# Surge in pensioner shoplifting highlights cost-of-living crisis in UK



Food retailers across the UK are facing a notable surge in shoplifting incidents involving elderly individuals, a trend attributed largely to the ongoing cost-of-living crisis. According to John Nussbaum, director of service for retail at Kingdom Services Group, a security firm operating in numerous supermarkets and convenience stores, there has been a marked increase in reports of pensioners engaging in theft to secure basic necessities like food.

Nussbaum described a shift in the profile of shoplifters, stating, “We’ve seen a massive increase in pensioners shoplifting,” and elaborating that incidents now include actions as seemingly innocuous as placing a jar of coffee in a shopping bag. His observations point to an emerging pattern where desperation drives those who might not have previously considered theft to engage in it. Approximately 5% of those apprehended for shoplifting by Kingdom staff are over the age of 50, a demographic that starkly contrasts with more typical theft patterns involving organised crime.

This change suggests a deeper societal concern. Official statistics from the Office for National Statistics reveal that recorded shoplifting offences in England and Wales reached an unprecedented 516,971 in 2024, reflecting a staggering 20% jump from the previous year. However, industry bodies, such as the British Retail Consortium (BRC), caution that these figures likely underrepresent the full extent of the issue, with many incidents not reported or going unrecorded.

Graham Wynn, assistant director of business and regulation at the BRC, highlighted that retail theft incurs a cost of over £2.2 billion annually, significantly impacting both businesses and the general shopping experience. He noted that the rise in organised crime poses additional risks, linking it to increased violence and abuse directed at retail staff. With gangs reportedly targeting stores systematically, the repercussions extend beyond financial losses to include heightened safety concerns.

The legal landscape further complicates the issue. Changes made in 2014 have effectively softened penalties for those charged with stealing goods valued under £200, creating a perception among criminals that shops are vulnerable. Notably, expressions of concern have arisen around how some large retailers have responded to profitability pressures by reducing staff and increasing reliance on self-service checkouts, a strategy that many critique for contributing to the crime uptick.

While retailers have invested heavily in security measures, including advanced technologies like facial recognition, they remain caught in a complex web of escalating theft, public safety risks, and the social implications of economic hardship. Nussbaum noted the alarming rise in violence associated with organised theft, mentioning incidents of physical assaults against staff, some resulting in severe injuries, and staff even resorting to wearing stab-proof vests while on duty.

In response to these challenges, the government has proposed legislation aimed at addressing petty theft more effectively. Plans include eliminating the £200 threshold for “low-level” theft and introducing a new offence related to assaults on retail workers, acknowledging the pressing need for enhanced legal protections and security measures in the retail environment.

The increasing number of pensioners resorting to theft serves as a stark reminder of the desperation faced by many in today’s economic climate. As Nussbaum succinctly put it, “People can’t afford to spend £10, £20 on food.” The unfolding narrative poses difficult questions about economic disparity and the changing nature of crime in society, challenging retailers, lawmakers, and communities to address the underlying causes and broader implications of this trend.

### Reference Map

1. Information regarding the rise in pensioner shoplifting and comments from John Nussbaum.
2. Statistics on overall shoplifting offences and BRC comments.
3. Discussion of legal changes and implications for retailers.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

* <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2025/may/12/uk-food-shops-report-massive-rise-in-pensioner-shoplifting> - Please view link - unable to able to access data