

## **Why imprisoning repeat shoplifters rarely breaks the cycle of offending – and what may work better**

The UK government is taking a harsher approach to tackle criminal activity which is blighting local neighbourhoods. And recently, government ministers have been talking tough about repeat shoplifting, including the possibility of introducing new laws which would see prolific shoplifters imprisoned. This has all been against a backdrop of concern about a rise in shoplifting across the UK.

But there are some serious practical problems with any such measures and questions remain over whether such a policy could break the cycle of offending. Meanwhile, there is an innovative approach to this issue which may be a better way of dealing with crimes such as shoplifting called “integrated offender management” (IOM).

Rolled out over the past few years, IOM is a novel criminal justice approach that is designed to break the cycle of re-offending. It is operated by 39 out of 43 police forces in England and Wales.

IOM involves police officers working closely with prison and probation services and criminal justice intervention teams. These are support staff who provide both clinical and therapeutic interventions for drug users involved in the criminal justice system. It is all in an effort to change or control the criminal activities of prolific offenders.

IOM was designed to address the underlying causes of offending. By the end of 2020, it was central to the government’s neighbourhood crime strategy. In a report issued that year, former minister for crime and policing Kit Malthouse and former minister for prisons and probation, Luzy Frazer, said:

“We need a new approach – one with the tools to come down with full force on those responsible, but which also encourages rehabilitation and supports offenders to overcome the complex problems that we know can fuel this type of behaviour, such as substance misuse, poor mental health and issues with housing or employment.”

Any proposals which would see prison sentences for repeat shoplifters could risk undoing any positive progress made under IOM.

### **The problem with prison**

The UK’s prison estate is running out of capacity for adult males. In November 2022, the Ministry of Justice announced emergency measures that would see some offenders who would ordinarily be imprisoned (typically remand prisoners) housed in police cells. Figures released in August 2023 show a total of just 980 available prison places.

The government has already stated that more prisons need to be built. But any criminal justice initiative that requires new prisons will take a long time to deliver. This is because, on average, new prisons take two to three years to build and open. Also, 70% of shoplifting is estimated to be carried out by people funding an addiction to class A drugs – typically heroin and crack

cocaine. These people arrive in prison as addicts and likely leave as addicts and so will continue shoplifting. Custody is not a panacea for prolific shoplifting and is unlikely to break the cycle of offending.

### **Integrated offender management**

IOM work is done through a mix of rehabilitative and restrictive or enforcement-orientated interventions. Here, the police take a “carrot and stick” approach to the management of offenders. Plain-clothed officers, deployed as police offender managers, gather intelligence and monitor people for signs of re-offending. Simultaneously, these officers attempt to draw offenders away from crime by working alongside the other agencies, facilitating access to drug services, education, employment and transitions into stable housing arrangements. This is the “carrot” approach. Where there is evidence that a person is failing to comply with licence conditions, or engage with IOM positively, traditional catch-and-convict policing methods are used by uniformed patrol officers. This is the “stick” approach. Prolific shoplifters are the type of offenders IOM schemes should be engaging with.

My own research has focused on how police officers contribute to IOM schemes. I have also spoken with offenders who were engaged with IOM in the community. A number said that, while it was initially challenging to do so, in time they were able to form working relationships with police officers. And, significantly, because of this, IOM had had a positive impact on their lives. This was particularly the case when it came to IOM helping them enter employment and tackle any drug-related issues they were experiencing. Broadly, IOM seemed to have a strong motivational influence and a positive impact on those who wanted to leave their criminal lifestyle behind.

But IOM can only fully operate when people are able to access the relevant support services in the community. People may be able to get very limited employment and substance misuse help when in prison, but IOM offers a much deeper and enduring level of support.

The prospect of removing sentencing discretion for prolific shoplifters from magistrates and judges and introducing mandatory jail sentences, would risk disrupting a significant criminal justice programme. IOM may be a better and more cost-effective way to deal with the pressing issue of repeated shoplifting.