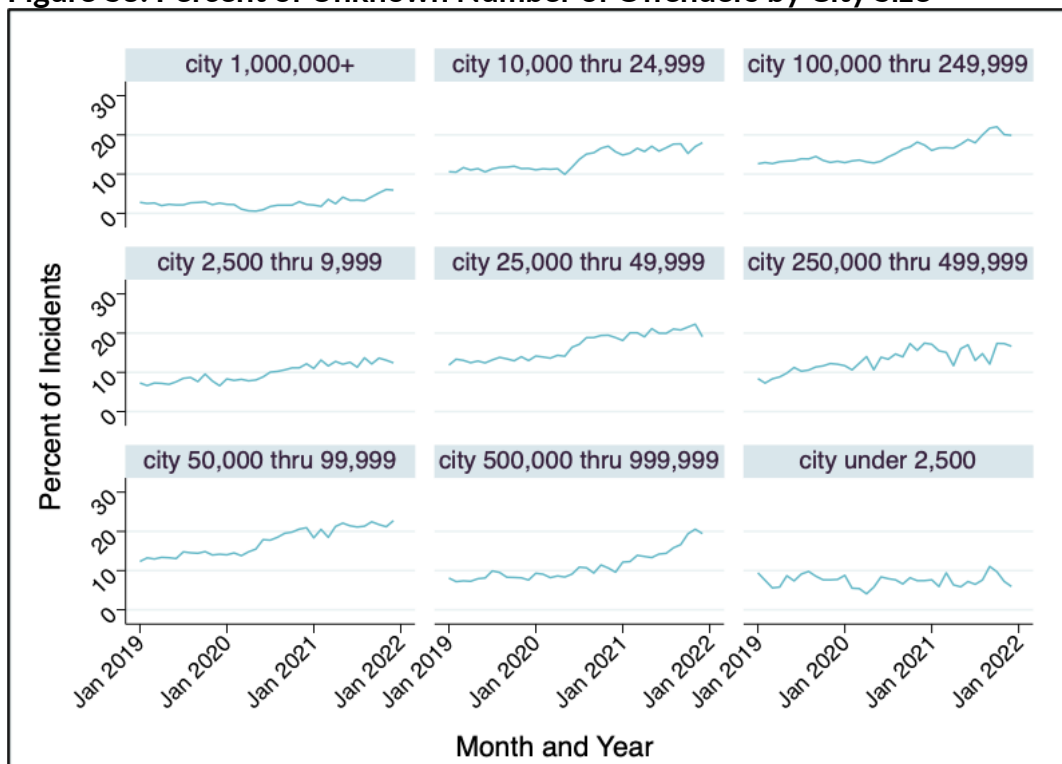
The increase in the number of unknown offenders may have resulted more individuals involved in the shoplifting incident, although that remains unclear. For example, law enforcement officers may not record the number of individuals in a group-based incident if they are unsure whether it was five or six people. In other words, as the size of the shoplifting group increases, it may be more difficult to record how many people were involved, resulting in the number being marked as unknown.