

Central Co-op retail crime report

February 2024





Foreword

As we confront the stark realities of contemporary retail crime, here at Central Co-op, we're standing firm in our commitment to safeguarding our colleagues and supporting our communities. In 2024, the rise of organised crime has become an all too familiar narrative. Too often our stores bear witness to aggressive behaviour and relentless plundering of our shelves - a regrettable reality worsened by the alarming absence of effective law enforcement intervention.

Central Co-op, in solidarity with our communities, refuses to accept this as something our colleagues, Members and customers are to endure. Co-operative values are based on self-help, self-responsibility, democracy, equality, equity and solidarity, which compels us to act on this issue decisively - tackling not only the symptoms but also the root causes of retail crime.



Central Co-op Society President, Elaine Dean

We are advocates of proactive measures aimed at protecting our colleagues. Recognising the gravity of the situation, we have undertaken a multifaceted approach, including investment in safety initiatives and collaboration with law enforcement agencies. Notably, our partnership with the West Midlands Police & Crime Commission's "Offender to Rehab" program highlights our commitment to tackling the root causes of crime at a grassroots level, with a focus on addressing issues of addiction and societal vulnerability.

We are calling on Members of Parliament (MPs) to support a crucial amendment to the Criminal Justice Bill.

Drawing from the momentum generated by a successful 2023 campaign, in collaboration with many other retailers and Co-operative Societies, which witnessed the introduction of the Retail Crime Action Plan in October, we are determined to continue our efforts by encouraging our Members, customers and colleagues to advocate for legislative reform. We aspire to help create meaningful change and foster a safer, more resilient retail environment for all. The retail industry stands united in confronting retail crime. Together, let us champion the cause of our frontline workers and reaffirm our unwavering commitment to community well-being.

This proposed measure would specifically criminalise assaults on shopworkers, sending a clear and unequivocal message that violence and organised crime within retail environments will not be tolerated.

By sanctioning this amendment, Parliament has the opportunity to demonstrate its commitment to the safety and well-being of those who uphold the law within our stores. It is imperative that every one of us takes a stand against violence and abuse directed towards shopworkers, and this amendment represents a significant step towards achieving that goal.

We are also asking Police and Crime Commissioner candidates to publicly agree a pledge to tackle retail crime on election, including getting police to attend requests for assistance as a matter of priority.

Together, let us send a powerful message that the safety of our colleagues and communities is non-negotiable. We are urging our colleagues, Members and customers to help us take action by writing to their MP and asking if they will stand with our shopworkers by supporting the Retail Workers amendment to the Criminal Justice Bill.

Signed,



Elaine Dean
Society President

Acknowledgements

We are hugely grateful to the individuals and colleagues who took their time to contribute to this report, offering testimonials, research and interviews to demonstrate what can often be the harsh reality of their working day.

The 2024 British Retail Consortium (BRC) report revealed that incidents of violence and abuse have increased to over 1,300 per day, up from just under 870 in the 2023 survey, while customer theft more than doubled to 16.7 million. Maybe the most shocking finding of all is that only 8 per cent of reported incidents of violence and abuse were prosecuted, so it's unsurprising that 61 per cent of retailers rated police response as poor or very poor.

On the 7th of February 2024, The Co-operative Group published a research report setting out a ten-point plan focused on turning the tide on prolific offenders and building on advancements seen to address the alarming increase in crime, violence, intimidation and abuse that continues to torment the retail sector, blight communities and cause physical and mental harm on store workers.

Commissioned by the Group and written by Emmeline Taylor, professor of criminology at City, University of London, the report recommends making attacks on a shopworker a stand-alone offence. As well as advocating for changes to legislation, a focus on interrupting the stolen goods trade and the introduction of measurable key performance indicators to monitor the commitments made in the police Retail Crime Action Plan.

The new report has ambitions to foster a refreshed, honest and collaborative approach between the retail industry, police and broader criminal justice system, and build on the advancements seen over the last few years. It illustrates how retail crime spreads and grows when left unchecked and is all too often dismissed as a petty and victimless crime despite its far-reaching societal impacts.

Central Co-op supports and echoes the findings in the report and on Co-op Group's stance on this matter. The report represents crucial pillars of our collective endeavour to combat retail crime, providing invaluable insights and actionable strategies for effecting meaningful change.

"Not too long ago we faced a pandemic, something that changed our world forever. During that time, all retail workers were considered frontline heroes, helping to keep us fed during the lockdowns we experienced. Now, in 2024, retail crime is at a level we could never have imagined, with our colleagues facing threats, violence and abuse regularly for simply carrying out their jobs. It is unacceptable and things must change.

We stand with our colleagues across the industry calling for an amendment to the Criminal Justice Bill to protect all retail workers." - Debbie Robinson, Chief Executive Central Co-op



Central Co-op Chief Executive, Debbie Robinson

Summary

Paul Dennis, Chief Operations Officer at Central Co-op, comments: “We’ve observed a significant surge in violent crime, with assaults on store colleagues up by 67 per cent year on year, while instances of verbal abuse, threats and intimidation have also risen by 47 per cent.

Safeguarding the well-being of our colleagues, ensuring their safe return home each day, remains our utmost priority. While we continue to invest in protective measures, it’s imperative that the police prioritise these offenses and enhance their response to incidents. The British Retail Consortium reports that only 8 per cent of reported retail crime resulted in a prosecution, with just 4 per cent resulting in a conviction.

Collaborative efforts with the police and local leadership are crucial to addressing this issue effectively. These are not victimless crimes; the enduring impact on our colleagues, Members and customers highlights the urgency for meaningful change. We remain steadfast in our commitment to working with the Government and local law enforcement to drive positive outcomes.”

Recent times have cast a harsh spotlight on the alarming escalation of retail crime, revealing a landscape rife with violence, theft, anti-social behaviour and criminal damage. These hostile environments not only compromise the safety of retail staff and customers but also threaten the profitability and viability of businesses in affected locations. Compounding this challenge is the frustrating reality that many perpetrators of these crimes are not only well-known but also appear to operate with impunity, emboldened by the lack of repercussions for their actions.

A range of factors have contributed to this perfect storm, with reductions in police resources and disinvestment in critical social services creating fertile ground for crime to thrive. Prolific offenders often receive short custodial sentences or fines that fail to address the underlying causes of their behaviour, such as substance misuse or mental health issues. Moreover, evidence suggests that such punitive measures may even exacerbate rather than alleviate the problem.

This situation has taken a toll on hard-working retail workers, who are increasingly anxious with rising levels of crime. However, amidst these challenges there is cause for hope, as initiatives at local and national levels gain momentum. The recommendations outlined in Co-op Group’s report offer actionable pathways forward, aimed at better protecting shopworkers across England and Wales from the devastating impact of prolific local offenders on their businesses and communities.



Central Co-op Chief Operations Officer, Paul Dennis

By prioritising collaboration, resource allocation and holistic interventions that address the root causes of retail crime, we can work towards creating safer, more resilient retail environments for all. It is imperative that stakeholders at every level of society commit to implementing these recommendations and sustaining the momentum of change to ensure a brighter, safer future for the retail sector and its invaluable workforce.

Introduction

2021 marked a significant point in time with the amendment of the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill. This amendment aimed to place in law the aggravating factor applied by courts in cases of assault, particularly against individuals providing a public service or performing a public duty, as outlined in Sentencing Council guidelines. The move was embraced by the retail sector, signalling governmental recognition of the gravity of the issue.

However, as subsequent years followed, it became apparent that this legislative stride fell short of addressing the full extent of the problem. Regrettably, the Ministry of Justice has lacked the means to effectively monitor the impact of the amendment, rendering assessment of its effectiveness unattainable. As a result, the situation within Central Co-op stores and retail businesses nationwide has shown little improvement.

Theft-related incidents have particularly spiked, showing a 63.7% increase compared to the prior year, with actual reported theft rising by 58.4%. Attempted theft has also seen a notable increase by 77.7%.

In the first half of 2023, Co-op Societies reported an alarming average of a thousand daily incidents of retail crime - a stark surge of 35 per cent compared to the preceding year. Disturbingly, a considerable majority of severe retail crime incidents went unattended by law enforcement, even in cases where shopworkers were seriously assaulted.

While retailers have reported green shoots of improvement since the launch of the Retail Crime Action Plan in October 2023, research suggests that two-in-five criminals detained by trained security guards still walk away with police failing to attend. The necessity for prompt intervention to safeguard retail staff and communities cannot be overstated. Central Co-op urges Members of Parliament to rally behind an amendment to the Criminal Justice Bill, establishing assault on shop workers as a distinct offense.

Shop workers are entrusted with upholding the law, including the regulation of potentially hazardous items such as alcohol and knives. Regrettably, it is often in the enforcement of these regulations that tensions escalate into violence and abuse. If Parliament mandates shop workers to uphold the law, it is also their duty to afford these individuals the fundamental legal protections.

Businesses, despite investing millions in security measures, often find themselves plagued by an escalating barrage of attacks. The distressing experiences of in-store colleagues, the heightened anxiety of customers and the relentless depletion of resources paint a grim portrait of retail in 2024.

For frontline shop workers, the toll taken by this continuous issue is profound. The absence of reliable police intervention compounds their distress, leaving them vulnerable and without

resolution. Additionally, the escalating occurrence of abuse, threats and violence further heightens this distress, underscoring the urgent need for decisive action.

In the past year, Central Co-op stores have experienced a significant rise in reported internal crime incidents, with an increase of 58.7 per cent compared to the previous year. The main contributor to this surge has been theft across the retail locations.

Theft-related incidents have particularly spiked, showing a 63.7 per cent increase compared to the prior year, with actual reported theft rising by 58.4 per cent. Attempted theft has also seen a notable increase by 77.7 per cent, yet this stat does indicate that Central Co-op has implemented improvements in prevention methods.

Reported assaults within Central Co-op stores have risen by 67.7 per cent, with 223 incidents reported. This includes assaults on colleagues, security personnel and customer altercations. Among these, 78 assaults were against Central Co-op colleagues and 122 against security personnel.

Instances of threats, intimidation and verbal abuse have also surged, rising by 47.1 per cent compared to the previous year. Additionally, anti-social behaviour within the stores has increased by 25.7 per cent, with 112 more incidents compared to the previous year.

These statistics highlight the challenges Central Co-op stores face in combating retail crime and maintaining a safe environment for Members, customers and colleagues. Efforts to enhance security measures and improve approaches to deter criminal activity remain essential in addressing these concerning trends.

As we navigate the turbulent waters of in-store shopping in 2024, Central Co-op remains steadfast in our commitment to our colleagues, our communities and the pursuit of justice.

“Every day is a struggle because half my team are worried coming in just in case there is an altercation with shoplifter. Although we stay clear and just offer them baskets, they almost get confrontational from us even being around. Police have no hurry in them to help when we’re being looted for stock. Retail has become more of a battleground and half of the team worry for their own safety day in day out.” - *Store Manager*

“This increase in retail crime is one we’ve seen particularly in the last 12 – 18 months. It’s almost seems to be socially acceptable to verbally or physically abuse a shopworker and we need to look at how we’re addressing that as a society.” – *Lee Dillow, Head of Trading Support*

What we’re doing in store

In the ongoing battle against retail crime, Central Co-op has embarked on a comprehensive strategy aimed at safeguarding our colleagues, customers and stock. With a multifaceted approach that includes both proactive measures and collaborative engagements, the Society is striving to mitigate the impact of criminal activities within our stores.

“The level of shoplifting we witness now has moved far beyond opportunistic petty theft. Criminals stroll in at any time of the day, unmasked and make no attempt to conceal items. It has escalated to nothing short of looting” - *Store Manager*

One notable aspect of Central Co-op’s initiative involves direct engagement with local Members of Parliament (MPs). Throughout 2023, a total of 34 letters were sent to MPs, expressing concerns over colleague safety in the aftermath of various incidents. These incidents ranged from colleague assaults following theft escalations to instances of antisocial behaviour and customer altercations. Furthermore, Central Co-op facilitated 10 visits by local MPs and Police and Crime Commissioner (PCC) candidates to our stores in different regions, fostering dialogue and awareness about retail crime challenges.

Central Co-op has also made substantial investments in protective equipment and security measures to fortify its defences against criminal activities. In 2023 alone, the Society allocated £460,000 for headsets across all its stores, enhancing communication and response capabilities. As well as the deployment of body-worn cameras in 99 stores and the rollout of the “Watch Me Now” program in 126 stores signifying a commitment to enhancing surveillance and accountability. Additionally, Central Co-op initiated trials of new product protection measures, such as tagging barriers, in three stores to further deter theft.

We have also prioritised collaboration with industry partners and crime reporting platforms to bolster resilience against retail crime. By joining the National Business Crime Solution (NBCS), Central Co-op gains access to a comprehensive crime reporting platform, enabling more effective sharing of intelligence and collaboration with law enforcement agencies. Initiatives like the Shopkind campaign, aimed at promoting kindness and community cohesion within stores, support Central Co-op’s commitment to fostering a safe and supportive environment.

Uniform guarding and store detective services play a crucial role in Central Co-op’s security framework, contributing to both incident response and crime prevention. Throughout



2023, uniform guards and store detectives were involved in addressing 16.6 per cent of reported incidents, providing valuable support in safeguarding both personnel and property. Moreover, their intervention resulted in direct savings of over £153,000 by preventing theft and protecting merchandise.

As Central Co-op continues its efforts to combat retail crime, we remain steadfast in our commitment to innovation, collaboration and community engagement. With ongoing investments in protective equipment, enhanced security measures and proactive engagement with stakeholders, Central Co-op aims to create safer and more secure environments for its colleagues, Members and customers alike. By addressing the root causes of retail crime and fostering partnerships with local representatives and law enforcement agencies, Central Co-op endeavours to build resilient communities and uphold the values of safety and integrity in our stores.

Our commitment to addressing retail crime extends beyond immediate security measures to tackling the root causes underlying such behaviours. Recognising the complex interplay between addiction and criminal activity, we were honoured to be the first retailer to support the West Midlands Police & Crime Commission's "Offender to Rehab" program. Through this initiative, we gained valuable insights into the connection between addiction and theft, informing our efforts to provide support rehabilitation opportunities for those in need.

Additionally, our Member & Community Relations Officers (MCROs) and Membership Communities Councils (MCCs) actively engage with and support various community groups, some of which focus on topics such as money management and anti-social behaviour. By empowering individuals with resources and education, we aim to foster healthier communities and reduce the occurrence of retail crime at its source.

Policing & government

The effectiveness of police responses to retail crime remains a critical concern for both retailers and law enforcement agencies. Central Co-op's experiences reflect systemic challenges that undermine the effectiveness of police interventions and jeopardise the safety of retail staff and customers.

One of the primary issues identified is the lack of police presence and support for community stores, hindering timely communication and assistance during incidents. The inability to identify or contact local Police Community Support Officers (PCSOs) or police officers exacerbates the vulnerability of retail establishments to criminal activities.

Furthermore, we've noticed a widespread reluctance among colleagues to report incidents to the police, which stems from a perceived lack of responsiveness or meaningful outcomes following the reporting of theft. Instances of poor police response to emergency calls (999) or physical assaults compound the problem, leaving retail staff feeling abandoned and unprotected.

The escalation of theft incidents has dire consequences, including an alarming increase in colleague assaults, posing significant risks to their safety and well-being. Additionally, the targeted theft of products, particularly health and beauty items, by organised criminal gangs underscores the evolving nature of retail crime and the need for proactive law enforcement measures.

Despite these challenges, there have been promising developments following engagements

with MPs and Police and Crime Commissioner (PCC) candidates. Positive responses and follow-up actions from local police forces demonstrate the potential for collaborative efforts to address retail crime effectively.

Allocating dedicated support to target theft in specific stores has yielded tangible results, leading to the apprehension of prolific offenders and a subsequent reduction in criminal activities.

The diminishing confidence among retailers in police responses to crime is a cause for concern, as highlighted in the British Retail Consortium's (BRC) latest Crime Survey. Addressing this crisis of confidence requires a concerted effort to improve response times, attend to reports of serious crime and enhance communication regarding case progression.

Tackling retail crime demands collaborative action and innovative solutions that prioritises the safety and security of retail staff, customers, and communities. By addressing systemic challenges and fostering meaningful partnerships between retailers and law enforcement agencies, we can create safer environments and deter criminal activities in retail settings.

Conclusion

The evidence is clear: incidents of serious retail crime, including assaults on shopworkers, too often go unaddressed by law enforcement. This failure to respond leaves retail colleagues and communities vulnerable to escalating violence and abuse.

We cannot afford to ignore this pressing issue any longer. That's why Central Co-op is urging Members of Parliament (MPs) to support an important amendment to the Criminal Justice Bill - a measure that would make it a specific offence to assault a shopworker. By enacting this amendment, Parliament can send a powerful message that violence against those enforcing the law within retail environments will not be tolerated.

Central Co-op is urging its colleagues, Members and customers to take action now. Contact your MP and ask if they will stand with our shopworkers by supporting the Retail Workers amendment to the Criminal Justice Bill. Together, we can ensure that retail colleagues and communities are safe and protected from harm.

<https://party.coop/retailamendment-coop>



