

RETAILERS PAY HEAVY PRICE FOR RISING CRIME LEVELS



Retail crime is costing retailers an estimated €1.62 billion every year, according to the Irish Small and Medium Enterprises Association (ISME).

Following the sharp rise in retail crime levels across Ireland, according to the latest CSO figure, the situation is now having a major impact on the retail owners and workers when faced with criminals who are often aggressive, sexist, racist and who use weapons and threatening behaviour. *Report by Derek Nagle.*

Theft and related offences have risen by 12% since last year, with nearly half (46%) of the national increase due to a growing number of thefts from shops, according to statistics recently released by the Central Statistics Office (CSO).

Following the latest CSO statistics, which relates to Q4 of 2023, Retail Excellence Ireland (REI), has said that urgent action is needed to deal with an increase in retail crime.

However, Ireland’s largest representative body for the retail industry noted that while this is a significant issue, the statistics fail to account for anti-social behaviour faced by retail staff.

REI Chief Executive Jean McCabe has said that the CSO statistics back up what her organisation is hearing from members on a daily basis; “the

retail industry is increasingly being targeted by criminals across the country,” she said, adding that “these actions by a small minority have a highly negative effect on retailers and their customers, and something needs to be done to reverse what is a very worrying trend”.

McCabe also highlighted the impact of anti-social behaviour on retailers. “These figures from the CSO don’t take into account the daily instances of anti-social behaviour that retailers are experiencing. These have a knock-on effect on staff and customers and will lead to less footfall at a time when retailers are struggling hugely with the myriad of costs of doing business.

“We would hope and expect that our incoming Taoiseach will follow through on making law and order in Ireland one of his top priorities.”



Retailers are spending significantly more on security, such as CCTV, due to shoplifters.

VIOLENT STORE ROBBERIES

In the capital alone, growing retail crime coupled with the vicious level of assaults against retail workers was brought into sharp focus late last year.

During the riots in Dublin on 23 November 2023, shop owners and employees found themselves trapped within their premises for fear of attack by those intent on robbing and causing damage.



The huge rise in retail crime is because serial shoplifters and organised gangs think they can get away with carrying out retail thefts with little or no consequences for them, believes Tara Buckley, Director General of RGDATA.

In the aftermath of the riots, the Joint Committee on Enterprise, Trade and Employment, chaired by Maurice Quinlivan TD, who himself worked in retail for 19 years, met on 13 December 2023 to debate the issue of shoplifting and the rising levels of assaults against retail workers.

Tara Buckley, Director General of the Retail, Grocery, Dairy and Allied Trades Association (RGDATA), was one of the debate’s participants. A survey on retail crime undertaken by her organisation found that 93 per cent of its members have been victims of shoplifting and 40 per cent have been victims of fraudulent activity.

Of those surveyed 25 per cent said they had been subjected to violent robberies in their stores, with weapons being used in over one quarter of these crimes. These included firearms, knives, syringes, hammers, crowbars, bottles and even axes.

“Retail theft is most certainly not a victimless crime. Shop owners, staff and customers are the victims. Staff and owners in shops must deal with criminals who are often aggressive, sexist, racist and who use weapons and threatening behaviour. The average cost to the 3,500 shops,



More Gardaí on the streets is a very significant factor in the security discussion, and retailers have said it’s a deterrent.

forecourt stores and supermarkets that RGDATA represents throughout Ireland is over €40,000 per store,” she notes.

CONSISTENT SENTENCING NEEDED

Buckley believes that the huge rise in retail crime in this country is because serial shoplifters and organised gangs think they can get away with carrying out retail thefts with little or no consequences for them. She also feels there is a serious problem with gangs of youth offenders who believe they are “untouchable and are very aggressive and brazen” about stealing from retailers.

“The courts need to be more consistent on sentencing policies for retail crime, especially for repeat offenders. RGDATA members are extremely frustrated with the courts. Shop owners put a lot of time and effort into providing evidence, making statements and appearing in court and the offenders usually walk free and are back in the shop robbing it again while laughing in the shop

owner’s face,” she says.

Retail crime costs retailers an estimated €1.62 billion every year, according to the Irish Small and Medium Enterprises Association. The Global Retail Theft Barometer also shows that Ireland has the highest cost per capita when it comes to retail crime [€339.31] –

significantly more than both second and third placed countries, Iceland and Denmark.

SPENDING MORE ON SECURITY

Arnold Dillon, Director of Retail Ireland and board member of IBEC (Irish Business and Employers Confederation), says that there’s a major and acute stress on retailers when they’re trying to deal with other costs across the board.

“However, they must spend significantly more on security due to shoplifters. More visible Gardaí is a very significant factor in this discussion. Retailers say that this is a deterrent. It’s an ongoing and daily challenge,” he points out.



Data protection issues need to be considered in ‘naming and shaming’ shoplifters by posting their images on social media, notes Arnold Dillon, Director of Retail Ireland.

Dillon makes reference to the Retail Crime Forum which meets more frequently since last year’s Dublin riots and involves An Garda Síochána and the Minister for Justice Helen McEntee and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment Simon Coveney.



In the aftermath of the Dublin riots, the Joint Committee on Enterprise, Trade and Employment met in mid-December 2023 to debate the issue of shoplifting and the rising levels of assaults against retail workers.

“The ongoing contact with An Garda Síochána is both positive and constructive. Co-ordinating intelligence is very important to ensure repeat offenders are subject to the full force of the law so increasing the deterrent needs to be looked at,” he says.

CRIME PREVENTION STRATEGY

In December 2023 An Garda Síochána rolled out a nationwide programme known as ‘Operation Táirge’ as part of its crime prevention and reduction strategy, supporting operational activity aimed at detecting and preventing Organised Retail Crime (ORC).

ORC usually refers to situations where several persons are acting together, targeting retailer outlets to steal significant quantities of goods to resell back into the retail supply chain through the black market. It can also involve ‘refund fraud’ to make a financial or material benefit.

ORC is usually co-ordinated and well-organised by people who recruit others to commit theft from retailers. Stolen goods are then sold to a ‘fence’ who either sells them at a certain location or in some cases may sell them online in an activity that has come to be known as ‘e-fencing’.

Several arrests have been made across the country since Operation Táirge was set up. Almost immediately after the launch a woman in her 50s was arrested and detained in connection with 11 incidents of alleged theft from retail premises in Athy, Kilkenny, Maynooth, Newbridge, Portlaoise and Wexford.

Shortly after this, two men in their 20s and 40s appeared before the Courts of Criminal Justice in Dublin charged with a spate of robberies which included violence and knives. In one instance petrol was even poured onto the counter of a retail premises to cause fear and intimidation.

Under the National Detection Improvement Plan, ‘Operation Táirge’ aims to support those working in retail to report a crime. Using an intelligence-led approach to identify criminals who engage in retail crime, the programme works with high-risk retailers to enhance prevention,



Theft and related offences have risen by 12% since last year – 46% has been due to a growing number of thefts from shops, according to CSO statistics.

investigation and prosecution. It also works with retailers to help strengthen their security to prevent them from becoming victims of criminality.

Led by the Organised Retail Crime Tasking and Co-ordination Group within An Garda Síochána, the operation will support each Garda region to monitor and respond to emerging trends in their area. Organised retail crime may also involve an international dimension; therefore, the co-ordination group will maintain its close working relationships with counterparts including the UK and Northern Ireland.

‘NAMING AND SHAMING’ SHOPLIFTERS

There have been reports in other regions of retailers ‘naming and shaming’ persistent shoplifters by posting their images on social

media, but Dillon believes that data protection issues need to be considered here.

RGDATA’s Tara Buckley notes that the Data Protection Commissioner has objected to individuals’ images being publicised and that a statutory measure to enable this deterrent to be exercised would be helpful.

She feels that whilst local retailers have a lot of sympathy for An Garda Síochána, who are forced to deal with the same aggressive criminals on a daily basis, there is a frustration that retail theft is not taken seriously enough.

“The Gardaí need to be more responsive to reports of retail crime and the courts need to hand down sentences that will give a clear message to criminals that this type of crime is taken seriously and there are consequences for those who rob shops or abuse shop staff” she says.