

# Imposing stricter penalties on adolescent shoplifters with prior offences in thefts involving low-value items may ultimately harm long-term development

Evangelou K <sup>1</sup>, Pavlidou L <sup>1</sup>, Belimezakis N <sup>1</sup>, Zervas V <sup>1</sup>, Hadjiphilippou M <sup>2</sup>, Louka C <sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Department of Medicine, National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, Athens, Greece

<sup>2</sup> Department of Nursing, National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, Athens, Greece

<sup>3</sup> Department of Chemistry, University of Cyprus, Nicosia, Cyprus

## INTRODUCTION

Adolescent shoplifting is usually impulsive and low in monetary value, yet repeated acts often trigger escalating criminal justice responses.

Forensic and criminological research indicates that formal juvenile processing and transfer to more punitive settings do not reduce reoffending and can modestly increase it compared with diversion.

Youth exposed to stricter judicial sanctions show equal or higher subsequent delinquency than peers diverted away from court, challenging assumptions that harsher penalties are necessary to deter “persistent” minor theft.

Punitive escalation in this population may therefore operate as an iatrogenic intervention, undermining normative psychosocial development and entrenching criminogenic pathways.

## AIM

To synthesise forensic-psychiatric, developmental and criminological evidence on adolescents with repeated low-value thefts, evaluating whether intensifying penalties promotes rehabilitation or instead amplifies mechanisms that increase long-term offending and mental-health burden.

## METHODS

A narrative review drew on:

- systematic reviews / meta-analyses comparing formal juvenile court processing, transfer to adult jurisdictions and diversion for low-level youth offending;
- developmental neuroscience work on adolescent brain maturation, stress and hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis dysregulation;
- studies on labelling, stigma and the impact of criminal records on social integration, education & employment
- evaluations of diversionary and restorative programmes for young property offenders.

Evidence was interpreted through a forensic-psychiatric lens, focusing on pathways by which sanction severity interacts with pre-existing vulnerabilities (impulsivity, trauma, substance misuse, family adversity) to shape identity, symptom trajectories and criminogenic risk among adolescent shoplifters.

## RESULTS

Across experimental / quasi-experimental studies, formal juvenile justice processing shows, at best, no reduction and often a small increase in subsequent delinquency compared with diversion, suggesting that more intensive system contact can have net harmful effects.

Youth transferred to adult criminal courts tend to reoffend more quickly and violently than comparable peers retained in juvenile systems, indicating that exposure to harsher penal environments in adolescence does not deter but may escalate criminal careers.

These findings are consistent with labelling perspectives: official processing and custodial sanctions consolidate a “deviant” self-concept, increase peer rejection in prosocial contexts and normalise antisocial affiliations, which predict chronic offending.

Empirical work on youth diversion emphasises that avoiding unnecessary criminal records reduces educational disruption and improves access to employment, acting protectively against persistent theft and other low-level offending.

From a developmental neurobiological perspective, punitive escalation represents a potent chronic stressor at a life stage when the prefrontal cortex and associated executive functions are still maturing and stress sensitive. Sustained activation of the HPA axis and related inflammatory pathways in adolescence has been linked to impaired behavioural inhibition, heightened emotional reactivity and increased risk for internalising and externalising psychopathology, all of which are themselves associated with later justice involvement.

Harsh sanctions that remove adolescents from school or work further narrow opportunities to practise adaptive decision-making and prosocial roles, reinforcing impulsive, short-term reward-seeking patterns that characterise both shoplifting and other risk behaviours.

Clinically, coercive, punishment-centred responses undermine trust in mental-health and social services. Young people subject to escalating penalties frequently perceive court-mandated psychological assessment or treatment as an extension of control rather than a resource, weakening therapeutic alliance and reducing adherence to interventions targeting conduct problems, substance misuse or mood disorders. Findings from procedural-justice research similarly suggest that when sanctions are experienced as unfair or overly punitive, legal authorities lose legitimacy and compliance decreases.

Family relationships may also be strained by repeated justice involvement, particularly when caregivers experience the system as stigmatising or disproportionate; this can erode protective parental monitoring and collaboration with services.

By contrast, restorative and diversionary approaches that emphasise accountability, victim reparation and collaborative problem-solving within the community show at least comparable, and

in some studies better, outcomes for youth property offenders than traditional prosecution, while also improving victim satisfaction.

Such programmes minimise disruption to schooling, facilitate early identification of mental-health needs and allow tailored, proportionate conditions (e.g. psychoeducation, skills training, family work) instead of custodial or highly restrictive penalties. For adolescents whose thefts involve low-value items, these models align more closely with international juvenile justice standards, such as the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Beijing Rules, which stress proportionality, diversion where possible and the primacy of reintegration.

## CONCLUSION

Stricter penalties for adolescent shoplifters are unlikely to improve public safety and may cause iatrogenic harm by reinforcing deviant identity, disrupting development, and increasing long-term criminogenic and mental-health risks. Developmentally informed approaches (diversion, restorative justice, accessible mental-health care) are better suited to support desistance and social integration

Correspondence:

[evangeloukyriacos@gmail.com](mailto:evangeloukyriacos@gmail.com)