

4. Reducing Theft from Shopping Bags in City Center Markets

Barry Poyner and Barry Webb

EDITOR'S NOTE: This case study first appeared in a Tavistock Institute of Human-Relations' publication (Poyner and Webb, 1987a) and has been edited by the authors for inclusion in this volume. It developed from an earlier study of "street attacks" (violent and sexual assaults, robbery and thefts from the person) in Birmingham and Coventry, two large cities in England, which found that many of these incidents were thefts from shopping bags occurring at markets in the city center (Poyner, 1981). Because of their concentration in the central part of the city, with excellent rail and bus connections, these markets attracted thieves like bees to a honey pot. Conditions at the markets also facilitated theft. In the covered markets the lighting was so poor and the shoppers so close-pressed by the arrangement of stalls that it was easy for thieves to remove purses from shopping bags without being noticed. According to the evidence of the case study, the installation of improved lighting (to enhance natural surveillance) and the widening of spaces between stalls (deflecting offenders) in the worst affected markets substantially reduced these thefts. There seems also to have been some diffusion of benefits in that thefts in nearby markets also declined, perhaps because: "The general attractiveness of this area for thieves has reduced." Finally, a

note on terminology: "Shopping bags" are large cloth or plastic bags with handles to carry purchases; "purses" and "handbags" in common American parlance would be, respectively, "coin purses" and "pocketbooks."

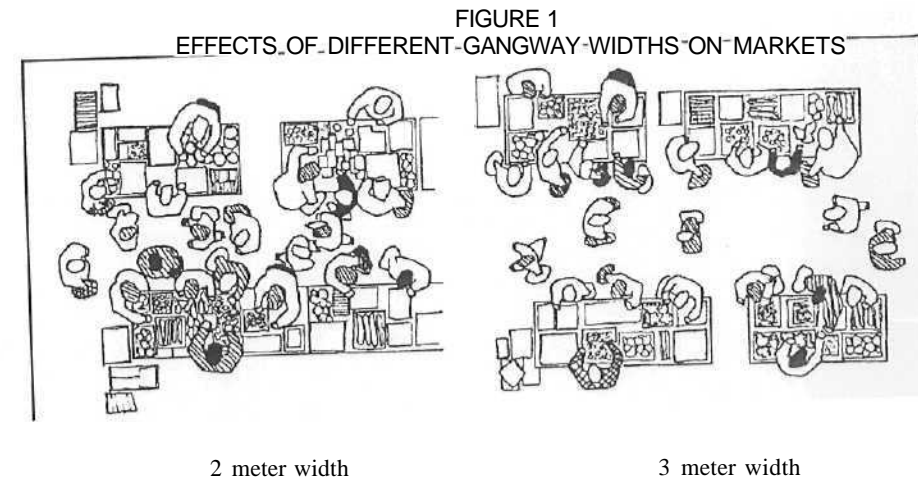
ONE OF THE clear findings to emerge from an earlier study of street attacks in the city center of Birmingham was the existence of a large number of thefts of purses from shopping bags, usually carried by women (Poyner, 1980, 1981, and 1983). These thefts were concentrated almost exclusively in the Birmingham Bull Ring, well known as the center of one of the largest retail markets in England. In all there are well over a thousand stalls some occupied six days a week selling fresh food of all kinds, clothing, household goods and even antiques. There are four main market areas: two Bull Ring Markets open six days a week, an indoor market hall where most of the meat, fish and poultry are sold and the Bull Ring Open Market which has many fruit and vegetable stalls. The other two markets open **three** days a week. They are the Rag Market which is under cover and the Flea Market which is outdoors. These markets concentrate more on clothing, household goods, antiques, toys, etc.

The crime which is the subject of this case study is not a specific crime as defined in police statistics but is a sub-group of "thefts from the person of another." In the earlier study it was found that there was a clear set of thefts which involved the offender removing a purse or wallet from the top of an open shopping bag or from a side pocket. The victim often claimed that the shopping bag must have first been unzipped by the thief, but often it was possible to observe women with purses or wallets pushed into the top of shopping bags or plastic carrier bags. Thefts of this type only occurred in crowded places and the victim was not aware of the theft happening until shortly afterwards. The result was that few offenders were ever seen by victims and few caught.

Because these thefts occurred mainly in the market areas of the Bull Ring, it was hypothesized that offenders would probably follow likely victims, usually older women, around the market stalls and while the victim was preoccupied with her search for suitable purchases or while waiting to be served, the offender would take her purse.

Two particular features of this type of crime were identified which were believed to offer approaches to the prevention of the theft. Firstly, the offenses occurred in a very specific area of the city center and at remarkably specific times. Not only did these thefts tend to occur on three days in the week—on Tuesday, Friday, and Saturday, the busiest three market days—but they also tended to be restricted to quite narrow periods, i.e., between midday to 2:00pm on Tuesdays and 1:00-4:00pm on Fridays and Saturdays. It also seemed that the crime was seasonal, occurring mainly in the summer months. These factors together suggested that some form of intensive policing of the markets where theft occurred would discourage would-be thieves.

The second feature of this crime was that it was found to occur most in the two markets with the more densely packed stalls and less in the other market areas with a more spacious layout. The study proposed that as an alternative to intensive policing, it may be that changing the layout of the market stalls so that they were all more spaciouly arranged would reduce this kind of theft. It was suggested that the gangway widths might be increased from about 2 meters to 3 meters. It was hypothesized that wider access ways made it more difficult



for offenders to steal without being noticed by other shoppers in the crowded gangways as Figure 1 illustrates.

At the time these proposals tended to be treated as an academic exercise and the research team had little expectation that any action would be taken. However, a visit to Birmingham in the summer of 1984 revealed that one of the markets with a high level of theft had been replanned and the narrowest access ways between stalls had been increased to a design width of **10feet**, which was exactly the dimension (i.e. 3 meters) proposed in the earlier study. In addition the area had been planned more spaciouly in other ways such as providing more space behind the stalls and wider cross accessways. It was therefore decided that a study would be made of the effect of these changes.

It was only later when data were being collected from police records that the research team discovered that in 1982 (probably beginning in late 1981) the police had set up a Divisional Support Unit to deal with street crime in the city center. Two teams were formed one of which had the specific brief to look into the problem of theft from the person in the markets. The policing work was a covert operation with officers not normally **wearing** uniform. Several techniques were tried by this team including using a policewoman dressed as a woman shopper as a decoy. This approach was felt to be unsuccessful and so forms of detection were used. The Bull Ring Open Market, which was the area later replanned was observed from nearby roofs by some of the team to try to identify intending offenders. These officers then directed some officers on the ground to follow likely suspects. In the opinion of the sergeant in charge of the team the exercise was successful, but not in terms of many arrests. A few arrests were made, but it soon became known that the police were making observations because details had to be given in court. He felt that it soon became a game. The offenders and police knew who each other were and so the offenders gave up offending while the police were about. Nevertheless, the police action was seen as a strong **deterrent** to this kind of theft. The Unit was disbanded by the end of 1982. This was about the same

time as the Open Market was being replanned.

Although the police action did not acknowledge any influence from the original research study, it is very hard to believe that none of the senior officers who set up the Divisional Support Unit knew of the study. The research findings had been formally presented to a group of senior officers of the West Midlands Police in 1980 and the report made available to the Chief Constable and other senior officers. The work was also reported in the autumn 1981 edition of *Police Research Bulletin* (Poyner, 1981). The publication of this article and the setting up of the Division Support Unit seem to have occurred within weeks of each other. The influence on the new market layout is much less certain. It is quite possible that the designer made the decision to increase the design width of gangways to 10 feet for other very good reasons than to reduce crime.

The Data

The crime type that was the basis of the original work was not a recognized police crime category but a sub-set of "theft from the person," with a few incidents categorized as "other theft." Because the coding of crime used by the police does not specifically identify these thefts, it was not possible to obtain data on this crime pattern from any computer search through police data sources. The only way to identify reliably all the crimes which occurred in these market areas was to go back to the original police files and select incidents by hand.

This task of working through all available crime files of a busy city center police subdivision is a very time consuming and dusty business. It had been found in the original study that 75% of the thefts occurred in the six months April to September. It was decided that only searching files for these six month periods would reduce the search time by 50% but would still provide a 75% sample of each year's thefts.

Apart from the practical difficulties of handling box files scattered around a police station undergoing extensive refurbishing, it was very easy to identify the thefts required and the authors are quite confident that the selection work was accurately carried out.

In the event, data on these thefts were obtained for four complete summer periods (1982-1985). These data are presented alongside the analysis from the original report in Table 1.

TABLE 1
THEFTS FROM SHOPPING BAGS IN BIRMINGHAM MARKETS (FIGURES FOR THE PERIOD OF MARCH TO AUGUST IN EACH YEAR)

	1978	1982	1983	1984	1985
Rag Market	52	82	54	17	12
Open Market	54	21	45	33	12
Market Hall	20	4	11	12	9
Flea Market			2	2	
Totals	126	107	112	64	33

Discussion

First, looking at the totals in Table 1 there is very clear evidence of progressive significant reduction in the crime from 1983, the year in which the layout of the Open Market was changed. There seems little doubt that whatever the precise details of the changes which have taken place the markets area is no longer seriously plagued by this particular crime. The crime reduction from 1983 to 1985 amounts to a 40% reduction in the first year and over 70% reduction in two years.

Policing. Having recognized that the overall figures show a very substantial reduction in thefts, it is even more interesting to look more closely at the analysis in Table 1. If we compare 1982 data with the data from the original study, we find that overall there is roughly similar level of crime but that the distribution between market areas is quite different. The Bull Ring Open Market and Market Hall have much lower levels of theft while theft increased in the Rag Market.

From what is now known of the activity in the Markets this appears to be the result of the intensive policing by the team from the Divisional Support Unit. Their impact on the Open Market and its immediate neighbor the indoor Market Hall is clear. However, the overall picture does not seem to justify the claim of crime reduction. On the face of it, police action seems to have redistributed much of the crime rather than prevented it. For the most part these thefts had been displaced into the Rag Market. The Rag Market was the largest of the markets with smaller stalls than the Bull Ring Open Market but with the same narrow gangways. The more important difference is that the Rag Market is a large shed structure. It would not have been so easy for the police to make observations as in the Open Market which is partly surrounded by buildings with many vantage points for observation. As the sergeant of this team explained, the would-be offenders became fully aware of what the police were doing, and so it can only be assumed that the offenders adapted by operating in more, for them, congenial surroundings.

Markets management. If the policing had not reduced the overall level of these crimes, what did? It was clear from the figures in Table 1 that from 1983 crime did drop in both the Rag Market and the Open Market and some clarification of what changes might be responsible was required. To do this a meeting was held with the General Manager of the City of Birmingham Market Department. The result of this meeting and a further interview with a member of the Markets own security staff revealed that there were a number of factors that may have contributed to the decline in theft. These are best discussed under a series of separate headings.

Density of use and congestion. The Birmingham Markets had been long regarded as a thriving business and the improvements already mentioned to the Bull Ring Open Market had also been accompanied by a number of other improvements. Over the last few years the number of market stalls had been increased substantially. Most of these changes had been to extend the Flea Market. In fact when the original study was made in 1978/9 this market comprised only a few stalls. The number of stalls at April 1985 are given in Table 2. The figures for the Rag, Open and Indoor markets are little changed since 1979, but the Flea Market has become a major element of the market complex. Like the Rag Market the Flea Market only operates on Tuesdays, Fridays and Saturdays.

TABLE 2
NUMBER OF RETAIL MARKET STALLS
AVAILABLE IN APRIL 1985

Rag Market	552
Flea Market	231
Bull Ring Market Hall	197
Bull Ring Open Market	158

While the increase in the size of the markets area has taken place, many traders have commented that trade has reduced. Unfortunately, by the very nature of the organization, there are no reliable statistics for the amount of trade, but it does seem that either due to the increased number of stalls or because of a decrease in trade combined with the increase of stalls, the general impression is that the markets are not quite so busy as they used to be. If this is the case, this in itself could account for some of the reduction in theft. It is clear that thefts from bags relies on the existence of crowded areas and if these are reduced so is the opportunity to steal.

Design changes. Apart from the development of the Flea Market, the main design changes that had taken place in the markets since the original study had been made, were the replanning of the Open Market, part of which is now roofed over, and the up-grading of the building that houses the Rag Market. In this case the front of the building was given a face lift and inside a ceiling was added with an improved lighting system. It is worth noting that the lighting system was not a minor improvement but one carefully designed for modern conditions. It won a certificate of commendation in the "Energy Management of Lighting" Award Scheme. This scheme is administered by the Electricity Council and the Lighting Industry Foundation, designed to encourage the most effective use of electricity.

The redesign of the Open market came first and was carried out within the first three months of 1983. Although the upper part of the old layout was a series of free standing hexagonal stalls with 10-feet between stalls the lower and busiest area (adjacent to the Woolworth store and the Indoor Market Hall) had stalls with 8-feet gangways often further narrowed with boxes. The new layout has a similar number of stalls but the space around the stalls is more evenly distributed. The minimum gangway width between stalls is 10 feet and some are a little wider. There are also more cross access ways. The design also gives more space for the traders to stow the stock and this has helped to reduce the obstructions in the gangways. The overall effect is much more space and less congestion and for the most part movement around the stalls is much more free (see Figure 1).

At first sight the increase in crime in the Open Market from 1982 to 1983 could indicate that the new layout had no impact, but it must be remembered that the policing team were at work in 1982. In fact if 1982 is ignored, the pattern of theft in the Open Market is consistently down from the original study through 1983 (when the layout was changed), and 1984/5. The crime reduction over the first two years of the new layout amounts to well over 70%, which is the same proportion as the reduction for the markets area as a whole. It seems quite reasonable to claim that the new layout with wider gangways has reduced crime.

The Rag Market also shows a significant reduction in theft. But here there was no change in the layout of the stalls. The most significant change was the new lighting system. As can

be appreciated from Table 2, the Rag Market is a very large shed with over 550 stalls. These stalls are little more than trestle tables used mainly on Tuesdays, when it is particularly crowded around lunchtime. Being in a relatively poor standard of accommodation compared with the Bull Ring Market Hall, the general level of lighting was poor and the combination of moderate levels of illumination and narrow crowded gangways seems to have been attractive to thieves. The improvement to the lighting seems to have made the difference. The new lighting system was installed towards the end of 1983 which accounts very well for the considerable drop in crime in this market between the summers of 1983 and 1984. This is the first clear evidence found by the authors to show that improved illumination levels reduce crime. It is perhaps paradoxical that the crime concerned only occurs during daylight hours!

Conclusions

There is little doubt that the two original hypotheses about policing in the markets and about the increasing of gangway widths have been proved to a considerable extent. In addition to this it has been found that increased levels of illumination appear to have deterred would-be thieves. This finding fits in very well with the ideas of the original study which emphasized the importance of would-be offenders being exposed to the view of other shoppers as a means of preventing crime. Both reducing congestion around the stalls and increasing the illumination increases the risk of thieves being seen to steal by other members of the public.

The problem with the use of intensive policing appears to be that it has not reduced crime overall but merely redistributed it. However this is not the case for the design changes to the markets. There was no evidence of displacement of theft to other markets or shopping areas. Indeed, quite the opposite has happened. The reductions in the Rag and Open Markets were accompanied by smaller reductions in the surrounding area. What seems to have happened is that by improving the worst areas of risk, the whole markets area has benefited. The general attractiveness of this area for thieves has been reduced.

Of course, those who believe unswervingly in the universality of the displacement theory will claim that the thieves have merely gone elsewhere. However, if they have gone elsewhere they will almost certainly have had to adopt other forms of theft because the original study showed very clearly that this type of crime occurred almost exclusively in these market areas, and there was no evidence to the contrary in the more recent review of crime files.

One final point, the markets security staff had a clear view that congestion was one of their main problems with crime. Apart from the more dramatic changes referred to above, they also felt that it was possible to manage the markets in such a way to reduce congestion. Apparently a few years ago the back of the Rag Market was particularly crowded because groups of stall holders used a particular sales approach. They liked to gather a large crowd around and make a direct sales pitch rather than wait for customers to approach their stall. To reduce this congestion these stall holders were moved and dispersed to less congested locations.