



RICK KOPSTEIN

A rise in shoplifting has prompted stores to put expensive items out of reach. Above, tequila is locked behind plexiglass at Ryann's Wines in East Meadow.

LOCKING IT UP

Retailers limit access to items and self-checkout as shoplifting spikes

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Shoplifting incidents reported to county police departments on Long Island last year rose nearly 20% as retail experts and law enforcement officials say thieves have become more brazen.

"I've actually witnessed some thefts sometimes when I have been in the local supermarket. So I know the impact in the community is that it's hard, especially for the small-business owners, because they're losing inventory," said LaShawn Lukes, president of the Hempstead Chamber of Commerce.

"... Also, it's a two-sided situation, because now it's hard to

[hire] employees because they do not feel safe," said Lukes, who added that the chamber will work with village officials on community policing initiatives this summer.

Law enforcement and retail experts cited several factors for the spike in thefts: organized retail crime rings selling more stolen merchandise online; fewer employees working on sales floors; more self-checkout lanes, making it easier to steal; and the rising cost of living on Long Island.

Another factor, law enforcement officials said, is New York State's bail reform law, which ended cash bail in most cases that involved misdemeanors and nonviolent felonies. Some criminal justice researchers, however, dispute that claim.

Shoplifters have gotten bolder, retail experts said.

Last April, four suspects walked into the Prada store at the high-end Americana Manhasset shopping center and took seven handbags worth more than \$20,000, showing a sales associate to the floor as they fled, a Nassau County police report said.

In August, a man wearing a full-face mask shattered a jewelry display case with a baseball bat at Macy's in the Roosevelt Field shopping mall in Uniondale and attempted to steal more than \$370,000 in jewelry as employees sought shelter, according to Nassau County police. He was charged

See **SHOPLIFT** on A30

PEOPLE ON THE MOVE See who has been hired or promoted on Long Island [newsday.com/onthemove](https://www.newsday.com/onthemove)

SHOPLIFT from A29

with attempted robbery, because his use of the bat caused employees to fear for their safety, as well as attempted grand larceny and other offenses, police said. In early November, a masked thief committed a smash-and-grab robbery at the Macy's, breaking a glass countertop and taking three diamond necklaces worth about \$30,000, police said.

Petit larceny up

Reports of petit larceny shoplifting, which is the theft of merchandise valued at \$1,000 or less, rose 22% to 6,482 complaints in Suffolk County from 2022 to 2023, according to police department data Newsday obtained through a Freedom of Information Law request.

Suffolk police reports of grand larceny shoplifting, the theft of merchandise valued at more than \$1,000, fell 11% to 578 from 2022 to 2023. But the numbers are significantly higher than in 2019, when there were 289 reports, data shows.

In Nassau County, petit larceny shoplifting incidents grew 27% to 3,819 from 2022 to 2023, according to police department data Newsday obtained through a Freedom of Information Law request. Nassau's grand larceny shoplifting incidents fell 8% to 981 during that same period.

Nassau does not have data from 2019 because the record management system used at that time counted shoplifting among all types of larcenies, according to police.

Big-box and home improvement stores are hit the hardest in Suffolk, with organized retail crime playing a factor, Stan Grodski, deputy chief of detectives for the Suffolk County Police Department, said in an email. It typically involves a group of people who steal and fence stolen items on online auction sites, at flea markets and to other retailers, he said.

"In addition, individuals involved in organized retail theft may also commit other crimes, such as using stolen or cloned credit cards to obtain merchandise, changing bar codes to pay lower prices, and returning stolen merchandise to obtain cash or gift cards," he said.

Both police departments said they need cooperation from retailers to make arrests.

"Some establishments in the past have decided not to press charges when an individual shoplifts," Nassau County Police Commissioner Patrick Ryder said in an email.



Beauty products are locked up at a Walgreens in Queens. A customer-service button summons store personnel.

LOCKING IT UP

Retailers make changes

Some retailers are closing stores or reducing hours of operation, hiring more security guards and installing more elaborate security systems, particularly as more smash-and-grab incidents become violent and publicized in viral cellphone videos.

At a Burlington store in Garden City on a recent afternoon, a security guard removed a rope to let customers in and out, similar to a nightclub.

"We have many safety measures in place in all stores nationwide to ensure an enjoyable shopping experience," said Julia DePillis, a spokeswoman for the Burlington, New Jersey-based retailer. She did not respond to questions about why and when the rope was placed in the store.

A Target in Copiague closed its self-checkout registers be-

cause of shoplifting, store employees told customers.

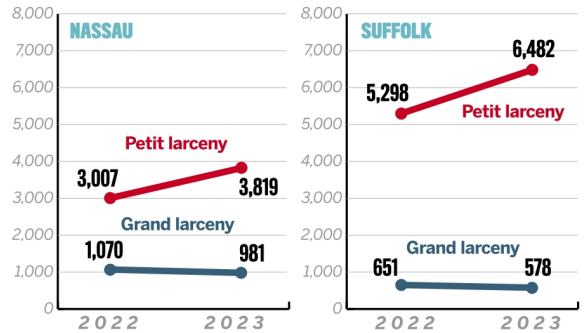
Dollar General announced in March that it was removing self-checkout registers from more than 300 stores that have the highest amount of "shrink," which retailers define as inventory losses from shoplifting, employee theft, damage or other reasons. Shoplifting accounts for the bulk of most retailers' shrink.

Shoplifting increased sharply at a Mandeewomen's clothing store in Centereach last year, especially during the winter holidays, store manager Yesly Ovalles said. She did not provide numbers.

"Some of them, they will act like they're shopping around. They would go into the fitting room, and that's when they take their sensors off. But most of the time, they're running

LI SHOPLIFTING COMPLAINTS

In Nassau County, petit larceny shoplifting incidents grew 27% from 2022 to 2023, while grand larceny shoplifting incidents fell 8% during that period. In Suffolk County, reports of petit larceny shoplifting rose 22% from 2022 to 2023, while reports of grand larceny shoplifting fell 11%.



SOURCE: NASSAU COUNTY POLICE DEPARTMENT, SUFFOLK COUNTY POLICE DEPARTMENT

out" with stolen clothes, she said.

The store has hired more staff, and its employees interact with customers more, which has reduced shoplifting, Ovalles said.

CVS shopper Michael Paturzo is angered by the rise in shoplifting, but he is understanding of retailers locking up merchandise, he said.

"I'm sick of [shoplifting]... And a lot of places, they see shoplifting and don't do anything about it," said Paturzo, 73, as he bought cough drops at the retailer's drugstore in Huntington on a recent Sunday.

Rising costs

At Walmart in Farmingdale last month, Dix Hills resident Natasha Neary, 52, rolled her shopping basket near multiple clear cases of locked-up skin care products. The rising costs of goods are likely driving people to resort to shoplifting, she said.

"I'm sure it's tempting to a lot of individuals... I'm not saying it's right, but I get it," she said.

Paule Pachter, president and CEO of Long Island Cares, said while he found it disturbing that people would shoplift from a supermarket or Wal-

mart or Target, he was not surprised.

"There are more people struggling right now to make ends meet on Long Island," said Pachter, noting that his Hauppauge-based nonprofit's five food pantries served 157,513 people last year, a 37.4% increase from 2022.

Grocers also have seen a spike.

After shoplifting increased significantly at Stew Leonard's supermarkets in 2022, mostly at its Farmingdale store, the grocer quadrupled its spending on security measures at its seven stores in 2023, said Stew Leonard Jr., president and CEO of the Norwalk, Connecticut-based company.

Stew Leonard's added more security guards and surveillance cameras in stores, promoted the loss-prevention manager in the Yonkers store to the companywide director of loss prevention in 2022, and reduced the amount of file mignon and expensive seafood on the sales floor during hours most popular for thefts, he said.

In 2023, Stew Leonard's caught 119 shoplifters in the Farmingdale store, up from 60 in 2022, spokeswoman Meghan Bell said. Chainwide in 2023, 638 shoplifters were caught, up from 479 in 2022, she said.

While the number of shoplifters apprehended has increased, the stores' financial losses have decreased because of the expanded security, she said.

In the Ryann's Wines store beside Stew Leonard's in East Meadow, a sister store owned by Leonard family members, clear cases were added in 2023 so expensive brands of liquor could be locked up because of an increase in thefts, he said.

What the numbers say

Debate continues over whether some retail organizations and the media have exaggerated the extent of shrink nationwide. Part of the problem with getting accurate shoplifting numbers is that no comprehensive national and New York state shoplifting data exists.

Furthermore, retailers' average percentage of shrink appears to have remained steady over the past few years.

Retailers reported that shrink accounted for \$112.1 billion in losses in 2022, up from \$93.9 billion in 2021, according to survey results released in September by the National Retail Federation. However, retailers' average shrink losses nationwide in 2022 were equiva-



Stew Leonard's quadrupled spending on store security. Above, a camera at the store in East Meadow.

lent to 1.6% of sales, which was the same share in 2019, according to the Washington, D.C.-based trade group.

Furthermore, while there were shoplifting spikes in some cities, the combined average shoplifting rate among 25 major cities fell by 2% in 2023 compared to 2019, before the pandemic, according to a January report from the Council on Criminal Justice, a nonprofit think tank in Washington, D.C., that studied data from police departments.

But most retailers won't publicly disclose specifics about theft because they don't want to affect the value of their brands, which contributes to the crime being underreported to police, said Cory Lowe, director of research at the Loss Prevention Research Council in Gainesville, Florida.

"The most likely outcome for a retailer who speaks out about shrink is having their brand mentioned alongside crime by every media outlet in the nation, and being treated like the problem isn't as bad as it really is because the law enforcement data is not accurate," Lowe said.

Some inventory discrepancies are due to employee thefts or bookkeeping errors, so retailers might not know why inventory lists don't match their books, which they don't want to publicize, said David Swartz, senior equity analyst in Consumer Equity Research at Morningstar Research Services in Chicago.

"They also don't give you a

lot of information as to where products may be stolen or lost and how they may be stolen or lost ... So the media will assume or just imply that the shrink is a proxy for" shoplifting, he said.

District attorneys on Long Island and Nassau County police cited New York State's bail reform as the major factor in spikes in shoplifting, though criminal justice researchers say otherwise. The Suffolk County Police Department declined to comment on the effects of bail reform.

The law, which was passed in April 2019 and took effect in January 2020, ended cash bail in most cases that involved misdemeanors and nonviolent felonies, including shoplifting.

An amendment that went into effect in July 2020 gave judges the authority to set bail in cases that involved harm to people or property, such as misdemeanor or felony larceny, if the suspect already had a pending case that met the same criteria. (Petit larceny shoplifting is a misdemeanor and grand larceny shoplifting is a felony.) In 2022, another amendment included a clarification that harm to property can be defined as theft.

Suspects aren't held

When a store calls Suffolk police to apprehend a shoplifter, if probable cause for an arrest exists, the suspect will either be issued a field appearance ticket to appear in court at a later date or transported to a precinct for processing if there are issues regarding producing identification or additional

charges, Grodski said.

"Arrestees are not held overnight on petit larceny or grand larceny charges. They would be required to appear in court on a later date," he said.

Shoplifters from outside the state or country have almost no risk since they cannot be held on bail, Suffolk County District Attorney Raymond A. Tierney said.

"Any foreign citizen would think this was a joke. Come as a tourist, shoplift until you finally get caught, take your ticket, leave the country with a full suitcase," he said.

The state's bail and discovery reforms need to be revisited, Nassau County District Attorney Anne T. Donnelly said in an email.

"The changes made in 2019 make it harder for prosecutors to seek bail for defendants, particularly for misdemeanor offenses like petit larceny, and have created onerous discovery obligations ... These challenges are contributing to recidivism and an increase in shoplifting incidents," Donnelly said.

Some criminal justice researchers disagree that bail reform has led to more shoplifting.

Bail reform is too often used as a scapegoat, said Ames Grawert, senior counsel for the justice program at the Brennan Center for Justice at New York University School of Law.

"I think it's very popular to blame these things on bail reform. If you look at New York City, the increase [in shoplifting] starts in 2006 and spikes in

2022. Neither of those align with bail reform, which took place in 2020. What it lines up more with is the resumption of foot traffic in downtown and their shopping areas" after the COVID pandemic, he said.

Incarceration for minor crimes causes more social and financial harm to detained people, leading to more recidivism, said Michael Rempel, director of the Data Collaborative for Justice at John Jay College of Criminal Justice in Manhattan.

After incarcerated people are released, "they may have become unemployed as a result of being in jail. They may have lost their housing. They may have experienced psychological damage from being in jail," he said.

In February, the Data Collaborative for Justice released its study on bail reform's impact on recidivism in New York's State's suburban and upstate regions.

The study found that people facing misdemeanor charges who had no recent prior arrests and who were not jailed before trial had a lower risk of recidivism than those who had been jailed for low-level crimes before bail reform, said Krystal Rodriguez, policy director of the collaborative.

Targeting crime syndicates

The Retail Council of New York State is no longer prioritizing further changes to bail reform because of the amendments to the law that allow prosecutors and judges to consider harm in repeat-offender cases, said Melissa O'Connor, president and chief executive of the Albany-based trade group, which represents about 5,000 retailers in the state.

"We have as an industry never prioritized [pursuing] an individual going into a store to take an item out of necessity. Our focus has been organized retail crime syndicates and repeat offenders who are at times going into a store dozens and dozens of occasions to the point where sometimes the employee even knows the person by name," O'Connor said.

On Thursday, state lawmakers began voting on a \$237 billion fiscal 2025 budget that includes making assault of a retail worker a felony, \$5 million in tax credits for small businesses investing in more security measures and \$40.2 million for dedicated retail theft teams within State Police, district attorneys' offices and local law enforcement — initiatives the retail council supports.