

Shoplifting

P. M. F. H.

THE APPEARANCE of this paperback may well belie its character, for it is a meaty social document resembling a research thesis. I would recommend it to all serious readers of this journal since it could not fail to broaden as well as deepen their perspective on criminal activity generally, as well as on this particular type of larceny; but I would suggest strongly that they begin with the excellent last chapter headed Summary and Conclusions, and explore further from there the particular points which interest or provoke them.

The authors set out to make a "rather wide survey of the main facts about shoplifting" and this they have done competently, particularly in view of the fact that they have relied for the most part on data already being collected for other purposes, or the services of staff already fully engaged on their own professional work. In research, it is the questions asked of the facts and the relationships which can be drawn out of them that matters, of course, so that the striking feature is the way in which these particular sets of facts are seen in relation to the social context in which they occur, and in relation to each other, that is important. It is the use of control data, about the community at

large, and about other sets of thieves, wherever it could be found, the constant reference to other thinkers and other studies, in addition to the authors' own considerable knowledge and understanding of the delinquent field as a whole which makes it an imaginative piece of work.

Naturally, there are points at which one would wish for an even fuller exploration either of the ideas, or the statistical material presented, perhaps particularly in relation to the medical and psychological aspects, but one is left with the stimulus to pursue this journey oneself, rather than with a feeling that avenues are being prematurely closed. Indeed it is the way in which the study draws out so many of the varied threads which are woven into an interaction eventually deemed criminal which is so fascinating. It is clear, for instance, that the attitudes and policies of stores and their detectives is as important as the psychopathology of the individual in determining who comes to court, and that, in those who come to court, a multiplicity of factors are at work to bring about different social consequences.

As the author says, we do not know whether more women than men do shoplift, but we do know

that more of them are arrested for it, and the study is therefore mainly about adult women shoplifters; largely about a group of 532 who appeared in three courts in the greater London Area during 1959/60. This is supplemented by data about 200 shoplifters received into Holloway at the same period. For comparative purposes, and to enable trends in shoplifting and recidivism to be looked at, a representative sample of 100 was taken from the three courts in 1949 with a record of their subsequent convictions, and a sample of 50 other thieves admitted to Holloway in 1959 was also looked at.

There is, in addition to this, an excellent examination of some data on shoplifters in the juvenile population of the same area where the proportion of boys and girls arrested is equal. There is also an interesting short chapter on the men who came before the same courts in the same two periods as the women; there were 234 and 212 of them respectively. The data on the immigrant shoplifters who form 29 per cent of the adult female sample receive some special attention, and perhaps throw light on one aspect of the cost of social mobility, or demonstrate common factors at work in causing people to move away from home and to steal.

It is impossible to comment on more than one or two of the points which strike one. Apart from the young immigrants, the predominating group of women is over 40

years of age and tends to be separated, widowed or divorced, living alone and to be middle class in origin. This needs relating to the fact that, in those about whom more intensive data were available, motives of depression and resentment in the middle age group, of sexual frustration and conflict with parents in the younger group, and of confusion, loneliness or want in the elderly group, were dominant. Case histories demonstrate the importance of psychological factors of a varying kind in many types of case, even among those who are professional or recidivist, as well as in the bulk who are first offenders; so does the fact that among men book stealing predominates, though not from special intellectual interest, and that in the male juveniles, a larger number of shoplifters than of other thieves are disturbed. What are the lines along which treatment of this aspect of the problem might be tackled? The authors stress that the first practical problem to tackle is that of providing an adequate screening service so that appropriate help can be given, particularly to likely recidivists and to the definitely pathological cases.

Those of us in the prison service who are dealing with women, have become acutely aware that at least 50 per cent of our population have considerable psychiatric disturbance, and Dr. Epps' study demonstrates this among the shoplifters. Pressure towards any measure that makes earlier diag-

nosis and more specific treatment available both inside and outside the prison walls seems important. Dr. Gibbens raises the question of more systematic screening interviews at court, and the use of a condition of treatment as a more usual part of a probation order; Dr. Epps raises the question of a treatment regime in prison for the large group with what she describes as personality disorder "whose constructive handling presented considerable difficulty."

On the question of screening in the juvenile population, the report stresses the difficulty of excluding cases from court appearance on superficial grounds, since "the nature of the offence, however trivial, gives no indication of the degree of disturbance which lies behind it." In this study, approximately 40 per cent of both boys and girls showed a well-marked

disturbance in their family or personal life which would have merited supervision and treatment, and an equal number could not, in the confines of this study, be investigated at all. Such evidence as there is from the Portman Clinic and from a previous study by Dr. Grunhut, suggests that treatment results "have not been unsatisfactory." It is clear that in this area of diagnosis and treatment, as in others mentioned by the authors, the need for further study and for experimentation and follow-up is great.

Shoplifting — by T. C. GIBBENS and JOYCE PRINCE

is obtainable direct from the Institute for the Study and Treatment of delinquency, 8 Bourdon Street, Davies Street, London. W.1.

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Until the public buys
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We long to civilise
But only compromise
And almost idolise
The public greed

Should we express surprise
That all the crime rates rise?
When such things signalise
The public creed.

JAMES GOEHGAN