

Shoplifters gang up

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The camera zooms in on two men - one young, one old - in the meat section of a Surrey grocery store. They pile steaks into the basket of the old man's scooter, then casually cover them with a blanket. By the time they reach the store's exit, they're carrying several hundred dollars worth of meat. The surveillance footage reflects the changing face of Surrey's theft problem, says Const. Marcel Parent of Surrey RCMP's retail theft unit. "These people steal all day long. They're highly organized and work in groups of three or four, sometimes whole families," says Parent. There's nothing they won't steal. "Surrey has a black market for just about everything you can steal - cheese, meat, shoes, razor blades, batteries, DVD players, cameras."

Between 2000 and 2005, the number of arrests for retail theft in Surrey jumped from 2,122 to 3,205, says Parent. To fight back, Surrey stores have stepped up security in the last three years, installing sensors and camera systems and hiring their own store detectives, also known as loss prevention officers (LPOs). LPOs monitor surveillance cameras, pose as shoppers to spy on thieves, and make arrests when a theft takes place. "We can't send everyone to jail, so stores are arming themselves," says Parent. "Even if you're not stealing, somebody's watching you."

Parent liaises with Surrey's 200 LPOs and says most are employed by major retail chains, while the rest are contractors hired by smaller stores. Parent hates the term 'shoplifter' because he thinks it doesn't convey the seriousness of the crime. "It makes it sound like it's almost cool to steal. You won't hear me call them shoplifters. To me they're thieves."

Mario Schuchardt owns the Canadian Tire at 13665 102nd Ave. He's seen it all: "Mothers come in with baby carriages. They load up the baby carriage, with the infant in it, with tools. "We have people come in with someone in a wheelchair and they're hiding stuff in the lap of the person that's in the wheelchair and covering it up with a blanket. "Once you start chasing them down, their legs work just fine."

Three years ago, Schuchardt installed "piles of cameras" and hired several LPOs. Even though he spends \$50,000 per year on anti-theft measures, Schuchardt still loses about \$250,000 a year to crooks. "My losses have gone down, although they haven't gone down near where I would feel comfortable with it." Also, Schuchardt is concerned for the safety of his LPOs, several of whom have been injured while apprehending thieves. "Some of these people can get pretty nasty. They threaten you with hypodermic needles. We had a guy pull a knife out on us. They have their buddies wait outside and then hang a beating on our LOP when he tries to catch one of them."

Schuchardt says he's frustrated that many of the thieves don't end up behind bars. "There's a sense of frustration with how Crown counsel deals with shoplifters. For the Crown it just seems to be a pain for them to deal with." He also says police officers sometimes try to talk him out of pressing charges. "They know Crown won't deal with it, so they say 'Why even bother?'" BC Crown doesn't keep separate statistics for shoplifting charges, says spokesman Stan Lowe. "What I can say is that shoplifting comprises a

significant portion of the charges that come in...and they come in from all the large retailers."

Drug addiction motivates much of the theft that takes place at the Zellers at Central City, says business manager Ross Pickard. "In this neighbourhood it's more drug issues. Each market is different but for us it's definitely a drug problem." LPOs have been working the store since it opened almost five years ago, but there's a still a "huge" theft problem, says Pickard. "The razors are always a hot commodity...and health and beauty products they can sell on the street or to smaller stores."

Last year the Whalley Business Improvement Association contributed more than \$10,000 to set up a website, surreyrtpp.org, that allows LPOs working in Whalley stores to share information about crooks. The site is necessary to combat thieves who are more brazen every year, says Lesley Tannen, executive director of Whalley BIA. "They cost our businesses millions of dollars per year in losses and, increasingly, we understand that they're being aggressive and in some cases, dangerous. "Two hundred items a day is nothing for these folks. They take taxis to steal stuff from store to store." Tannen said it's still too early to tell how much the website has helped the problem. "There has been information provided as a result of loss prevention officers sharing information that has resulted in arrests. "It's going to grow. It will take time."

Cream, razors and film make most-stolen list

According to the Food Marketing Institute, an American-based retail research group, some of the most frequently shoplifted items are:

- hemorrhoid cream
- pregnancy tests
- razors
- nonprescription painkillers
- camera film