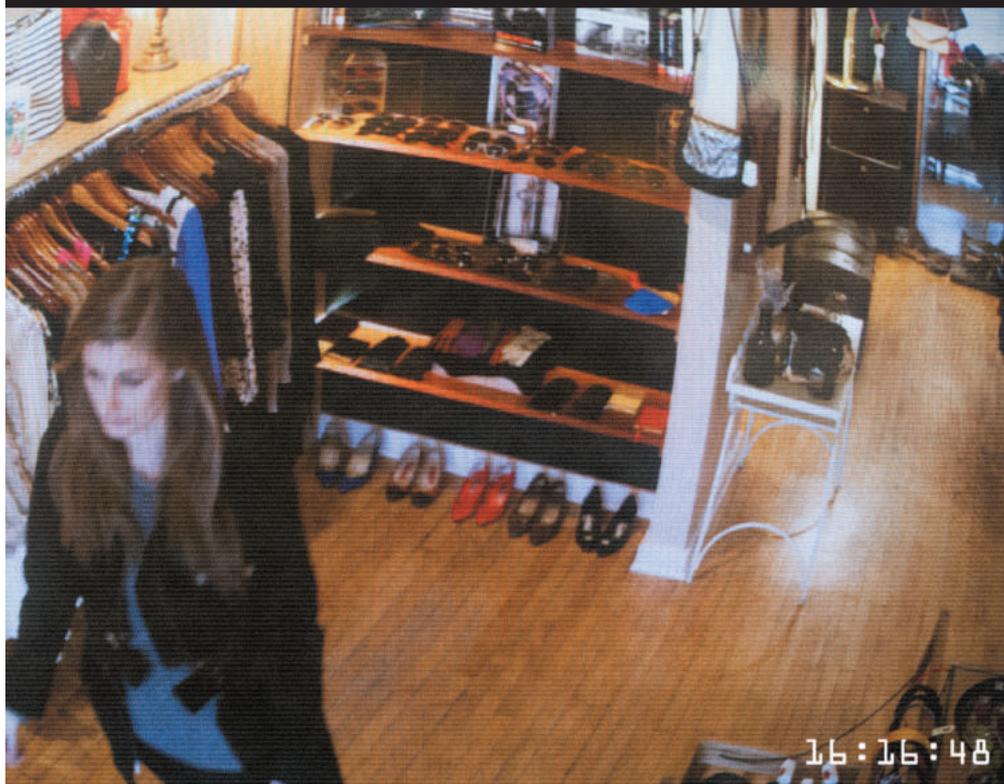


Heavy lifting



ng As the holiday shopping season revs up, so does shoplifting. **Marcia Froelke Coburn** investigates new ways police are nabbing and punishing thieves, who also have some new tricks up their sleeves. Photographs by **Andrew Nawrocki**



Chloe walks into Victoria's Secret with confidence. While she's been to this chain's location on North Avenue only once before, she acts as if it's her regular hangout spot. "Hi, yeah, I'm back again," she says to a twentysomething salesperson. "I know I said the other day that I wasn't sure about those Cheeky Panties, but I've got to see them again."

The staffer hesitates, then nods, even though she has never laid eyes on Chloe before. "Okay, I'm browsing for a minute, then I'm coming back to you," Chloe says in a sing-song voice as she walks away, checking out the displays of lacy bras.

This isn't a real shopping trip for Chloe. Instead, she has agreed to show me how she might shop a store—*shop* being her word for shoplift.

Chloe (her name and some identifying details have been changed) has been shoplifting for a dozen years, since she was in her twenties. She's not stealing to get by: She holds a \$53,000-a-year marketing/public relations job in the near north suburbs. But she's good at shoplifting.

If this were a real outing for Chloe, not just a walk-around with me, she would buy something small—she thinks this deflects attention from her as a possible shoplifter—and then browse. She might ask a question about Bombshell, one of the store's perfume lines. "Does this have vanilla notes?" Something that they probably won't know," she says. Her goal is to move the staff's perception of her from possible buyer to time-waster, so they'll stop paying attention to her.

This isn't hard to do. Chloe is fairly unremarkable-looking: medium build, average clothes. But underneath her sweater she wears a slightly oversize bra by Chantelle or La Perla. She's opened up its back lining and put in a layer of duct tape, then resewn the lining back in place. The result: Anything that gets stuffed into her bra can make it past the sensors and out of the store. Even if the sensors go off, she has nothing in her pockets or bag. She says it's a "shame to have to [doctor] such nice bras," which retail for \$100 to \$230 each. Of course, she didn't pay for them anyway.

If today had been a boosting day, Chloe says she would have been able to lift a handful of bikinis, some camisoles and a few bras, although she won't say exactly how.

"I don't even want all those things, but I can get them," she says, and that seems to be the point. She can, so she does. Her shoplifting has become so proficient that she now sells items she has boosted. At first she used eBay, but she got paranoid. "I think they're watching eBay," she says, referring to law enforcement. Now she sells her extra boost at dollar stores or little tucked-away storefronts—consignment stores sometimes, but she has to be wary of those that keep records. "They will take anything: lingerie,

MODEL IN SIMULATED SURVEILLANCE PHOTOS: JESSICA HEIBROCK/FACTOR WOMEN

Shopping

BIGG DEAL Jerry Biggs, the director of Walgreens' organized retail crime division, with cases of confiscated over-the-counter drugs kept in a secret warehouse.



clothes, knickknacks, cosmetics. Oh, Crème de la Mer cream—the French face cream costs \$150 per ounce. “They love that.”

Suddenly, the lesson is over. “I’ve already told you too much,” she says, pulling out a little bottle of Purell hand sanitizer and dolloping some on her hands. This is her post-shoplifting ritual.

Individual shoplifters like Chloe have long been a problem for law-enforcement officials—particularly around the holidays. Foot traffic in stores is up, and seasonal employees don’t know the ropes. But the face of shoplifting is changing, with more people teaming up on bigger, more financially devastating jobs. And thus, officials are creating new laws, task forces and sting operations to combat theft.

Some of the shoplifters targeted by these programs aren’t professional criminals: Last year, Chicago got hit with a wave of so-called flash mob shoplifting, in which large groups of juveniles hit several Michigan Avenue stores—the North Face, Armani AX Exchange—in a burst of thrill-seeking theft. And in July, many people watched the surveillance video, posted online, of a mob of young men pouring into Mildblend Supply Company on Milwaukee Avenue during Wicker Park Fest, overwhelming the store with a multiplying presence and stealing a reported \$3,000 worth of merchandise.

Then there are the organized crews: savvy, profit-hungry shoplifters who usually work in groups of twos, threes or more, with one person providing a distraction in the stores. The crews often use two cars—one is a “clean” car that

holds the shoplifters and the other is a cargo car stuffed with stolen merchandise. This way only one person, the driver of the cargo car, risks arrest during the getaway. Crews travel from one shopping mall to another, and often from state to state. According to the National Retail Federation, 96 percent of surveyed U.S. merchandisers have been hit by professional crews in the past year, and Chicago is one of the top ten destinations for rings of thieves.

Estimates from State’s Attorney Anita Alvarez indicate that Illinois loses more than \$77 million in tax dollars—sales tax, liquor tax, entertainment tax and more—annually because of shoplifting. *Consumer Reports* pegs the “crime tax,” the amount each American family pays in higher prices at stores due to shoplifting, at \$450 a year.

“A small-scale retail approach to shoplifting is not going to do anything,” says Jack Blakey, chief of the special prosecutors bureau of the State’s Attorney’s Office. “The problem will just keep repeating itself. So law enforcement here is changing its response” to be more aggressive.

CCROC, the Cook County State’s Attorney Regional Organized Crime Task Force, was formed in 2010 to bring retailers together with law enforcement to work as partners. Members include Walgreens, CVS, Target, Macy’s, Meijer, OfficeMax, Jewel-Osco, J.C. Penney, Walmart and eBay. (So Chloe isn’t paranoid; eBay sales *are* being watched.) On a secure website, members can share information, including reports of organized retail crime and BOLOs, be-on-the-lookout alerts about suspected thieves. A store can post a photo of a suspected shoplifter, allowing other merchants

Each American family pays about \$450 a year in higher prices due to shoplifting losses.

to comment if the man or woman seems familiar. Together, CCROC has managed to identify patterns of multistate boosting crews, who lift and then often ship the stolen merchandise back to an out-of-state fence, a middleman who buys stolen goods from thieves and sells them for a profit.

Thanks to a 2011 Illinois law, HB6460, Cook County prosecutors are taking a national lead in prosecuting shoplifters. HB6460 expands the existing financial criminal enterprises statute to include organized retail theft—defined as property being stolen and resold. This law makes stealing and working with a fence three or more times in an 18-month period a class X felony, boosting the amount of time served to anywhere from six to 30 years with no probation. If you are part of the scheme but not a leader, you can be charged with a class 1 felony, punishable by four to 15 years. It’s the first law in Illinois to address organized retail theft; prior to this, offenders would have faced shoplifting charges punishable by up to only three years behind bars. The new law also allows prosecutors to go after offenders’ assets. “It’s a law that’s got some teeth in it,” says David Williams, assistant state’s attorney.

“The public needs to understand the extent of this kind of stealing,” Williams says. “We are not talking about a person swiping a candy bar,

PHOTOS: MICHAEL JARECKI

DEAR JOHN Biggs has decorated his office with John Wayne memorabilia.



INSIDE THE BOX Items confiscated from Vijay and Ajay Patel, brothers charged with operating a multimillion-dollar fencing operation, line the shelves at the secret Walgreens warehouse.



but people who steal as a profession, then off-load the goods to a fence. Shoplifting is a low-level crime that can tie into a large-scale criminal enterprise quickly.”

Blakey and Williams give examples: a Chicago man, arrested in March, who was so good at stealing bicycles that when he was caught, the police had to untangle a massive two-story pile of bikes, tossed together on their sides like pickup sticks. He had them stacked in the foyer of his Near North apartment as well as in two rented storage units. “Great thief, terrible fencing abilities,” Blakey says. “He was way behind the curve in moving his merchandise.”

In November 2010, Chicago also saw the arrests of Vijay and Ajay Patel, brothers charged with operating a multimillion-dollar criminal enterprise out of their Northwest Side sham-company distribution warehouse. “They were purchasing and reselling stolen merchandise in a major fencing operation,” Williams says. “Good fences, bad money launderers. They couldn’t move the money fast enough.” Investigators found more than \$4.5 million in cash, stuffed into duffel bags and suitcases in both the warehouse and their homes.

For all their successes in catching shoplifters, though, law-enforcement officials still express frustrations. Combating flash mobs in high-density shopping areas is one. “We can’t stop a social-media call to steal,” Williams says. “But those events are usually more of a grab-and-go situation,” meaning thieves snatch something by the door and don’t net as much as an organized crew.

Department-store merchandisers could help deter flash mobs if they would move their easy-to-lift products away from the entrance, he says.

Also, Williams has run into reluctance from some high-end stores to prosecute shoplifters. This year, for example, a man was caught putting a \$5,200 crystal vase from Neiman Marcus into his shopping bag and walking onto Michigan Avenue with it. The store declined to prosecute. “Some of these fancy stores”—Williams names several on Michigan Avenue—“are more concerned with making the customer experience a pleasant one, rather than utilizing antitheft techniques.” In other words, these stores don’t want you to think your shopping trip could be marred by a run-in with a thief. (Neiman Marcus declined to comment on the vase theft.)

Last fall, the State’s Attorney’s office unveiled Operation Whoville, an undercover series of stings that targeted shoplifters at Orland Square Mall and Woodfield Mall, and on North Michigan Avenue. The result: 59 very public arrests and a stern warning to organized boosters. “We called it Whoville based on the Dr. Seuss books,” says Williams, who leads the task force. “Because we knew the Grinch was coming.”

This holiday season, they say, the Whos are coming back to stop the Grinches in their tracks.

Who is doing this heavy lifting? “I’ve met various types of shoplifters,” says Andrew Weisberg, a Chicago criminal defense attorney. “They can be people who have plenty of money and they could easily buy whatever they’re stealing, but for some reason they don’t want to do that. They want to steal it.” Weisberg has defended doctors, accountants, high-level managers and a nurse who fit this category.

“For some people, stealing is compulsive,” he says. “They can’t help it.” These lifters, Weisberg says, usually have other issues, like depression, anxiety or even bipolar disorder, that lead to the crime. There are juveniles who shoplift as a rite of passage. “And there are a few people who are stealing because they need the food or the baby formula,” Weisberg adds. “But those people are a very small minority of the cases I’ve handled.”

Rachel Shteir, an associate professor at the Theatre School at DePaul University, spent seven years researching her 2011 book *The Steal: A Cultural History of Shoplifting* (Penguin Press, \$25.95). Shteir says there are no easy answers about who shoplifts or why they do it. “It’s long been considered a woman’s crime,” she says, “and followers of Freud linked it to repressed sexuality.” But Shteir, who interviewed hundreds of shoplifters for her book, breaks down the stereotypes this way: “There are both male and female compulsive stealers, who often are driven by depression [accomplishing the theft may boost their mood] or some lack of impulse control. There are drug addicts who steal to feed their habit and they just do it, every day or so, to get the money to buy the drugs or alcohol they need. There are adrenaline junkies who just get off on the thrill of doing it.”

The organized crews, who often go out with specific lists from fences—Gillette Mach3 razor blades, L’Oreal shampoo, Advil, batteries, alcohol, pregnancy tests—are in it for the profit, Shteir says. As for flash-mob theft, she says: “While it’s definitely shoplifting, flash mobs are more of a social-media event than anything else.”

PHOTOS: MICHAEL JARECKI

Shopping

The biggest problem with all kinds of shoplifting is that “it’s the elephant in the room,” Shteir says. “It’s right here and it’s very big. But no one wants to talk about it. Stores often don’t want the hassle of going to court. And lots of people just want to shrug it off as a victimless crime.”

“Our biggest frustration is that so many people are given a pass on shoplifting,” says Barbara Staib, director of communications at the National Association for Shoplifting Prevention. Many first-time shoplifters are either warned by the store or directed by courts into a brief class or program. (For example, a behavioral theft deterrent program is offered by Cook County and Rush Hospital for first-time offenders.)

Staib explains “shrinkage”—the amount of merchandise that routinely is missing from a store’s inventory. “Most retailers are happy with a 1.3 percentage [rate] of shrinkage,” Staib says. But law-enforcement officials could help retailers drive that rate lower. Right now, shoplifting cannot be charged as a felony unless the thief nabs more than \$300 in goods. NASP wants the felony threshold lowered, so people stealing smaller amounts could be prosecuted.

“We’re dealing with a subset—10 percent of people in the U.S. who have shoplifted,” Staib says. “We pay higher prices because of this theft. Honest consumers pay the price for dishonest people.”

Somewhere in the Midwest—I’ve been sworn to secrecy about its exact location—is a large warehouse. On the outside, it has no signs or distinguishing details. But inside is the hub for much of Walgreens’ expansive security system, one that’s unusually large, even for a major retailer. It’s where Jerry Biggs, the director of Walgreens’ organized retail crime division, spends much of his time.

Biggs, who has held this job since its inception in 2003, is a big, affable guy who wears cowboy boots and decorates his office with John Wayne memorabilia. A poster of 1950s movie *I Was a Shoplifter* hangs on one wall and a confiscated booster bag, a fake Gucci tote lined with duct tape, sits on a chair to one side.

In this office, Biggs watches a computerized system that allows him to monitor Walgreens stores in every state. Biggs loves talking about shoplifting. “A regular booster can get \$500 or more a day, sometimes from one store,” he says. “We’ve arrested people with shopping lists in their pockets. One guy was even walking around the store consulting his list. We have it on tape.”

Biggs has a lot of digital footage and he is happy to show it to me. There is video of a shoplifter grabbing bottles of Aleve off a shelf and throwing them into one side of his coat with lightning speed, while a partner surveys the store for security guards. In another, a man in a suit wanders up to a shelf outfitted with one of those acrylic lockdown boxes—the kind that holds razor blades or packages of Claritin. The man checks it out, walks away, then comes back and quickly breaks the clips holding the box in



VIDEO KILLED THE SHOPLIFTING STAR
A monitor in the Walgreens warehouse displays a photo of a woman accused of stealing.

“Shoplifters can be people who have plenty of money and could easily buy whatever they’re stealing.”

place. He puts the entire acrylic box in a shopping cart, heads to a remote area of the store and nabs the contents: \$2,000 worth of diabetes test strips.

Biggs has the other side of such scenes on tape, too: a montage of arrest photos—people crying, people looking as if they need a fix, people smirking—strung together to a soundtrack of “Bad Day” by Daniel Powter.

Back in the warehouse, Biggs shows off a stack of merchandise. It stretches from one side of the warehouse to the other, climbing as high as two stories. Monster Energy drinks, Eveready batteries, Advil, Tylenol PM, men’s colognes, Olay skin cream. The array is mind-boggling. It was all used as bait in the Patel brothers’ arrest. “There was an undercover police sting that involved all this merchandise loaded onto a 53-foot semi trailer and offered to [the Patels],” Biggs explains. “The market value here is \$100,000, but the fences offered to buy it for \$22,000.” That’s when the brothers were arrested.

It’s November 1, the kind of chilly, early fall day that makes you want to snuggle up with a good book. But in a conference room at J.C. Penney in a western suburban mall, the energy level is through the roof. Approximately 48 law enforcement personnel have gathered for the start of a two-day

sting. Words scrawled on a whiteboard spell it out: OPERATION WHOVILLE 2—BLITZ.

“Remember, this is a bit like fishing,” Williams tells me. “We don’t know if we’re going to get any bites or not.” But it seems likely something will come of this operation. Private security for all of the mall stores mingles with the police from North Riverside, Cicero and Chicago. There are state police involved, too. Some are in uniform but most are dressed in undercover casual: dad jeans, thermal waffle shirts, Bears sweatshirts, ball caps. They will be covering several malls in the area today. Nextel phones are passed out, passwords established and numbers set for text messaging.

“A lot of this is about building relationships,” Williams says. “The local police and the stores get to know we’re here and that we’re serious, and we just build on that.” We are walking through the mall now, waiting to see what will happen. It will be a long day, from noon to 9pm, and then the same all over again for Williams tomorrow.

The hours go by quickly at first, but then start to slow. Williams passes some time at the Starbucks in the center of the mall, chatting with various law enforcement and store security.

There is a central common room for coordinating all the information, but it’s small and stuffy. It feels better to be out in the mall.

Then the reports start to come in: a young man arrested for trying to shoplift at an athletic gear store. A woman taking kids’ clothes. Another athletic gear arrest.

At the end of the two-day blitz, shoplifting arrests total more than 20. And two weeks later, Williams is off to head up another operation somewhere else—perhaps in a Whoville near you.