



2011

Multiple Offender Crimes

**Preparing for and Understanding
the Impact of Their Tactics**

www.nrf.com



About the White Paper

The National Retail Federation's (NRF) multiple offender crime survey was created to get a better understanding of multiple offender crime incidents and how they affect retailers, shopping centers and malls nationwide. Responses represent incident history from over 100 senior retail executives representing department/large box stores, discount, drug, grocery and specialty retailers comprise the data of the survey.

About the National Retail Federation

As the world's largest retail trade association and the voice of retail worldwide, NRF's global membership includes retailers of all sizes, formats and channels of distribution as well as chain restaurants and industry partners from the United States and more than 45 countries abroad. In the U.S., NRF represents an industry that includes more than 3.6 million establishments and which directly and indirectly accounts for 42 million jobs – one in four U.S. jobs. The total U.S. GDP impact of retail is \$2.5 trillion annually, and retail is a daily barometer of the health of the nation's economy. www.nrf.com

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Multiple Offender Crimes

OVERVIEW

Based on recent incidents and resulting media coverage, retailers and mall management companies have raised concerns about multiple offender crime incidents, some involving “flash mob” tactics to organize. Multiple offender crime incidents involve groups or gangs, often teenagers, swarming a store and overwhelming store employees with their numbers and speed.

In July 2011, NRF polled retailers around the country to gauge the impact of multiple offender crimes. Over three-quarters (79%) of retailers report being a victim of a multiple offender crime in the past 12 months, some of these incidents (10%) involving flash mob tactics.

Many retailers experience multiple offender crimes and have existing response protocols in place to handle these situations when they occur. To assist retailers in preparing for and responding to these incidents, NRF reached out to more than 100 retail companies to better understand their current protocols and compile guidelines for businesses when handling multiple offender crimes.

UNDERSTANDING MULTIPLE OFFENDER CRIMES

Traditionally, these multiple offender crime groups engage in grab-and-run scenarios where offenders quickly enter stores and target specific merchandise – such as high-end handbags, jewelry and designer clothing – then flee, sometimes to a waiting vehicle or, as was the case in several high profile incidents, using mass transit. These incidents are referred to by media, law enforcement and retailers as robbery, burglary, grab-and-runs, flash mobs, flash mob thefts, flash robs or swarming. While there are distinct differences in how the groups organize, multiple offender crimes may involve serious criminal behavior including assault, theft and vandalism.

In addition to the financial losses and safety concerns, multiple offender crimes disrupt the normal flow of business for retailers and shopping centers and create significant safety concerns.

FLASH MOBS VS. MULTIPLE OFFENDER CRIMES

In July 2011, NRF polled retailers around the country to gauge the impact of multiple offender crimes. Ten percent of the 106 companies polled reported being victimized by multiple offender criminals who used flash mob tactics in the past 12 months. Half of these companies have experienced two to five incidents in the same period.

Flash mobs take on many different meanings. Flash mobs are defined as groups of people who assemble suddenly in a public place, perform an unusual and sometimes seemingly pointless act for a brief time, then disperse. Flash mobs are organized via telecommunications, social media, or viral email and often gather for the purposes of entertainment or satire. There are reports of flash mobs singing songs in food courts, conducting street performances, and engaging in other light-hearted acts. Many of these random “performances” are innocent enough and get a good laugh making their way around YouTube. While the comedic/non-criminal incidents can be innocent enough to be humorous, multiple offender crimes are nothing to joke about.

There are instances where multiple offender crime groups organize using social media, texting and viral emails, then commit crimes such as theft, vandalism, assault and battery. And retailers are raising red flags about criminal flash mobs, which are wreaking havoc on their business, causing concerns about the safety of their customers and employees, and directly impacting their bottom line.

Multiple offender crimes tend to involve groups or gangs of juveniles who already know each other, which does not earn them the term ‘flash mob’. But regardless of how these groups organize, their menacing activities can be classified as multiple offender crimes as it effectively describes the criminal nature of these incidents.

RETAIL LOSSES

Retailers have raised specific concerns about multiple offender crime incidents as they directly impact the safety of customers and employees as well as the security of their facility. Multiple offender crimes can also cause retailers significant losses: ten offenders each taking \$100 of merchandise can result in over \$1000 of loss in just a few minutes. Since these offenders target highly desirable merchandise placed toward the front of the store, companies are now faced with lost sales opportunities and labor costs to re-merchandise the area.

According to NRF's survey of retailers, juvenile offenders were involved in 83 percent of the events and social media or texting was known to be the communication vehicle in 42 percent of the apprehended cases. The affected retailer or responding police department made apprehensions in 50 percent of the incidents. In addition to loss of merchandise, there were some injuries to store associates reported.

Financial losses are just one aspect; of greater importance are safety concerns. Both the multiple offender crimes and flash mobs can involve large congregations of people. These types of incidents disrupt the flow of business, distract associates and create safety issues. Additionally, multiple offender crime incidents can be frightening and intimidating to honest customers. A frenzied group of teens snatching merchandise and running through store aisles creates panic and potential safety issues for customers and store employees. Customers plan for productive (and leisurely) shopping experiences, while employees plan for and hope to have busy (and profitable) stores and shopping centers. The following incidents show how these issues escalate to serious crimes in a short period of time.

RECENT INCIDENTS

September 2010 – St. Paul, MN – [BP Convenience Store](#): Approximately 20 juveniles shoplifted at a BP convenience store on Lexington Parkway and a cashier was punched in the face several times. Police used surveillance video from the store to charge several teenagers with offenses from first-degree aggravated robbery to third-degree riot and theft.

February 22, 2011 – St. Paul, MN – [Holiday Gas Station](#): About 30 to 40 young people dashed into a Holiday Gas Station on St. Paul's West Side, snatched up dozens of juice bottles, candy, chips and other junk food, then took off without paying. Minutes later, two men were shot less than a mile away. According to police, 20 juveniles were ticketed for curfew violations.

March 4, 2011 – Chicago, IL – [North Face and Filene's Basement](#): At Filene's, teens ran onto the sales floor, grabbed items, then ran out. At North Face, they entered screaming and yelling, knocking over displays and grabbing clothes worth close to \$3,000. Suspects are teens 13-17 years old.

April 25, 2011 – Washington, DC – [G-Star Raw](#): About 20 teenagers went into G-Star Raw store in the popular Dupont Circle neighborhood. The group leisurely went through clothing, as if they were shopping for their size before running out of the store with merchandise. In the short time they were in the store, the teenagers stole \$20,000 worth of clothing.

June 9, 2011 – Chicago, IL – [Retail and Residential Neighborhood](#): Four men were assaulted Saturday night within minutes of each other by large groups of youths in separate attacks in the Streeterville area, raising fears of flash mobs. The police department insisted they will hunt down every one of the thugs responsible for five weekend robberies in Streeterville.

June 23, 2011 – Philadelphia, PA – [Sears](#): According to police, 40 participants stormed a Sears store stealing thousands of dollars in sneakers, socks, watches and other items. Police apprehended 15 juveniles and one adult who were cited for retail theft and conspiracy.

July 6, 2011 – Philadelphia, PA – [United Artists Theater \(Retail Neighborhood\)](#): Police believe they averted an incident where 25 groups were expected to participate in a flash mob.

July 6, 2011 – Milwaukee – [BP Store](#): Several people rushed a BP Store stealing snacks and candy. One person was punched in the mouth.

July 25, 2011 – Washington, DC – [Georgetown Store](#): A retail specialty store was targeted by a group of four (two men and two women) criminal offenders. While distracting store associates, offenders stole multiple items and fled the store quickly.

July 28, 2011 – Los Angeles – [Jewelry Store](#): Three young men conducted a smash-and-grab in Los Angeles. They pepper-sprayed the owner, smashed display cases, and stole more than \$7,000 in costume jewelry. The case is believed to be gang related.

CONCLUSION

Direct feedback from retailers and law enforcement indicates that multiple offender crimes occur for many reasons. Retailers can educate their associates about to handle these types of situations if they occur.

Retailers are encouraged to report these incidents or attempts to mall security (when available) and law enforcement. By documenting the event, law enforcement and retail loss prevention executives can communicate and coordinate with other groups to prevent and respond to future incidents.

Some would argue these are modern day teen pranks, but in the case of multiple offender crime activity, they are far from it. A gang of suspects conspiring to commit a crime inside the store, regardless of age, should be held fully accountable under the law for their criminal behavior. Given the premeditation, prosecutors should consider felony charges for the more serious offenders.

For more information on Crowd Management, refer to

NRF's Crowd Management Protocols:

www.nrf.com/crowdmanagement

SUGGESTED GUIDELINES & SAMPLE RESPONSE PROTOCOLS

The safety of customers and employees should guide any actions taken during the incident. The key function that associates should perform when a multiple offender crime is occurring is to **Observe and Report**.

Below is a checklist of items to consider incorporating into your plan. The following protocols for multiple offender crimes were created for retailers to consider when enhancing their existing theft, civil disturbance, crowd management, workplace violence and/or safety policies. In addition, retailers should reaffirm or update adherence to their corporate policies on Media Relations, and the release of video evidence.

The National Retail Federation solicited information from dozens of leading retailers and law enforcement experts about multiple offender crimes. While the response protocols vary by company, the items below were consistent between all parties.

PREVENTION

- The safety of customers and employees should guide any actions taken during the incident.
- Retailers and law enforcement should monitor social networks and websites for indications of a planned event and then take appropriate action.
- As with other crimes, retailers, mall security and law enforcement agencies should continue to share intelligence about anticipated incidents.
- Associates should report to store management or Loss Prevention whenever they see unusually large gatherings of people inside or directly outside the stores.

RESPONSE

- If safe to do so, use customer service techniques to discourage crime activity.
- Consider options for re-positioning associates in the store:
 - Attempt to discourage the thefts by re-positioning associates near key areas of the store and high-value merchandise.
 - Instruct employees and customers to retreat into a secure part of the store.
- To prevent the offenders from injuring associates, customers or causing additional damage to the store, stores should follow the prevention and apprehension guidelines issued by the corporate office.
- Observe & Report
 - During the incident take mental note of each offender, including their physical description and clothing. Immediately following the incident, document your observations.
 - Additionally, take a mental note of any property stolen, damaged or other pertinent information about company loss. Immediately following the incident, document your observations.
 - Note and preserve any areas touched by offenders in order to facilitate the collection of evidence
 - Any video of the event can assist in the documentation process and should be readily available for law enforcement officials (following company protocols for release).
 - Based on applicable corporate policy, mall guidelines and local law enforcement preferences, store personnel should notify the appropriate parties.
- Apprehensions should only be facilitated by authorized personnel and only when safe to do so, according to applicable corporate policy and state laws.



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