

Dear Retail Employees, You Deserve Better.

I thought it strange when a woman came into the store with one of our shopping bags already hanging loosely from the crook of her arm. But I assumed that she had been here earlier that day, accidentally took the bag with her, and was now here to return it. It was a Friday night around seven o'clock, and there were no other customers at the time—just me and my manager. I approached the woman with the typical customer-appeasing smile and perk in my tone,

“Hello ma'am, how are you doing today? Is there anything I can help you look for?”

She said nothing and kept her head down as she moved past me and straight to the wall where more of our expensive merchandise was. I cautiously kept my distance as she opened the shopping bag wide and raked shelves of product into it. Though this wasn't the first time I had witnessed shoplifting, I still felt shocked when I realized what she was doing. I looked back at my manager for her reaction and found her pulling out a tablet to start a loss report.

We both tried speaking with the woman, asking her if she needed help or wanted us to put her ridiculously full bags behind the counter to ease her 'shopping experience.' She continued to ignore us, filling bag after bag and leaving a plethora of holes in the walls of merchandise as we stood by. I was honestly dismayed that she had the audacity to steal right in front of us. Then, without a word, she was out the door. I felt shaken, uneasy beyond belief, and couldn't quite put my finger on why. She wasn't violent. She didn't threaten anyone. But the reason soon dawned on me—she most certainly could have.

The following week, I was working another night shift, this time on a Saturday. I was behind the register, completing online orders, when I heard the familiar jingle of the door open around eight o'clock. I felt that same unease creeping up, and I didn't even make it out from behind the register when I saw that it was the same woman from the previous week. I stayed right where I was as she made her rounds in less than two minutes—another +\$1,000 worth of product gone.

In both instances, I felt conflicted. On one hand, I was terrified to confront her. I didn't know this woman, why she was stealing, or how far she was willing to go. But in the same breath, I was furious. I wanted to tell her that what she was doing was immoral; even worse, she was putting employees and customers in an unnecessarily traumatic situation. I wanted to stop her, but I couldn't. Our company's policies—which seek to 'protect' employees from potential violence by asking them not to engage with the criminal(s)—don't allow it. And yes, they shouldn't because an employee's safety should be prioritized above all else. But these policies also continuously fail to prevent retail theft and potential violence from retail criminals. Instead, they perpetuate the cycle of putting employees in dangerous situations and then asking them to come back the next day with no promises of a safer future.

Shoplifting, typically minor theft for personal reasons, and Organized Retail Crime (ORC), large-scale theft of merchandise by criminal groups for financial gain, are an increasingly prevalent issue in retail. The National Retail Federation (NRF) [reports](#) that inventory loss, otherwise known as shrink, has reached \$112.1 billion in 2022 compared to \$93.9 billion in 2021. In addition to the rise of retail crime, 88% of [retailers note](#) an increased aggressiveness in retail criminals. To better understand how retail companies are protecting their employees from retail violence, I read through multiple asset protections procedures for different major retail stores. One component is fairly consistent when telling employees how to handle retail criminals: stay out of their way.

This policy minimizes the possibility of employees being assaulted by retail criminals, which in some cases has proved effective; however, this policy doesn't always guarantee safety, as evidenced by [the death of Gary Rossar](#). Rossar, an 83-year-old worker at Home Depot, asked a "customer" (a shoplifter) to show him his receipt as he was walking out with merchandise. The criminal pushed Rossar to the concrete floor and caused fatal injuries.

Rossar was just doing his job.

On the other hand, some employees, like [Donna Hansbrough](#), ignore their company's intervention policies. Hansbrough, who had worked at Lowes for 13 years, chased after three thieves and attempted to take back the stolen merchandise when she was struck three times in the face.

Hansbrough defends her decision by saying, "I just got tired of seeing things get out the door. I just, I lost it. I basically lost all the training, everything they tell you to do. I just, I just lost it."

Lowes fired her for violating their store's policy and engaging with the criminals, and this decision created an uproar. Individuals couldn't comprehend how Lowes could fire her after all that she had done for the company and so shortly after this backlash began, Lowes reinstated her.

Similarly, two Lululemon workers [were fired](#) for calling the police after chasing two retail criminals out of their store. When Lululemon stated that the workers were fired for engaging with the criminals, not for calling the police, it sparked inquiry in the retail community as to what constitutes 'intervention' as the workers technically didn't physically engage with the criminals. The workers, unlike Hansbrough, were never reinstated.

Employees should not have to choose between standing by, afraid, as their stores are torn apart or intervening to protect their store and fellow employees, but then agonizing over whether they will lose their occupation or be harmed or even killed. It can become overwhelmingly difficult for retail employees to continue with their jobs when they report [feeling](#) traumatized and demoralized by the consistent shoplifting—I can attest to similar feelings. After that woman left

our store, I felt in a way violated and even more angry knowing that because she broke the law and we couldn't stop her, we would have to stay late to clean up a mess that we didn't create. Even more frustrating was the knowledge that because we weren't allowed to do anything, she would just keep coming back to a store she knows cannot retaliate.

Currently, [actions are being taken](#) by State lawmakers and retail employees with the Retail Workers Protection Act, which moves to reclassify assaulting a retail worker as a Class D Felony charge instead of the minor charge of a Class A misdemeanor. In addition, retail stores are taking measures to prevent theft by locking expensive items away and enlisting asset protection personnel in the store. But beyond just the ascertainment of physical safety for employees, there needs to be equal measures taken for the state of employees' mental health. As evidenced above by mine and others' experiences, shoplifting incidents cause immense emotional strain for the employee and keep employees scared to return the next day and days after.

I'm somewhat comforted by these efforts to take retail theft more seriously but cautious about their effectiveness. I understand the complexity of this issue and that there isn't a simple solution to preventing retail theft and maintaining workers' safety. However, I remain hopeful that these precautions will at least improve upon the ineffective asset protection policies, and soon, employees will be able to simply come to work.