

OPINION

Why the rise in shoplifting? Blame our addiction to online shopping

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A security officer working at a store England in June, 2023.

SUZIE HOWELL/THE NEW YORK TIMES NEWS SERVICE

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The numbers are extraordinary. According to [Statistics Canada](#), [rates of shoplifting](#) jumped 31 per cent in 2022 compared with 2021. The Retail Council of Canada says some of its largest members are reporting a 300-per-cent increase in thefts since 2020. Toronto police and the council both estimate the value of retail crime in Canada exceeds \$5-billion a year.

A more immediate harm is an uptick in violence: Toronto Police Chief Myron Demkiw estimates two out of five organized retail thefts involve violence, very

often directed at some of Canada's most vulnerable workers, such as youth and recent arrivals.

While some may take the rise of violent retail theft as a part of a disintegration of civility in society, perhaps wrought by the pandemic, the true drivers are more complex.

At its heart are profound shifts in market structures that have rendered retail theft too profitable for organized crime to resist.

Sure, many retail thieves appear to be motivated by drug dependency: A very large number of lower volume and value thefts are being committed in areas with high concentrations of opiate sales and use – notably, for example, in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside and Edmonton's Northeast.

However, a smaller number of high-volume and value thefts account for the bulk of growth in the dollar value and violence associated with retail crime since the pandemic. And this is where our love for online shopping comes in.

It may not readily appear so, but cyberspace retail is often the domain of organized crime, where a small number of front-line gang members (who are often youth) are recruited or coerced into "shelf-clearing" service by larger, highly organized crime syndicates that move products through a vast network of physical markets overseas and online markets everywhere.

Such crime syndicates are adept at responding to new avenues for extraordinary profit, or "arbitrage opportunities." Of greater importance than pandemic-driven shifts in general social attitudes, has been a mass shift in consumer habits: Shoppers across the socio-economic spectrum have become more comfortable buying a wide variety of electronic, household, medicinal and food products online.

Statistics Canada reports that [online shopping surged](#) by 99.3 per cent [in the first three months](#) of the pandemic alone in 2020, before plateauing somewhat to rest at an overall 67.9 per cent year-over-year increase by mid-2022. In real numbers, [online shopping totals](#) expanded from roughly \$20-billion in 2019 to [more than \\$100-billion](#) in just a few short years.

As governments, businesses, education institutions and other sectors have furthered the reach of web-based hyper-communications technology to accommodate online work, retail and education – it has suddenly become a lot

easier for organized crime groups to sell stolen goods online to an exponentially connected market.

Online marketing of stolen goods is also inexpensive to render professional looking.

In real life, a tabletop strewn with random household items and foodstuffs, such as condiments, set out on a street corner in the sun would not likely attract passing buyers: The scene is patently suspect. In cyberspace, however, a secondary school-level web developer can set up a clean-looking virtual retail space under a phony professional banner where products are neatly arranged by virtual category in minutes.

The uninitiated consumer simply pictures an equally organized warehouse with proper storage facilities behind the electronic façade.

The reality, however, is far more sinister. According to Chief Demkiw, criminal actors will reinvest stolen retail profits from that innocuous looking canister of discounted baby formula on a slick website into other criminal activities like human, drug and weapons trafficking.

So, combatting violent retail theft means shutting down the arbitrage opportunities that attract organized crime through changing the structural conditions of the market for stolen goods.

Leveraging technology is the obvious answer – with use of cameras and the development of databases to assist in removing “shelf-clearers” from circulation.

The second solution concerns consumer education to ensure people do not buy stolen goods. The simple message: if an online sale seems too good to be true, it probably is – and may be a front for something far darker than you imagined.

<https://www.theglobeandmail.com/business/commentary/article-why-the-rise-in-shoplifting-blame-our-addiction-to-online-shopping/>

We have been flung headlong into an online “Hell” down a lawless rabbit hole that will cripple, if not kill, us as a functional economy and society.

We rail against scammers in industrial blocks in Mumbai, Myanmar, and Kiev but the worse fact is that the “Reader’s Digest” scammer “selling” Grandma a new car, or urging Grandpa to take “urgent action” on his TD bank card, may well be the parent with a heaping grocery cart beside us at Costco. TJB