



# Paraglide

## **Shoplifting increase baffles Bragg**

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Shoplifting is on the rise on Fort Bragg with the Army and Air Force Exchange Service showing a 10-percent increase in shoplifting this year.

Nationally, shoplifting costs retailers an estimated \$10 billion annually. These losses are in turn charged back to consumers in the form of higher prices.

“Last year AAFES did \$6.3 billion in sales and lost about \$15 million from shoplifting incidents,” explained Richard Koloski, AAFES loss prevention manager. “Overall, shoplifting is second to employee theft, but it is on the rise and closing the gap.”

In 2001, the average shoplifter stole \$128 per incident, according to a University of Florida study. That number increased in 2002 to \$195.73 per incident. Koloski attributed that increase to the number of people who are taking high-dollar items from the store. That is particularly true on Fort Bragg, where high-dollar items are more accessible.

“AAFES tries to be more customer friendly than many stores,” said Koloski. “While stores downtown keep the high-dollar pilferable merchandise like Playstation games and DVDs under lock and key, AAFES tries to maintain a friendlier environment and offers those items in a self-serve format.”

Through September of this year, AAFES security officers have reported 324 incidents of shoplifting. Koloski said that number is largely comprised of military dependents and children. “It seems that at age 12 we see more shoplifters,” said Koloski. “At that age, a lot of parents think their children are trustworthy enough to leave them alone by themselves in the store - and that’s when the shoplifting occurs.”

Koloski said that teens 12 to 17 years of age make up the biggest category of shoplifters, with active-duty soldiers and retirees rounding out the top three.

“Military dependents are the number one culprits, however we catch a lot of active-duty soldiers shoplifting tobacco products,” he said. “The funny thing is that most of the people have the money to pay for the items they take, so for many of them it’s just impulse and opportunity.”

He said that the primary targets for shoplifters in the two post exchange stores are clothing, music, video games, cosmetics, fragrances and jewelry. At the Class Six and shoppettes, tobacco and alcohol are the biggest draws. He said the stores also often fall prey to “bandits.”

“We get hit by some unauthorized users who come strictly to steal tobacco and liquor,” he said.

In an effort to combat the thievery, security has been stepped up at all the stores on post. At the North Post and South Post Exchange security cameras are in place and are monitored on a constant basis. There are also numerous plainclothes detectives who walk the sales floor. “It could be the elderly lady down the aisle from you or the young guy looking at music beside you,” said Koloski. “You never know where they are. A lot of people shoplift out of impulse because they think nobody’s looking. Last year, 10,000 people in AAFES stores thought nobody was looking, they were wrong. Somebody is always looking.”

In addition to cameras and live surveillance, the stores also employ electronic article surveillance - electronic tags attached to clothing and high-dollar pilferable merchandise throughout the store.

“Our number one deterrent is our associates. We train them to recognize suspicious behavior and to call security when they see it,” he said. “Most of all, we teach them to greet people who are acting suspicious. More times than not, if they are there to steal and someone addresses them, they feel like they are under the microscope, and they leave the store. Not only is this a deterrent to theft it also enhances our customers’ perception of service in the store.”

In addition to cameras and EAS, AAFES monitors refund activity worldwide with the Automated Refund Fraud Indicator System. With the ARFIS system, a customer’s identification can be pulled up worldwide. A customer’s refund activity can be tracked to identify potential theft problems.

Also in an effort to further reduce shoplifting AAFES has changed its cash refund policy. As of Oct. 21 cash refunds are no longer authorized without receipt or proof of purchase. Customers are issued a store gift card which can be redeemed at their next purchase.

A new Web-based program, Fraud Watch, allows security personnel to go into the cash register system to verify if a customer without a receipt actually made a purchase on the day in question.

Koloski believes that all of these tools have allowed Fort Bragg personnel to become better at catching and preventing shoplifting on post. “We have definitely put a greater emphasis on preventing and detecting shoplifting,” said Koloski.

“What the shoplifters don’t understand is that when you steal from the post exchange you are really stealing from yourself,” he said. “The AAFES mission is two fold - to provide services to uniformed military personnel throughout the world and generate enhanced earnings to support the Morale, Welfare and Recreation programs on post. Fifty percent of AAFES earnings go back to the military. Shoplifting losses are a direct hit on the dividend.

“We believe there is only a small number of people who are dishonest but left unchecked, they can do significant damage.”

If a person is caught shoplifting at one of the AAFES stores, there are many repercussions. Military Police are called to the store in all incidents. From there, several things can happen. If the person is on active-duty, they are taken to the MP station and charged and released to the custody of their unit. The unit commander, working in conjunction with the Judge Advocate General’s office determines the nature of the punishment. Officials with the XVIII Airborne Corps Judge Advocate General’s Office said that each case is assessed on a case by case basis. The resulting punishment can vary from a finding of no punishment to a court martial.

If the suspect is a military dependent or a retiree the MPs confiscate the individuals identification card and issue them a letter revoking their exchange privileges, as well as a citation to appear in the federal magistrates court.

According to investigators with the 16th Military Police Brigade, Army Regulation 60-10 requires a one-year mandatory suspension of privileges for all facilities for anyone who is caught shoplifting. If they go to a facility during that period, they are then charged with trespassing.

Additionally, Federal law, Title 31 U.S. Code Section 3701 authorizes AAFES to recover actual and administrative costs related to shoplifting. This Civil Recovery Program carries an automatic \$200 civil penalty.

Koloski explained that additional monetary charges may be assessed depending on whether or not the item can be recovered or can be resold. Using a video game as an example, Koloski explained that while the store may be able to recover the item if it has been opened, they have to mark it down. In that case, the individual would be charged the \$200 fine plus the reduced resale value of the item. If the item cannot be resold, the individual is responsible for the full face value of the item.

“What we’re finding is that a lot of parents, whose children we catch, don’t think they should be responsible for the Civil Recovery because they were not with their child,” said Koloski. “Under the statute the parent is responsible for the actions their child while they are in our stores, so we issue the demand against the parent. While these fines help AAFES offset the cost of providing cameras and security personnel in the stores, the long term or more specific goal is to encourage parents to pay more attention and to supervise

their children while they are in the stores, because that's what will reduce the number of shoplifting incidents.”