

The 'everyday' behaviour that has shop owners in Australia worried — and it's on the rise

As Christmas nears, increasing retail theft is costing profits and putting staff at risk. What's behind it?



Younger Australians are more likely to rationalise stealing, changing price tags and deliberately misusing self-serve checkouts, research shows. Source: Supplied / SBS Chinese

Shoplifting has become so relentless at Orange Supermarket in Sydney's south that staff say it now feels like part of the daily routine — and a costly one.

What used to be the odd missing snack or drink has escalated into hundreds of dollars in daily losses, fuelling concerns across the retail sector as theft surges nationwide.

"Basically, theft happens every day," supermarket cashier Lizchen Cai told SBS News.

"On average, the losses range from \$200 to \$300 on some days but can rise to \$500 or \$600 on others."

Over a year, that amounts to roughly \$150,000 — a figure that cuts deeply into already-thin margins for small and mid-sized retailers.



Sydney supermarket cashier Lizhen Cai said the store loses \$200 to \$300 a day to shoplifting. Credit: George Chan

Most thefts are petty and quiet, said shop assistant Harry Zhao.

"The most common cases are petty theft, where people quietly slip drinks or snacks into their bags or pockets while browsing," he told SBS News.

But increasingly, theft comes with a threat of violence. The Australian Retailers Association has warned that frontline workers nationwide face daily risks, with more incidents involving aggressive behaviour and organised groups operating across state lines.

"When we catch someone stealing, they often run out immediately and may hit us or fight us to snatch the items back," Zhao said.

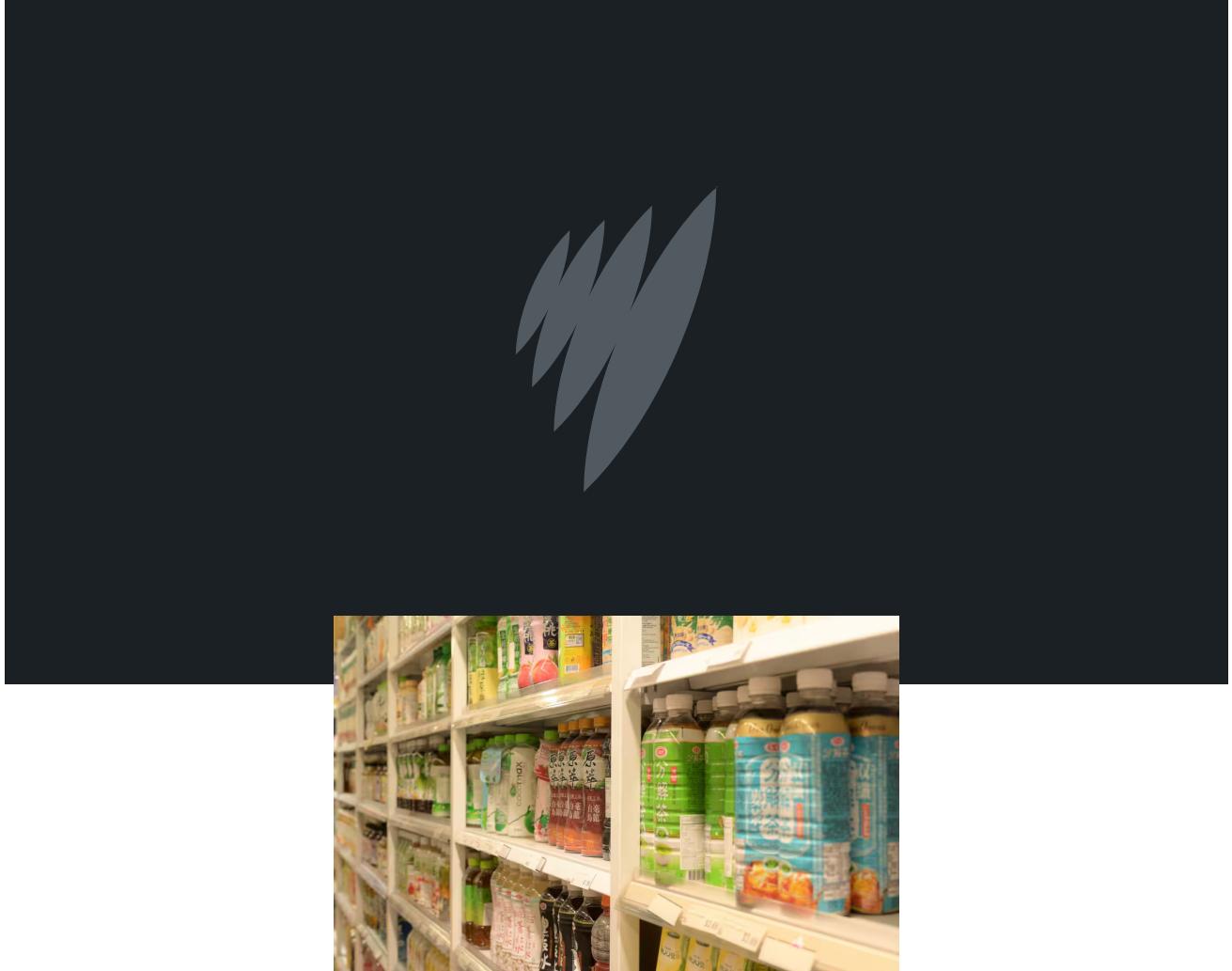
"If the situation escalates, it can turn into a confrontation. So, we usually let them go because we do not want our staff to be in danger."

Harry Zhao said the staff let thieves go to avoid a confrontation. Source: SBS / George Chan

Zhao said offenders come from all ages and backgrounds, though one group stands out.

"The majority are young people," he said.

That aligns with a recent Monash University survey of 1,047 Australian shoppers aged 18 and older, released in October.



The Australian Bureau of Statistics recorded 270,000 retail thefts last year, up 7 per cent – the highest level in two decades. Source: SBS / George Chan

"We do expect an increase in retail crime leading up to Christmas, and we urge retailers to be vigilant," Atto said.

"Also, law enforcement needs to be out there looking after retailers, as well."

Atto said the spike in shoplifting may be a symptom of a wider shift in attitudes.

"During an alarming rise in crime, people in Australia have become more accepting of retail theft. Our survey found that one in four believe it is justifiable to some degree to commit retail theft, including taking an item and not paying for it," she said.

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Sarah steals from supermarkets when she can't afford to eat. She says it's justified

Monash University's report also found a rise in specific behaviours, including shoplifting (27 per cent), changing price tags on products (30 per cent), not scanning some items at self-checkout terminals (32 per cent), and scanning items as cheaper alternatives (36 per cent).

Why retail theft is on the rise

Vincent Hurley, who specialises in the contemporary role of police and policing within criminological theories at Macquarie University, said when it comes to retail theft, soaring prices may be driving the trend.

"There is inflation and stagnation of wages, especially for part-time workers. So even to survive, some would consider stealing to be a way to survive in this cost-of-living crisis," he told SBS News.

Hurley, a former detective superintendent in NSW Police, said the growth of self-checkouts, which depersonalise payments, may be another factor behind rising crime rates.

"[Consumers] do not see it as stealing from an individual, from a person. They see [it as] stealing from an organisation, a corporation, which has no face, it has no identity," he said.

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A recent survey by the Retail Traders Association found 70 per cent of shop owners reported a rise in shoplifting over the past financial year.

Efforts by retailers, police, and peak bodies to crack down on repeat offenders – including the use of facial recognition technology – have so far had limited impact, according to Hurley.

"We should be worried about this trend as a society. Low-level crime can lead to much wider and more crime," Hurley said.

"Yet businesses do not want police inside their premises, because it sends a negative message to customers.

"So many businesses that are losing money build it into their insurance. And criminals see it as morally acceptable to steal from stores and get away with it, without being challenged."



Supermarkets and other retailers are bracing for a rise in theft over Christmas. Source: SBS / SBS Chinese / George Chan

Atto said retailers, police and peak bodies have stepped up efforts to crack down on offenders, most of whom research shows are repeat offenders.

"They've called for consistent national crime laws and police responses and have launched awareness campaigns to encourage Australians to be vigilant and report suspicious activities," she said.

However, many on the retail frontline fear they are losing the battle against rising crime.

"If you steal, it is selfish and inconsiderate of others," Zhao said.

"It creates insecurity and a feeling of danger in the community."

This story was produced in collaboration with SBS Chinese.

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