

# Doing good, doing wrong, doing time and doing harm: Criminalising the marginal in charity shops

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## Abstract

This paper builds upon theories of carceral spatiality and criminalisation to explore the extension of the carceral state into everyday spaces. In particular, here we consider the UK charity shop, which not only covertly relies on carceral labour from people ‘doing time’, but also abets the carceral state by criminalising everyday lives on the social and economic margins, thereby doing harm. Moreover, this criminalisation means charity shops become part of a broader system of governing in which social issues are treated as criminal problems with carceral solutions. We draw on ethnographic fieldwork in charity shops and news discourse over more than a decade to consider the pivotal yet hidden role of charity shops as instruments of criminalisation. We explore how charity shops as liminal spaces play a significant role in criminalisation through: sensationalising stories of ‘good’ charities and ‘bad’ criminals; policing theft, scams, and salvage; judging moments of what, and who, is criminal; and guarding against breaches of the terms of penal work orders. We argue that unpicking how charity shops criminalise the marginal matters, particularly in a context of both rising social inequality and the popularity of second-hand spaces, and brings into focus overlooked aspects of carceral power.

## Keywords

Carceral, charity retail, charity shops, criminalisation, marginality

## Introduction

Few people would associate the volunteer at their neighbourhood charity shop with a prison guard, a police officer or a judge. Charity shops selling mostly second-hand goods are ubiquitous

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on the British high street, numbering 10,200 across the UK (Charity Retail Association, 2024). They seem ordinary, homely places dedicated to 'doing good', and a world apart from prison or the court. However, research has shown that charity shops have long operated as camouflaged outposts of the prison and probation service, relying on labour from Licensed Prisoners on day release from prison, and from people working off court-ordered unpaid work sentences (Maddrell, 2000, 2017). The use of carceral labour has been a 'nation-wide, if far from uniform, phenomenon' since at least the 1990s, if not generally publicised (Horne and Maddrell, 2002, p. 91-92). In fact, charity retailers' ties to welfare governance mean they operate almost as an arm of the 'shadow state', their jumble of second-hand tat and treasure and remit of 'doing good' masking an entanglement with intensifying carceral power (Fitton, 2024; Horne and Maddrell, 2002, p. 121; Maddrell, 2017; Nickel, 2016).<sup>1</sup> Moreover, charity retailers form part of a varied and diffuse 'penal voluntary sector' given increasing responsibility for state prison and welfare services (Tomczak, 2016, p. 2). Yet not only has the role of charity shops in carceral labour remained mostly hidden, a significant aspect of their carceral entanglement has been largely overlooked: the role charity shops play in deciding what is a crime, and who is a criminal.

A rising body of scholarship draws attention to the mounting criminalisation of everyday lives on the social and economic margins. These critics point out how governments increasingly use 'cages as catchall solutions to social problems' (Gilmore, 2007, p. 2) by constructing a widening array of everyday states of being or acts of survival as crimes, such as being homeless or sleeping in public, skip-diving for food or clothes, or not having the correct immigration documents (see also Fletcher and Wright, 2018; Herring et al., 2020; Mitchell and Heynen, 2009; Williams and Clarke, 2018). This scholarship argues that prisons in the UK have become 'like warehouses or waste management facilities' for people deemed to be 'waste' (Gilmore, 2007; Moran et al., 2018, p. 672; Wacquant, 2010, p. 198). Criminalisation subjects marginalised people to being 'categorized, monitored, policed, and excluded in dehumanizing and often violent ways' (Monahan, 2017, p. 191). Meanwhile, criminalisation fuels a carceral state that has trended towards privatisation, more visible punishments, longer and more stringent supervision, more reconvictions, more detention and more harmful imprisonment practices (Moran et al., 2018, p. 673; Skins, 2022).

Cultural criminology has sought to better understand how the criminalisation of people living on the margins can be mapped in spatial terms, usually focusing on liminal urban spaces and wastelands where those often excluded from wider society, such as gangs, sex workers or homeless populations, may congregate, and 'powerful structures of social control have been skilfully and often surreptitiously woven into the fabric of the city' (Hayward, 2004, p. 156). The boundaries between the extant prison system and these public spaces of 'hyperincarceration' (Moran and Schliehe, 2017, p. 5) are porous and mutable. Theorists have discussed, for example, the penal characteristics of public housing (Shabazz, 2009 in *ibid.*), or how changing trespass laws and CCTV impact upon 'street scavengers' and those who seek out food from bins (Ferrell, 2006; Mitchell and Heynen, 2009). These scholars point out that the pace and extent of criminalisation in everyday spaces are also intensifying. While Hayward (2004) highlights the role of consumer culture in this intensification, and other authors have discussed the transgressive criminality of some shopping sites such as the pawn shop or the shopping mall (Presdee, in Barak, 1994; Fass and Francis, 2004), the peculiar iteration of second-hand charity retail has escaped criminological critique. Charity shops have been noted as part of 'a new archipelago of confinement' (Rose, in

Maddrell, 2017, p. 233) through their use of carceral labour, but what has yet to be explored is how charity retailers are implicated in the carceral state as sites of everyday criminalisation.

In this article, we explore how the UK charity shop offers a case study of how geographies of carcerality intersect with 'geographies of exclusion' (Williams et al., 2001; Hayward 2012). We track how those within these spaces police what counts as 'doing wrong', such as theft, scams or other deviance, sensationalising and criminalising certain acts and people while overlooking others, imitating 'transcarceral spaces' (Allspach, 2010) in how they exercise forms of penal control. This article identifies and addresses a gap in our understanding of everyday criminalisation as part of the governance of marginality and intensifying carceral control in the UK and beyond. Our case study has broader international relevance for two reasons. First, even as charity retailers may vary around the world, from charity shops in South Africa, to thrift store giants such as Goodwill or The Salvation Army in the United States (Ayres, 2019; Nickel, 2016), to 'op shops' in Australia and New Zealand (Podkalicka and Meese, 2012), tensions around 'doing good', welfare governance, and even criminality pervade them all. Second, charity retailers need to be understood as only one of many everyday spaces, such as the public park, school, hospital, or housing or benefits office, that might seem far from the prison but increasingly have become spaces where people are criminalised, policed and punished (Fletcher and Wright, 2018). Because the general public do not see these everyday spaces, including charity shops, as governing bodies, and indeed because charity retailers often mask their own role in welfare governance, the role of charity shops in policing, judging and guarding against crime has tended to be overlooked.

More specifically, we show how criminalisation in charity shops and other spaces now extends beyond the classifying and policing of an activity as a crime. Criminalisation also describes the cultural process by which a state of being, rather than an action, becomes reimagined, reappraised and treated as criminal (Williams and Clarke, 2018). We trace how in charity shops the state of being marginal – of being vulnerable, needful, or ill – comes to be conceptualised and treated as a crime, thereby criminalising marginality itself.<sup>1,2</sup> Further, we show how because of their longstanding association with liminality and marginality, charity shops are particularly suggestive sites for understanding such processes.

## Charity shops, marginality and crime news

Charity shops have long been associated with the management of marginal and deviant things, people and spaces. Their role is often one of cleansing, eradicating the taint of marginality, and, through their charitable purpose, of offering moral and social salvation – governing through an ascetic of first degrading and then rehabilitating 'waste' time and labour (Fitton, 2024; Le Zotte, 2013; Nickel, 2016, p. 182). Charity shops traffic in liminal things that exist somewhere between being waste and having further utility (Hetherington, 2004), between trash and treasure, gift and commodity. The material fact that charity shops predominantly deal in second-hand items links them to a longer history between secondhandedness and uncertainty, risk and deviance (Gregson and Crewe, 2003). Second-hand things also bring threat of contamination, a sensation of disgust at the bodily proximity to unknown and potentially dangerous others (Gregson, Brooks, and Crewe, 2000). Historically, second-hand street markets were 'seen as dangerous places, bringing together unruly elements who were already predisposed to crime and delinquency' (McRobbie, 1989, p. 30), such as car boot sales set up on the 'urban fringe' and reputed to be places for the

circulation of stolen goods (Gregson and Crewe, 2003). More recently, on struggling high streets, some charity shops have become signals of economic wasting and decline (Hubbard, 2017; Payson and Moore, 2022).

Charity shops are also spaces of liminality for those who shop and work in them. They may be a key local resource, used variously as a lending library, a cheap arts and crafts store, and for everyday household provisioning (Edwards and Gibson, 2017), or as a way to make a living, such as by resellers and scrap collectors (Ayres, 2019; Hansen and Le Zotte, 2019). They have long played a role as a transitional space for people seeking to upskill, re-enter the job market or continue work beyond retirement. Many people who work and volunteer in charity shops are undergoing 'experiences of social dislocation' such as unemployment, retirement, disability, migration or bereavement (Flores, 2014, p. 388). Others may have been referred as part of formal employment training or a support plan or social prescription through the health service (Mind, 2022). The occupational affordances of charity shops matter especially under cuts to state welfare, in which other entitlements have been scoured away. Yet the benefits for volunteers also come with uneven risks, as charity shops also explicitly or implicitly play a role in the 'discipline' of workers (Nickel, 2016, p. 182). Scholars point out the 'fragility' (Maddrell, 2017, p. 232) of unpaid work, where any breaches of the terms of work, particularly work undertaken as a part of welfare or disability support, or a prison sentence or probation order, may be treated as criminal offences themselves. This context of liminality, vulnerability and risk of harm invites critical attention because it draws attention to everyday narratives and decisions on criminality.

Charity shops are also liminal spaces in a shifting social imaginary shaped by everyday narratives and media discourse around 'doing good' and 'doing wrong', charity and crime (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985). Critical scholarship has noted rising discourses that valorise thrift and individualised self-management, whilst stigmatising marginalised groups, thereby licensing both punitive cuts to state services and charity in place of entitlement as a social salve (Fitton, 2024; Nickel, 2016; Payson, 2022; Payson et al., 2022; Tyler, 2020). Scholarship also shows how media discourse sensationalises problems like 'welfare fraud' or 'benefit cheats' as crimes, for example, inflaming public feeling against all welfare recipients (Tyler, 2020, p. 196). Crime news more generally constructs social problems as criminal problems requiring punitive rather than welfare or healthcare solutions (Baranauskas and Drakulich, 2018, p. 682; Herring et al., 2020). News reporting helps the public 'to understand what their communities are like, what the boundaries are', who belongs and who does not, and marks out those responsible for the 'crime problem' (Rich, 2009, in Leverentz, 2012, p. 351). In other words, crime news constructs how those at the boundary, the socially liminal or marginal, are adjudicated and understood as criminal. These crime and welfare discourses, moreover, churn with feelings, from salacious humour to outrage, creating a potent 'emotional social imaginary' (Payson and Moore, 2022) around the liminal moral space of the charity shop where what counts as a crime is adjudicated. In this context, our focus on the intersections between charity retail, the carceral and the welfare state necessitates a methodological approach that can address both everyday relations in charity shops, and broader social imaginaries of crime, punishment and community constructed as common-sense through discourse (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985).

## Methods

Thus motivated, we bring together two methods: ethnographic observation and a cultural studies analysis of crime discourse in charity shop news. Ethnography as a charity shop volunteer allows 'a visceral insight into how human lives intersect, and how individuals respond, within this particular setting' (Fitton, 2022a, p. 31), and affords insight into the oblique day-to-day practices in charity shops around crime and policing. A cultural studies approach to crime news, meanwhile, complements this by tracing how a charged social imaginary around crime and charity shops both takes shape and shapes everyday life through news discourse (Payson and Moore, 2022).

In this paper, we draw on a substantial body of data on charity shops gathered by both authors over more than a decade (2010–2021). The ethnographic data comes from two periods of participant observation in which the authors worked in charity shops as volunteers. The first period of ethnographic data from 2010 to 2011 consists of a 6-month ethnography of two charity shops in the North of England, one of which was a national chain (FS1), and the other an independent hospice shop (FS2). The second period of ethnographic data, from 2019 to 2021, consists of a 6-month ethnography of one independent charity shop on the South Coast of England (FS3), and participant observation as a shopper at 200 charity shops at a range of locations across Wales and the South West (FS4). The third source of data, charity shop crime reporting, comes from a news content analysis of regional and national UK print media in 2009 and 2018, where coverage mentioned 'charity shops'. Across all charity shop-related news, 'crime and offenders' was the fourth most common issue featured, appearing in 13.3% ( $n=133$  of 1000) of stories sampled – after 'special shop sale or event', 'explanation of what the charity does', and 'money raised' – underscoring crime's surprising saliency to charity shop discourse.<sup>2</sup>

Here we revisited our ethnographic and media data for instances of and references to prisoners, the probation service, crime (theft, fraud, vandalism, etc), and surveillance (CCTV, monitoring court orders, etc). We explored themes, patterns, and exceptions in the data. Our analysis was guided by both new studies of the cultural politics of charity shops, critical carceral studies, and theories of prison abolition and welfare stigma. Our findings describe four key themes: (1) sensationalising discourse of 'good' charity shops and 'bad' criminals; (2) everyday 'gangster policing' of thefts, scams and salvage; (3) judging marginal moments, gracing some and criminalising others; and (4) (prison)guarding against breaches of the rules governing work orders and probation.

## Findings

### Doing good and doing wrong: Policing the morality of charity shop crime

In crime news coverage, the charity shop becomes a liminal space where public morality around crime is imagined, contested and ultimately policed. Crime news coverage often presents a 'good' yet vulnerable charity shop, vital to the local community and deserving of protection. The charity shop is constructed as a feminised, vulnerable, communal body, belonging to 'us', where 'dirty' second-hand goods are cleansed and put to good purpose. This framing is due in part to shops' links with charities, to stereotypes of older women volunteers, and to the close, reciprocal, and 'localised' relationships charity shops have with people who are their primary donors, customers and volunteer base (Edwards and Gibson, 2017, p. 75, Fitton, 2024; Horne and Maddrell, 2002,

p. 84). By emphasising the moral purity of charity shops and their role in cleansing and rehabilitating degraded, even potentially disgusting, things and people (Nickel, 2016), the reporting plays into the synoptic fetishisation of criminal activities in and around these sites. The informality and charitable ethos of charity shops makes them an 'easy target', as one shop manager put it, particularly susceptible to crime.

Yet just as it constructs the 'good' charity shop victim, sensationalist crime news constructs its 'baddies' (Greer and Reiner, 2012; Machado and Santos, 2009). Incidents are detailed in ways that demarcate 'innocent, vulnerable victims' (the shop itself, and its staff and volunteers) from heinous others, who are pathologised as beyond imagination and morality (Kort-Butler and Habecker, 2018, p. 129). Many stories present a venal criminal other, exogenous to the moral economy, who must be punished and stigmatised for their transgressions in this sanctified, if potentially deviant and soiled, space. For example, *The Stoke Sentinel* (10 July 2009) called perpetrators who had robbed and smashed up a charity shop 'disgusting', 'yobs' and 'vandals'; an *Evening Herald* (2009) editorial describes a group of charity shop thieves as 'sick', 'despicable creatures capable of committing the most disgraceful crimes' (17 January 2009); likewise, the *Kentish Express* (12 April 2018) described charity shop thieves as 'the lowest of the low'. Framing crime in this way others the accused as nonhuman 'despicable creatures', and reinforces harsher policing and punishment to clean things up, echoing punitive carceral policy (Skinn, 2022, p. 6). As other scholars have noted, 'cultural narratives (e.g. about dangerousness or unworthiness) are often key drivers for the adoption of surveillance systems that in turn reify those discriminatory categories and subject positions' (McCahill, 2002, in Monahan, 2017, p. 192-193). Framing the violation of charity shops so emotively thus rationalises further surveillance and policing of a threatening, unknown 'them'.

Sensationalist charity shop crime coverage also makes much of leaky bodies and the abject (Kristeva, 1982), invoking disgust, 'horror' and humour to construct a distinction between an uncontaminated 'us' and a dirty, marginal 'other'. This can be seen in news stories that link charity shops with discussions of blood, faeces, urine and sexual fluids. For example, *The Sun* (26 October 2018), ran the headline 'SHOP HORROR: Dirty knickers, egg-stained nighties and suitcases full of sex toys' above a collection of volunteers' most sordid stories: 'nanna knickers with goodness knows what on and then blood or drip-stained sheets', or an opinion piece in *The Times* (25 July 2018) upbraiding donors for dumping 'soiled knickers, tangled, wormy tights'. Another volunteer in the same *The Sun* story details how a 'woman did a wee all over the changing room floor', the shock value and titillation increased by the detailing of female deviance in particular. Sordid fluids are juxtaposed with sordid crimes in the news discourse to distance the abject marginalised other from the 'moral' space of the charity shop. By managing the redistribution of grotty donations, and by managing liminal charity shop bodies and behaviour, charity shop workers do both what Gregson et al. (2016) call the 'dirty work of the green economy' and what we might call the dirty work of the moral economy. This doubled dirty work compounds the emotional labour (Hochschild, 2012) that falls upon charity shop workers, many of whom are volunteers.

In addition to the good/bad binary that emerges from the media analysis is the propensity for humour, 'dirty' jokes, puns and bawdiness in charity shop crime news. Such comic hubris is used to ease the discomfort that people often feel when confronted with a social issue that is hard to palate (Vitis and Gilmour, 2017), such as the discordance of crime and punishment in a shop where there is an unspoken assumption that individuals will act and be treated charitably.

Discomfort is amplified by the presence of policing or the prison in a site where they seem out of place, and by the requirement for shop staff to participate in adjudicating crimes and punishments. Humour, among other feelings such as outrage, loss, and worry, shows up as an affective signal of the idiosyncratic, personal, burdensome and ill-fitting reality of charity shop policing, judging and (prison)guarding. In the next section, we explore how policing crime in charity shops operates, and which acts – and which bodies – find themselves criminalised within this space.

### **‘Gangster policing’: Thefts, scams and salvage**

Staff in charity shops use a range of strategies to police theft, from the basic to the elaborate and technological. While many retail jobs involve monitoring theft, this is particularly ad hoc, personal, and risky in charity shops. For example, valuables like cameras, jewellery, watches, and designer jackets, shoes and bags, are often kept locked away in cabinets or with steel cables to deter theft, with the keys kept behind the counter. Volunteers and staff will unlock these items by request, hovering nearby until they can be re-secured [FS3, FS4]. As was the case in FS1, for example, with a pair of Lacoste trainers that ‘look almost new’, to deter thieves only one shoe is put out on display and the other kept behind the till. Shops also may use CCTV, although the costs of video surveillance often necessitates some creativity, such as the use of dummy CCTV cameras and signs [FS2, FS3], or signs warning potential thieves to ‘smile, you’re on camera!’ [FS4] or that ‘the police will be called’ [FS2, FS4]. These performative measures and threats, however cheerful, signal to shoppers that even in an apparently informal space they are subject to being watched, policed and potentially punished.

While larger shops like Traid in Dalston, London [FS4], might have a uniformed security guard watching the floor, in most shops it is up to staff and volunteers to watch for theft, scanning for certain kinds of suspicious behaviour, and letting people know they are being watched while pretending to do something else. Maria, shop manager of the chain charity retailer [FS1], instructed the volunteer/researcher to: ‘Keep an eye out, and maybe walk around and re-arrange some things’. In FS3, staff advised the researcher to take a similar approach: ‘Look out for people bending down, by the baskets there, or trying to hide something, and go to tidy near them’. Staff thus must engage in everyday, embodied practices of performative surveillance – some of which are risky – to police whose browsing and shop behaviour is suspicious or potentially criminally deviant.

In addition, staff are also called on to keep on the lookout for potential scams and cons, policing the boundary between legitimate and illegitimate requests. Throughout the day, faced with regular requests for help or discounts, staff must weigh up the veracity of a story or the legitimacy of a plea in the moment and decide if the requester is ‘deserving’. This might involve refusing a large bill, testing for counterfeit bills with a marking pen [FS4], checking fraudulent clothing returns or receipts [FS3], or deciding on requests for something to be discounted, gifted for free, or added on top [FS1, FS2, FS3, FS4]. Yet our research shows significant flexibility and ‘blurring’ over such requests and discounts. At times granting a request was framed as part of the charity’s good work; at others, rejecting a request as a scam was framed as savvy (FS1, FS2, FS3; see also Fitton, 2022b). Those working in the shop police this boundary with an idiosyncratic mix of experience, shop policy and personal judgement.

While volunteers are not usually expected to confront possible shoplifters or scammers, shop managers practiced a form of deputized 'gangster policing'. Under increasing pressure to hit shop targets (Fitton, 2022b, 2024) and protect their shop from losses, managers relish telling stories of when they have caught people out, even when this puts them at risk of physical harm. These stories of thwarting crime are often framed with sardonic irreverence, humour and possible exaggeration. For example, the manager of the FS2 nonchalantly told the researcher a tale of being stabbed in the neck and hand during an altercation regarding a counterfeit banknote, laughing as he exclaimed how at least it meant the culprit 'never came back in'. Whilst similarly undertaking unofficial duties as a vigilante police officer, FS1 manager Maria recounted:

I gotta tell you about what happened earlier this week. Some guy, he was stealing something. He had some of our trousers and was about to walk out. So I stopped him and I said "Give those back!" Anyway, he argued with me, and he said "You better watch what you say. I'm a gangster." I said to him "Listen, there's only one gangster around here. And that's me." And I got the trousers back and he left! Everyone, Bev out the back and that, they were all laughing so much!

The convivial charity shop atmosphere seems to diffuse the discomfort of these charged interactions, working to reassure volunteers, staff members and shoppers that the situation isn't too serious. This tendency for crime to be laughed off by charity shop workers mirrors the comic hubris of charity shop crime news. Although Maria responds to a threat by doubling down, it is successful, and ends with Maria revelling in the laughing disbelief of her colleagues. However, not all confrontations are successful. These encounters can leave staff shaken and upset, as in FS3, when the theft of a valuable collection of vintage cameras at the end of a long day left the manager close to tears. In such cases, humour and upset compete with other affective responses in a cacophony that is common within the carceral space (Turner et al., 2022). Staff are called on to police theft, scams, and criminality to protect and defend the charity and its income – but at some cost, and with uneven and inconsistent affects.

### Judging marginal moments and criminalising the other

Criminalisation is not consistent in the charity shop. A range of activities that might be criminalised are often not, depending on the situation and people involved. Goods arrive in overstuffed bags, and in such quantity that they must be sifted and processed swiftly and ruthlessly. As items move, they transform: from charitable gifts into retail stock, trash into vintage treasure, valueless into valuable, personal property into recyclable or waste and back again in tangled and unpredictable loops, a process intrinsic to most pre-owned items (Appadurai, 1988; Thompson, 2017). In this churning torrent of stuff, boundaries around property that are presumed to be fixed become unsettled. At the chain retailer site [FS1] in 2011:

Another bag of donations has a set of rollerblading gear, including blades, knee and elbow pads and wrist guards. Emily [Deputy shop manager] says "Totally having them" and tries them on. [. . .] She puts the bag of gear to one side. I wonder whether she'll actually pay for them – she told me a story earlier in the day about a hair fascinators which she tried on when I got



them out of the cabinets one day to clean. She ended up wearing the fascinator home without thinking and then didn't bring it back – "It's somewhere at home now."

The status of the rollerblading gear and the fascinator becomes 'blurred', as noted at the time. The volunteer's acts are not framed as theft, but as thoughtlessness, a bit of fun, perhaps a form of borrowing or loan stemming from the liminality and sense of circularity these items possess. She is also protected by her sanctified, insider role as a volunteer. Shops strive to keep volunteers "'sweet" as customers and donors' (Horne and Maddrell, 2002, p. 84) through various incentives and loyalty policies, while not losing revenue. Volunteers are often important donors and customers: in FS3 for example, one volunteer spent £40 in a single shift ahead of her beach holiday, a significant portion of the shop's £200–300 daily takings. While volunteers were occasionally dismissed for theft of goods and money, and sometimes even reported to the police [FS1 and FS3], these were seen as unusual and sensationalised cases, as in *The Northern Echo* (27 February 2009) coverage of a 'fantasist' charity shop volunteer 'charged with stealing thousands of pounds'. Most everyday blurred treatment of goods by volunteers was not judged to be theft at all, highlighting the inconsistency of criminalisation.

Donated goods dumped in and around charity shops also exemplify other ways in which criminalisation is blurred and erratic. Bags of donations left outside a shut charity shop are technically a form of fly-tipping, an offence punishable by up to imprisonment or a £1000 fine in England (Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, 2023). But bags on the street are simultaneously fly-tipped rubbish (despite, as a testy customer noted in FS1, the 'signs everywhere' against it), a 'freebie', and property now owned by the charity. At one conversation at the shop till, a regular female shopper recounted how she chased off people picking through 'dumped' donation bags outside the shop (FS2). While some waste picking could be framed as a form of pro-social, if 'dark' recycling (Kohm and Walby, 2020, p. 614; Müller, 2012), many picking practices do not possess the moral high ground that charity shop recycling activities hold just over the shopfront threshold. Further, while 'urban foraging is a critical survival strategy for homeless and other poor people' many dumpsters and disposal sheds are now monitored by CCTV to prevent and criminalise such uses (Mitchell and Heynen, 2009, p. 618).

In our research, waste picking by marginalised people was instead often framed as polluting or contaminating, and a crime. *The Sussex Express* from 22 June 2018, for example, describes a man, 'unemployed, of no fixed address', punished and fined £105 by the court for taking 'a red velvet cushion, women's jewellery and a President Trump figurine' that were consigned as waste in a charity shop shed. The most famous case in this vein is the tragic death of Dawn Sturgess, 44, and Charlie Rowley, 45, poisoned by a Novichok-contaminated perfume bottle they found in a charity shop donation bin. The *London Evening Standard* on 6 July 2018 reported how 'the pair would often trawl through bins in search of items discarded by charity shops', as they 'would find stuff and get bits of jewellery to get some money', associating the couple, and their skip-diving, with social abjection and contamination. Such practices are of course heavily classed: an unhoused or impoverished person who is bin diving is treated differently to a middle class 'freegan', where salvage is undertaken for ideological reasons (Barnard, 2016; Lou, 2019). Policing of second-hand salvage thus becomes another route through which the everyday governance of the marginal finds its force.

What counts as theft is constructed through the everyday processes and discourses not only around the value of things (Fitton, 2022b), but also based on perceptions of pettiness and

absurdity in a moral economy of charity. During our ethnographic research, items stolen ranged from expensive vintage cameras [FS3] to cheap Primark make up [FS1]. In a 26 October 2018 feature in *The Sun*, a charity shop volunteer commented, 'It is amazing what people will nick. Someone tried to walk out with a cat ornament on sale for £2'. The severity and regularity of theft was therefore sometimes downplayed, and the idea of doing so was treated (by some) as laughable:

A lady who has been browsing the shop leaves with her family, and comes back in a second later and says "I just walked out with these leggings!" and puts down a pair of 98p leggings on the counter. I say to her "You oughta be careful, Maria is a gangster!" Maria laughs, and then recounts the story to the lady. The woman says "I feel so stupid. Imagine trying to steal a pair of 98p leggings from a charity shop!" [FS1]

The woman in question here is quick to disidentify from the negative stereotype of the kind of person who would steal from, of all places, a charity shop. This is a form of degradation that she treats as farcical. Consistently in our research, the idea of theft in the charity shop was presumed to be utterly absurd. This absurdity, as with the news reporting and 'gangster policing' confrontations we documented, would frequently descend into humour and jokes. Incongruity has long been a basis of comedy (Billig, 2005, p. 64), and the relationship between charity shops as 'moral field[s] of action' (Dean, 2024, p. 3) and crime is one that many find ostensibly ridiculous. Yet whether behaviour is laughed off and dismissed or interpreted as criminal theft is idiosyncratic, implicating charity shops in the criminalisation of everyday behaviours.

Contrast the leggings incident with another in the same shop. Maria is keeping her eye on two women wearing traditional Romani attire. An incident of attempted shoplifting had taken place just beforehand involving a different person, and Maria was rattled. After the two women leave the store, Maria declares that they were about to steal some shoes before they caught her looking and put them back. She whispers:

He [the shoplifter] was with those two ladies. I saw him meet up with them further down the street. They are all the same.

Who are the 'they' in this scenario? Certainly not a fellow staff member borrowing a fascinator or a polite woman returning stolen leggings. Maria, like the staff members in our other research sites, polices the behaviour of individuals according to her own biases. There is markedly no humour in her statement above; instead she treats the two women as suspicious from the moment they step foot into the store, despite their lack of involvement in anything criminal. Her suspicions might well reflect prejudice: Gypsy and traveller communities have been subject to extensive exclusion and symbolic violence in austerity Britain (Tyler, 2013, pp. 139-152) as well as throughout Western history. More broadly, whether formal or informal, policing and judging according to who is considered 'suspicious' often reproduces racist and discriminatory violence, such as the 'infamous' racist 'sus laws' of the early 1980s (Tyler, 2010, p. 63; Wacquant, 2010). Yet such use of suspicion and discrimination is regarded as acceptable, even savvy, in the 'moral' space of the charity shop.

To make informal and formal judgments, among others, charity shop staff learn over time a range of embodied, localised practices and knowledges. These, we argue, are inflected by broader

cultural narratives around criminality and deviance. Meanwhile, charity shops are often treated as a refuge for people who might stop in for a chat and social contact, to enjoy a browse, or to get respite from the street. In our ethnographic work, we observed shop visitors who behaved erratically or seemed unwell, in an altered state, or otherwise vulnerable [FS1, FS2, FS3, FS4]. We responded or watched others respond by listening, pacifying the person with a small gift, de-escalating or redirecting a long tirade or complaint delivered with alcohol on the breath, and even providing referrals or direct support [FS3, FS4]. This type of relationship stands in direct tension with the policing and judging also required of the job. Staff and volunteers must weigh up how to respond, taking into account risk to themselves; this calculus can and did make people feel uncomfortable. Is a person rummaging secretly among the children's toys [FS3] in need of a friendly chat, a referral, or a confrontation over possible theft? Whatever the situation and result, people in charity shops must police and adjudicate who is a criminal and who is not in a broader context of personal biases and entrenched historical patterns of discrimination, increasing social marginality, and intensifying carceral control.

By selectively policing deviance and discriminating what is a crime and who counts as a criminal in shops in everyday ways, charity shops become moral arbitrators, and thus unwitting pipelines to incarceration and its related harms (Herring et al., 2020). The final and perhaps most injurious way this occurs is through monitoring the terms of unpaid work orders and prisoners' licences, and in so doing (prison)guarding against breaches of the terms of their punishment.

## Guarding the prison, compounding the harms

As well as police and judge, staff and volunteers in charity shops also find themselves in the role of the prison guard, monitoring against any breaches of the rules of a prisoner's licence or an unpaid work order. Rising use of unpaid work orders has been largely framed not only as 'good' for the people doing it, but as a *public* good. Press releases in local papers from Community Rehabilitation Companies, for example, frame work orders served in spaces like charity shops as enabling people to 'right[t] their wrongs by carrying out good deeds in the community' (*The Stoke Sentinel*, 29 April 2009), a 'tough, effective and visible punishment' that also 'provides an opportunity' for rehabilitating prisoners (*Daily Echo*, 5 August 2018). The work is framed as 'dirty enough' to constitute an appropriate punishment, but also moral enough to afford rehabilitative transformation (Happer et al., 2019, p. 313-314; Maddrell, 2017). Yet despite this discourse of 'going good', critics point out that the widespread rise in unpaid work orders has led to perverse outcomes (Skinns, 2022). Instead of reducing incarceration, the rise in community sentencing has instead led to exponential rises in reimprisonment: 'exacerbating rather than resolving social harms' (Heard, 2015, p. 3; Skinns, 2022).<sup>3</sup> Because community sentences outline ever more detailed terms – from curfews to mandatory appointments at distant offices to protracted unpaid work orders – any breaches of these detailed terms are then heavily punished.

In the charity shop, at the everyday level, the detailed terms of a prisoner's licence or work order put some at risk of further punishment, and others in the role of prison guard. A breach of the terms of a prisoner's licence or work order can be as inconsequential as a missed appointment or showing up late to a volunteer shift at the charity shop. For example, a news story (*Tivyside Advertiser*, 7 November 2018) notes that a woman was fined £70 for failing 'to attend two appointments', her first violation of her court order of any kind. According to the news story, she

did everything else 'right', including completing 100 hours of unpaid work in a charity shop and continuing to volunteer there beyond the terms of her sentence. Inequalities are thus baked into the everyday terms of the charity shop shift: while one volunteer's lateness or missed meeting would likely be swiftly forgiven, for another, a similar infraction, whatever its cause, results in further criminalisation. This is one of the ways the carceral can move through 'forms of confinement that burst internment structures and deliver carceral effects without physical immobilization' (Moran, 2013, p. 240, in Moran et al., 2018, p. 670). In unevenly guarding against breaches of the rules, moreover, charity shops find themselves part of a widespread increase in the use of fines and punishments for missed welfare or unemployment appointments, which criminalise poverty itself (Gustafson, 2011, p. 51).

Enforcing the terms of court-ordered unpaid work or probation affect everyday relationships and practices in the charity shop. Charity retailers have a duty of care and can be a source of connection, support and meaningful occupation; paradoxically, staff members must also effectively conduct surveillance on incarcerated and probation workers (Maddrell, 2017, p. 231-232). The discovery of a bag of what was thought to be ketamine in the toilets of FS1 demonstrates the potential consequences of this responsibility. Helen, a volunteer, recounted what happened next:

The guy [Ted] who we thought it might've been was working. And he kept going to the toilet, and because of what happened I was suspicious. So he worked all morning and then he went to the loo for the seventh time, and afterwards I went in there too, and I saw remnants of that stuff along the top of the hand dryer. Well, it was definitely him and I was up all night worrying about what I would do. In the morning I rang Maria, it was her day off, and I told her what happened. And she said I had to report him to probation services. So I did. . . They called me back and said that he wouldn't be coming back, and that's all I know. I don't think he'll get in trouble about it. I hope he doesn't, I didn't want to get him into trouble. But I couldn't have him doing that here. It's disrespectful for one thing.

Helen adopts a role of amateur investigator, keeping count of his trips to the toilet, and analysing the 'crime scene' when he leaves. She frames her decision to report him as the morally right and necessary thing to do, agonising over it all the same.

Her quandary shows how carceral systems entangle charity shops in certain risks. Helen has been enlisted to police and guard the terms of this person's probation, a role that requires substantial emotional labour here and across the penal voluntary sector (Tomczak and Quinn, 2021). Ted's experience, meanwhile, disappears from view: the probation service only reports that 'he won't be coming back'. Yet rather than 'repairing' an individual through the moral cleansing of work in a charity shop, Ted was further excluded, alienated and criminalised.

Just as Ted's experience disappears, so do any stories of harm to the charity shop workers caught up in the criminal justice system. Instead, news stories on work order breaches appear as gleefully sensationalised narratives of wily and irrepressible vice. The moral space of the shop is counterposed with salacious stories of breaches in their most extreme form. For example, several papers ran the story of 'an axe murderer who worked in a charity shop while on day release from prison' and 'ran off with GBP 355 from the Oxfam shop in Derby' to go on a party spree, using the 'charity cash. . . for three days of living the high life' (*Daily Star*, 19 August 2009; *Uttoxeter Post* and *Times*, 21 August

2009). A similar story described the 'Carry-out killer', who reportedly became pregnant during a prison work placement after she 'sneaked away from a charity shop for sex' during 'a Valentine's date with her ex-con fiancée' (*Daily Record*, 27 October 2018). These stories depict the charity shop as a fungible space, vulnerable to exploitation and breaches by caricatured depictions of criminals. Radically othered, they contrast with the often older, female volunteers (Maddrell, 2000) who are frugal to a fault and 'motivated by friendship and altruism' (Goodall, 2000, p.105). Sensationalising breaches masks the charity sector's own occasional complicity with illicit activities, such as the Oxfam sexual abuse scandal, the sector's enabling of paedophile Jimmy Saville and the multiple fundraising scandals of the early 2010s (Dean, 2024; Dean and Fitton, 2023).

Further, the coverage depicts the probation service and carceral system as inept and weak (Pickett et al., 2015, p. 501), fuelling public dissatisfaction with the expenditure of tax-payer funds on these services. Each breach suggests a justice system that is too moderate, soft on perpetrators, and easily exploited. Petty breaches are then dealt with via familiar 'law-and-order' solutions such as more incarceration and harsher punishment that further entrap vulnerable people in carceral systems (Baranauskas and Drakulich, 2018, p. 683). Such framing distorts the fact that community service orders tend to increase incarceration and re-imprisonment rates, and enrol charity shop volunteers and paid staff in the uneasy work of policing, judging and guarding their co-workers, propagating harm in unpredictable ways.

## Conclusion: Doing wrong and doing harm

We examine how the space of the charity shop can be understood as an instrument of criminalisation. Our findings indicate an ongoing, long-term relationship between charity retail and penal governance, via the exertion of everyday power in relation to vulnerable, abjected populations. This relationship is all the more pressurised in the context of the prolonged crisis of the privatised carceral state, in which 'cages' have not only become 'catchall solutions to social problems' (Gilmore, 2007, p. 2), but now extend far beyond the prison into unexpected everyday spaces (Moran et al., 2018).

The glowing 'moral' identity around doing good that the charity shop holds (Dean 2020), in spite of the relationship with criminality we show, stems from its demonstrable charitable purpose. Questioning this moral identity requires us to consider how charity in general is not in fact good or neutral, but is a site of 'complex power relations' (Dean, 2024, p. 12) that can at times legitimate or exacerbate inequalities. We show a range of 'illegitimate' acts taking place in charity shops, yet that the boundary around what counts as such is fluid. Charity shop operations further marginalise and stigmatise, in particular, acts and people who deviate from shared ideas of who is legitimate, reinforced by crime media discourses of 'bad' criminals and 'good' charity shops. Thus, the power the charity shop holds as a site of everyday criminalisation and carceral control, and the wrong and harm it can do, are all obscured.

It is our contention that this obscuring is why few scholars have examined crime in charity shops or charity retail around the world. In our ethnographic findings, criminal activity was commonplace but regarded as mostly mundane and petty. It was the policing, judging and guarding of such activity that was tangible and risky, built into the roles of unpaid staff members as an everyday part of the job (see also Fitton, 2022a, 2024). While some crimes were

waved away as funny or absurd, other people are exempt from humour in relation to their perceived deviance. Rather, their (perceived) crimes are serious; they are surveilled and blamed from the moment they enter the charity shop space. Those who salvage from the bags and bins outside the shops, who originate from historically excluded communities, or who violate the orders of their work order agreements, are criminalised and ostracised in ways that the general population are not.

We have highlighted, in particular, the role of staff members in criminalisation in the charity shop with good reason, obliged to do the 'dirty work' of policing, judging and (prison)guarding. These people are often low-paid or unpaid, yet they are given responsibility for demarcating the criminal from the non-criminal in circumstances that range from mundane to terrifying. The tendency to deal with these situations with salaciousness, over-exaggeration, hubris, and wise-cracking comedy is mirrored in the crime reporting in the media analysis. Whilst a full analysis of the affective impacts of charity shop criminality is beyond the scope of this paper, these responses suggest a keenness to inject humanity and sociability into the jarring 'carceral atmosphere' (Turner et al., 2022) that feels so out of place in a charity shop. Arguably, this is exacerbated by the tendency for charity shop discourse to present these spaces as inherently good and moral, when their reality is more transgressive, marginal and mired in liminality.

Charity shops still serve as spaces of renewal, restoration, repair and redemption. They can be places where people rebuild their sense of personal and collective meaning. For some, charity shop work offers 'a means of regaining meaning, structure and belonging' (Flores, 2014, p. 384; Maddrell, 2017) in themselves and in the social world. Yet while this notion of 'repair' might seem to chime with discourses of reparative or restorative justice, criminalisation puts all relationships in these spaces, and any reparative function, under stress. As critical carceral scholarship argues, the liminality or 'porosity' of carceral space suffused into charity shops 'reconfigures rather than ends forms of control over the social and individual body' (Deleuze, 1992, in Richardson and Thieme, 2018, p. 7). Further, the pressure and questions raised by this reconfiguring of control are not restricted to charity retail, but extend to the many other everyday spaces increasingly made responsible for people's welfare – and punishment. The tensions outlined in this paper call for further investigation of how crime and carceral power take shape in these everyday spaces, and particularly within spaces such as charity shops that are sites of unspoken, moral symbolic power. In an intensifying carceral state (Moran and Schliehe, 2017), and as we consider 'abolitionist futures' (Aiken and Silverman, 2021), our research therefore invites broader questions about how crime is imagined, policed, judged and guarded across everyday life.

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## Notes

1. There are no national statistics for carceral workers in charity retail, but the practice continues, such as through hospice charity Sue Ryder's Prison Volunteer Programme (Sue Ryder, 2023), for example, or court-ordered community service as part of Community Rehabilitation Companies, privatised consortia contracted to run probation services from 2014 to 2019, since largely condemned as a failure (Carr and Robinson, 2021).
2. The content analysis of charity shop news was co-led by Dr Kerry Moore and conducted with the help of two undergraduate research assistants, Mia Dutch and Megan Lewis, through the Cardiff University summer internship programme.
3. In Scotland alone, for example, the number of people forced back into prison for breaching their licence conditions exploded by more than 1000% over 10 years (Heard, 2015, p. 5).

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