



# The Psychology and Sociology Impact of Shoplifting in America

Ferry Chandra<sup>1</sup>, Yusrina Dinar Prihatika<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Department of English Literature Universitas Ahmad Dahlan Yogyakarta, 55191, Indonesia

<sup>1</sup> [ferrychandra005@gmail.com](mailto:ferrychandra005@gmail.com) \*; <sup>2</sup> [Yusrina@enlitera.uad.ac.id](mailto:Yusrina@enlitera.uad.ac.id)

\*Correspondent email author: [ferrychandra005@gmail.com](mailto:ferrychandra005@gmail.com)

## ABSTRACT

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This research explores the phenomenon of shoplifting in America, focusing on its causes, consequences, and societal impact. Shoplifting, which is classified as theft, has seen a rise in recent years, particularly in urban areas, contributing to significant financial losses for retailers. Through a qualitative methodology based on both primary and secondary data sources, the study examines various factors driving shoplifting, such as economic hardship, psychological conditions like kleptomania, peer influence, and lifestyle choices. The research presents case studies from different U.S. cities, including incidents in San Francisco and Virginia, illustrating the complexity of shoplifting cases and the varied responses from law enforcement. Legal frameworks surrounding shoplifting in different states, including California, Texas, and New York, are analyzed, highlighting inconsistencies in how this crime is prosecuted across the country. The study also investigates the psychological and sociological impacts of shoplifting on both the perpetrators and the victims, revealing emotional distress, social ostracism, and long-term consequences for individuals involved. Additionally, it addresses the broader economic implications, with retail losses in the U.S. projected to reach \$150 billion by 2026 if current trends continue.

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## 1. Introduction

Shoplifting is an action that has been happening in America for the past few years. Shoplifting is an act of theft without awareness from the seller or shopkeeper. This often happens in some minimarkets even to supermarkets in America, Shoplifters usually hide their stolen goods into clothes, pants pockets, bags, etc., so as not to be noticed by the shopkeeper and leave the store without having to pay for the stolen goods, even they commit this theft openly in public, the public calls them shoplifters, shop theft, retail theft, or retail fraud. The term shoplifting is not defined by law but is classified as theft. This action is arguably different from robbery where a robber steals closed shops or civilian homes, there is no single profile for a shoplifting perpetrator. They come from various social, economic and age backgrounds. Teenagers often become perpetrators of shoplifting due to the influence of peers or as a form of searching for identity. However, adults, including those with stable jobs, are also often involved in these thefts.

The financial losses caused by shoplifting are enormous. Stores experience reduced profits because they have to cover the costs of stolen goods. As a result, many retailers are forced to increase prices of goods to offset these losses, which ultimately harms consumers. Apart from that, retailers also have to spend additional costs on security, such as installing surveillance cameras, paying security officers, and using anti-theft technology.

There are several types of reasons why people shoplift, such as economic problems, drug addiction, and mental illnesses such as kleptomaniac, there are also those who do it because of peer influence or as a form of rebellion. (Arboleda et al., 1977) said that, this violation has become commonplace and is committed by many people, so there are no specific characteristics or special patterns that can be used as a typology to classify perpetrators for comprehensive follow-up. Therefore, this is still difficult to say as a criminal act because the perpetrator is hard to indicate so there is not much that can be followed up by the store or the police. Various steps have been taken to address the problem of shoplifting. Many stores use advanced technology such as surveillance cameras, security sensors, and metal detecting doors. Additionally, there are also education and prevention efforts undertaken by organizations such as NASP (National Association of School Psychologists), which aim to educate the public about the negative impacts of shoplifting and encourage more responsible behaviours.

Law enforcement also plays an important role in addressing shoplifting. Penalties for shoplifting vary, from fines to prison, depending on the value of the item stolen and the frequency of the offense. Things like this have often happened in America for a long time. In fact, it has become a common thing in society. (Arboleda et al., 1977) also found, from 1973 to 1974 it was recorded that in America in 1973 it could reach losses of up to 16 billion US dollars caused by shoplifting, dishonest shopkeepers from store theft cases and even increased to 20 billion US dollars in 1974. It is said that shoplifting has an impact on several societal problems, including social inequity, security, and economic concerns. Similar to economic issues, lots of Americans stole at shops due to financial reasons. The majority of those in the lower middle class steal necessities like food in order to survive, no matter how they obtain the commodities they desire.

The author knows many cases about shoplifting that occur in America through various sources such as American television news, news on websites, and also news spread on social media. Most of these news stories discuss panic, riots that occurred in stores and even were highlighted in the media so the author wants to discuss the case of shoplifting in America. Usually, the news is found mostly through CNN, NEW YORK TIMES, WNBC and others. In addition, the author also found several videos found through social media such as TikTok, YouTube, and also websites that discuss shoplifting incidents. Shoplifting itself does not only occur in America, but all over the world also experiences the same thing, but in America itself has certain rules where the perpetrators cannot be followed up by the store or the authorities.

Shoplifting perpetrators themselves mostly carry out this action for various specific purposes such as economic difficulties, financing for living, and even some perpetrators who do this steal goods that are not even included in the shoplifting criteria, such as the example of the Apple store theft case where the perpetrator takes the Smartphone displayed in the store. They take advantage of the public's view that is considered shoplifting, but in fact their actions are included as theft or looting of stores. (KTVU FOX 2 San Francisco 2024) but most of the causes of this shoplifting occur due to the economic problems of the perpetrator. The difficulty of getting a job and even the increasingly high price of basic necessities makes the perpetrators do shoplifting to meet their living needs.

After several journals that have been researched by authors, the public has a view of shoplifting actors. (Gibbens, 1962) said that there was a psychiatrist named Dr. Letitia Fairfield when she was doing an interview at a café when she saw the Shoplifting incident that occurred in the vicinity, where a well-dressed woman was seen taking two peaches from a green grocery store and the next day, she saw a young man doing the same thing by stealing two peaches and she followed the child to his house. This time Dr. Fairfield did not stay silent and reprimanded the child's parents to tell him of their son's treatment at a store that his son stole, and warned the child not to steal anymore and told him to return the fruit he stole and apologize to the store.

## 2. Method

In one study, the author focuses on the qualitative methodology taken from a book entitled "Methods of Communication Research" written by Prof. Dr. Sugiyono and Dr. Puji Lestari, M. Si., which explains qualitative research. Based on what the author researches, the author concludes that quality research tends to use the results of quantitative research as research data. Qualitatives are potential and problem findings, objects, meaning of practical events, social interactions, seeing in truth data, phenomena, and hypothesis findings. (Sugiono, 2021).

**Data and Data Sources,** There are 2 types of data sources used in this study, namely: (1) Primary Data, Primary data is a source of data obtained directly from a predetermined object (Sugiyono, 2017). Primary data better reflects the truth because the data is obtained from what the researcher sees and hears directly, so as to avoid elements of opinion or hoaxes. Primary data is considered more accurate and detailed because it directly provides data to the data collector. In this primary data the author looks from the book entitled "The Steal: A Cultural History of Shoplifting" written by Rachel Shteir. (2) Secondary Data: Secondary data is a data source that does not directly provide data to the data collector (Sugiyono, 2017). Secondary data is obtained with the help of other media, such as literature, social media, youtube, documents, and video. Secondary data is data that has been further processed and collected by researchers to complement research data needs. The time and cost required to classify problems and evaluate secondary data is relatively less compared to primary data. However, there is a possibility of errors in the data source or the data is no longer relevant.

**Data Collection Techniques,** Data collection technique is a method carried out by researchers to collect data and information. Data collection techniques in this study were carried out using literature study. Literature study is a data collection technique by studying literature, books, reports, and notes related to the problem under study. Data Analysis Techniques, Data analysis is used to control the data to be systematic and in accordance with the formulation of the problem. The data analysis techniques used in this study are: Data reduction, Researchers sort and focus attention on the simplification, abstraction, and transformation of the rough data that emerges from the field notes (Huberman, 1992).

Data presentation, the presentation of data in qualitative research is carried out using correctly organized narrative texts to make it easier to make conclusions and then presented in the form of graphs, matrices, tables, charts, and the like (Huberman, 1992). Drawing conclusions or verification Researchers make conclusions that are accompanied by strong, consistent, and valid evidence (Huberman, 1992).

### 3. Result and Discussion

America is one of the largest economic powers in the world. In 2023, America's GDP growth increased 0.40% compared to the previous year from 2.50% - 2.90% with a total of 27360.94 Usd - Billion (Trading Economics, 2024). This is a large number for a developed country. With this amount, America certainly has a strong economy both for its country and other countries. However, a number of areas in the United States have high crime rates such as property crime, robbery, arson, assault, murder, sexual violence, and shoplifting.

#### 3.1. Result

**Shoplifting data in America,** According to CNBC Indonesia (Dewi, 2024), when other crimes began to decline, the shoplifting rate in America increased by 24%. This shoplifting mostly occurs in stores in America. In fact, more than one in five Americans claim to have lifted from a store. The survey involved 2,000 American consumers and found 23 percent had committed a store shoplifting, and 90 percent of those who had recently committed a shoplifting said they did so because of inflation and the current state of the economy. This data shows that even though the American economy is improving, there are still many people in America who are experiencing economic hardship. The existence of these financial problems has caused the crime rate in America to increase. In fact, almost every state in America has experienced shoplifting which captured public attention.

**Shoplifting in San Francisco,** In April 2024, a man was shot by a security guard. The man was shot because he was accused of committing shoplifting at a store in the Walgreens area. The man named Banko Brown, a transgender man who tried to fight the private security guard on duty at the downtown Walgreens. Before being shot, the incident explained that Brown repeatedly threatened to stab the security guard (Goldfarb, 2023). However, after his death, Brown's family sued the Walgreens store, the security company and the security guard for Brown's wrongful death. As a result, Antony, the city security officer, had to pay within 30 days with \$1,500 in total for three fines.

**Police officers killed thief in Virginia,** In November 2023, the same case also happened in Virginia. A man known as Pete Martinez was shot by a police officer who was patrolling the area. The policeman saw Pete with a woman named Monica Montoya who was carrying stolen goods from

a store. Pete and Monica were seen leaving the outside area of Khol's shop with the stolen goods. Initially the officer tried to get Pete to turn himself in for the shoplifting, but Pete refused and ran away. The officers eventually fired bullets at Pete with less lethal 40-millimeter ammunition.

**Rise in vehicle shoplifting**, Based on FBI data, there were 727,921 shoplifting cases throughout 2020. This is up from 667,064 in 2019 and 712,236 in 2018. Generally, these shopliftings are committed by men aged 25-29 years. The United States investigative agency, FBI, revealed data on motor vehicle shoplifting increased by 11.8 percent in 2020. commonly sold components are headlights, front bumpers, and tailgates that cost between 724 US dollars (US) and 1,144 US dollars. These high prices make these car parts attractive to thieves.

**Shoplifting factor in America**, Part of the shoplifting phenomenon in America above is due to 27% of Americans having children under the age of 18 and 26% are millennials aged 24-39. This indirectly shows that people in these categories actually face more financial problems than other groups because their needs are more than those at ages far below or above. The definition of lifestyle itself is a set of behaviors initiated by motivation, evolved by interacting with environmental circumstances, and shaped by choices, conditions, cognitions, and beliefs, human motivation, interest theory, and personal construction theory all come from sociology and psychology (Waltres, 2006). Living side by side with technology that develops rapidly every day makes a cultural shift in lifestyle such as communication, transportation, education, and health.

**Shoplifting Laws America**, In Indonesia, the law is regulated through the Constitution that is formed by the government and applies to all regions in Indonesia. In the United States, there are two kinds of laws that apply side by side, namely federal law that applies to the entire country and state law that only applies in the state concerned (Mulyana, 1994). The United States alone has 50 states. This causes America to have 52 legal systems, namely, the 50 state legal systems, the laws that apply in Washington DC and federal law. In the United States itself, shoplifting laws can be said to be weak because some states even apply certain targets to classify whether an act of shoplifting is a criminal offense or not. One example of shoplifting law in America is that the State of California will only classify a shoplifting as a criminal offense if the stolen item is worth more than US\$ 950 or the equivalent of Rp 15 million rupiah (Sorongan, 2024). In addition to the value below that, the perpetrator of the shoplifting cannot be subject to criminal sanctions.

In Texas, quoted from an American legal media, The Gonzalez (2024), explains that the law of a shoplifting is categorized into 3 classes based on the price value of the item. The lightest category is class C where the stolen item has a price of \$50 or less. The next charge is class B when the stolen item has a price of \$50-\$500. The next charge is a class A charge if the stolen item is worth more than \$500. However, shoplifting items worth \$2,500 or more can be charged as a felony. In the class B offense category, the thief will receive a minimum sentence of 180 days to 1 year in prison (The Gonzalez, 2024). If it is a class A misdemeanor, the thief will receive a longer prison sentence. In addition to imprisonment, the thief will also be subject to a substantial fine of between \$4,000 and at least \$500. Not much different from Texas, in New York, shoplifting laws are also classified into sections such as petty and grand shoplifting. Petty shoplifting is when the shoplifting is less than \$1,000. If the shoplifting is more than \$1,000 then it is categorized as grand shoplifting. The punishment for petty shoplifting is to pay a fine, perform community service, and potentially imprisonment for up to one year. However, for serious offenses, you will get a prison sentence of more than 1 year to decades.

### 3.2. Discussion

From the examples of cases that occurred in America such as those in San Francisco (2024) and Virginia (2023), shoplifting cases can occur from various factors such as homelessness to lifestyle. A shoplifting case is not a simple case. A high crime rate can also show how the social condition of a country is. In Indonesia, the law of shoplifting is written in the article of the Criminal Code (Kitab Undang-Undang Hukum Pidana or KUHP). For example, Article 362 of the Criminal Code explains about shoplifting, when someone takes someone else's property with the intention of unlawfully possessing the goods, the perpetrator of shoplifting can be punished with imprisonment for a maximum of 5 years. Another example is article 363 of the Criminal Code which discusses aggravated shoplifting when a person commits shoplifting by using violence or threats of violence against people,

using weapons, or conspiring with others. Aggravated shoplifting is punishable by imprisonment for a maximum of 9 years (Ministry of Administrative Reform and Bureaucratic Reform, 2023).

In Amerika itself, because it has many states, this is a challenge because each state has different laws. Stores in the US could lose up to US\$ 121.6 billion (IDR 1,980 trillion) to retail shoplifting by 2023. Data shows that the number of these crimes continues to grow, with the latest projection that it could cost businesses more than US\$150 billion by 2026. If this is not addressed, it will have a serious impact on both the country and its people.

**Psychological Impact,** Shoplifting cases will certainly have a psychological impact on both the perpetrators of shoplifting and the victims. The impact they experience is an emotional impact. According to research *The Psychology of Shoplifting* by Nadeau (2019) found that the perpetrators of shoplifting are mentally disturbed because they experience kleptomania which involves feelings of tension before the shoplifting and feelings of pleasure after the shoplifting. This study used the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders as its method and instrument with an 11-item self-assessment measure to examine a person's urge to commit shoplifting, thoughts of stealing, and emotions related to shoplifting. There are 7 types of reasons why people commit shoplifting, namely Loss-Reactive type, Impulsive, Hobbyist, Addictive-Compulsive, Economically Disadvantaged and Depressed type. Of these 7 types, there are even those who commit shoplifting as a form of depression. A person who is depressed usually takes an outlet to divert his mind. Here people who experience depression commit shoplifting as a way to overcome depression or as a way to feel something in place of anhedonia or apathy Nadeau (2019).

**Sociology Impact,** In addition to the psychological impact, people who experience or commit shoplifting are socially ostracized. When a person experiences social exclusion and feels that they will not be able to reconnect with others, they are more likely to engage in selfish or aggressive behavior, instead of pro-social behavior that can help build better relationships. These actions are known as antisocial actions. A person who feels alienated tends to engage in antisocial behaviors such as speaking in a loud voice, passing negative judgment on others, or giving up quickly on a demanding task. They also tend to consume unhealthy foods and drinks. From these actions, it follows that social exclusion is also likely to increase shoplifting intentions as a way of improving mood (Ling, 2017). The two impacts are related to each other. The social impact experienced by the perpetrators of shoplifting such as being ostracized will make their emotions tend to be unstable and as a result, they will take an outlet which will usually commit acts of shoplifting again.

#### 4. Conclusion

Shoplifting in America presents a significant problem, impacting the economy, law enforcement, and society at large. The financial strain placed on businesses due to theft results in higher prices for consumers and additional security costs. Despite America's overall economic strength, shoplifting remains prevalent, with many incidents motivated by economic difficulties, mental health issues such as kleptomania, or peer influence. This widespread issue involves people of various ages and socio-economic backgrounds, showing that shoplifting is not limited to any specific group.

Efforts to address shoplifting through technological measures, legal penalties, and public education have had mixed results. Each U.S. state has different legal thresholds for what constitutes shoplifting, leading to inconsistencies in how offenders are punished. This legal complexity complicates the enforcement process and may contribute to the persistence of the issue. Cases such as the tragic death of Banko Brown in San Francisco and Pete Martinez in Virginia reveal how shoplifting incidents can escalate into violence, further highlighting the societal and legal challenges tied to retail theft.

Beyond economic and legal consequences, shoplifting has both psychological and sociological effects. Many shoplifters suffer from mental health issues or social exclusion, which can drive repeated theft behavior. On the other hand, those affected by theft, whether businesses or communities, may experience increased stress and a diminished sense of security. Addressing this issue requires not only tougher legal measures but also a better understanding of the underlying social and psychological factors that contribute to shoplifting. Without this, the problem will likely continue to grow, creating deeper issues for society as a whole.

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