

# A Brief Cognitive-Behavioral Intervention For Shoplifters: Preliminary Outcomes

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Shoplifting is a pervasive and costly crime. In 2004, the U. S. Department of Commerce estimated that 23 million shoplifters are in America—approximately eight percent of the population. Shoplifters are believed to steal an average of \$25 million in goods each day. Official Department of Commerce figures relate that 15 percent of the retail cost of all goods in America is directly due to product loss from shoplifting.

With shoplifting a pervasive and expensive crime, criminal justice authorities are faced with approximately 2 million shoplifting arrests each year. While over half of these arrests are perpetrated by repeat offenders, the remainder is genuine “first offenders” (arrested for the first time). Because of the strain on the justice system, shoplifters are usually placed on simple diversion programs typically completed by remaining arrest-free during an unsupervised probation period. Restitution is often a component utilized in the diversion program. However, few probation authorities have any specialized programming for shoplifters. It is a situation many judicial and probation officials would like to address—but the overburdened criminal justice system’s limited resources play a decisive role in determining the official response to shoplifting. The private sector, offering specialized treatment and supervision services not always available to probation departments, can be utilized for the provision of such services. This paper reports on the preliminary outcome of a brief, specialized shoplifting program based on cognitive-behavioral principles.

## Program Design

In response to a Nashville, Tennessee judicial request, a 6-module cognitive behavioral workbook was developed to directly confront the problems unique to shoplifting. The program was specifically designed for two possible types of implementation: 1) It could be completed on a weekend in two four-hour blocks, or 2) The program could be implemented in a series of six, one-to-two-hour groups. The program was designed to address the specific “criminal thinking” issues related to shoplifting as well as instill an understanding in the offenders about why the crime is more serious than they believe.

The workbook is based on cognitive-behavioral principles and relapse prevention methods. Clients identify risky situations and moods, cognitive interpretations, and develop appropriate behavioral responses. Since the workbook was developed by the first author of Moral Reconnection Therapy (MRT®) materials, the moral reasoning underlying shoplifting was addressed.

**Shoplifter Types.** While the program was primarily developed for genuine first offenders, one important research finding regarding shoplifters merits discussion. In general,

shoplifters are comprised of two distinct types. One type, termed by the literature as the *Typical Shoplifter*, is widely believed to comprise the majority of first offenders. When initially asked, “Why did you steal?” the typical shoplifter usually replies, “I don’t know.” When pressed for a deeper answer, they will admit that they wanted the item they stole, used it, and did not want to pay for it. In brief, they wanted *something for nothing*. Because of this consistent finding in the “typical” shoplifter, *Something For Nothing* was chosen as the title and focus of the workbook (Little, 2004).

Typical shoplifters do not usually sell the items they steal, often blame lack of money or peer pressure, and often derive a brief but intense, drug-like pleasure from the experience as they repeat the behavior. Typical shoplifters may steal in unison with a peer group or alone, in many ways similar to drug usage. While some typical shoplifters express genuine remorse for the behavior, an underlying neurochemistry is engaged that leads to a repeating pattern of assessing the risks of a potential shoplifting situation, stealing, a resultant high occurring, followed by a mental state similar to stimulant abuse depression (with remorse). The addictive-like quality that develops can lead to more shoplifting as the high is experienced over and over. Some research concludes that, as the same pleasure-producing neurochemical systems (i.e., dopamine) is engaged that is present in stimulant use, the shoplifter is driven to the same risky situations where the high was experienced. It should be noted that few (if any) shoplifters who are assigned to such programs are kleptomaniacs. Kleptomaniacs should be identified by assessments and referred to appropriate mental health professionals for specialized treatment.

The second type of shoplifter is usually referred to as the *Professional Shoplifter*. The professional shoplifter is essentially living a criminal lifestyle, stealing items they can sell or hope to “return” to stores for cash refunds. These individuals will usually show an extensive arrest record and, if their arrest record is carefully scrutinized, there may be numerous past instances where they were treated by the criminal justice system as first offenders. They often steal expensive items and vast quantities of the same items for easy resale. Drug abuse, crime, and addictive lifestyles are prevalent in this group. The present program was not designed to impact the professional shoplifter. However, in all settings where shoplifters will potentially be treated, it is highly likely that a mixture of both types will be present. This paper reports on the results of the program utilizing three brief assessment instruments utilized in a pre- and posttest approach.

## Program Implementation—Client Characteristics

In late 2004, Behavioral Treatment Providers, a Nashville, Tennessee private probation services provider, was requested by a local court to provide the newly developed shoplifting program on a weekend day to assess the utility of the program. The court's major objective was that the large majority of the assigned offenders be able to complete the program in a single day. There was no plan to assess recidivism on program participants.

The program was subsequently conducted with 38 offenders assigned by the court. Over half (53 percent) of the participants were age 18 with a range of 18 to 60 years. The mean age was 21 years. The majority of participants were female (58 percent) with African-Americans comprising 65 percent of the total.

## Tests Employed

Three pretests were administered to program participants at the time of their acceptance into the program and immediately after program completion. The tests were coded so that individual details were not discernable following research protocols ensuring client confidentiality and agreement to participate in the research. The tests were developed for use in educational settings especially for minority populations. The first test was the *Modified Rosenberg Self-Esteem Inventory (MRSE)*, a ten-item test where subjects are asked to rate each item on a scale of 0 to 3. The items ask specific questions about worthiness, feelings of failure, personal ability, self-satisfaction, and respect. Scores range from 0 to 30 with higher scores related to higher levels of self-esteem (Dahlberg, Toal, & Behrens, 1998). It was hypothesized that scores on the MRSE would increase from pre- to posttest.

The second test was the *Fatalism Scale* (Dahlberg, et. al., 1998). The test is a 5-item questionnaire where clients indicate on a Likert scale the degree to which each statement applies to them. Scores range from five (less fatalistic view) to 20 (high fatalism). It was hypothesized that scores on the Fatalism Scale would decrease from pre- to posttest.

The final test was the *Control—Individual Protective Factors Index (CIPFX)* (Dahlberg, et. al., 1998). The test measures self-efficacy and self-control. The 13-item test addresses self-determination, decision-making, anger, and impulsivity. Scores range from 13 (low sense of self-control) to 52 (high sense of self-control). It was hypothesized that scores on the CIPFX would increase from pre- to posttest.

## Results

All 38 participants completed the program successfully during the one-day implementation. This issue was the major concern of the courts. All participants completed pretests, however, one to four participants chose to not complete various posttests. A series of repeated measures *t*-tests were completed on pre- and posttest scores from the three tests with the statistical analyses all one-tailed according to hypothesized changes.

Means on the *Modified Rosenberg Self-Esteem Inventory (MRSE)* were 22.4 for the pretest as compared to 23.1 for the posttest. The increase in self-esteem was in the desired direction and the resulting *t*-test ( $t_{33} = -1.33$ ;  $p = .096$ ) approached statistical significance. Internal reliability in the test was shown with the resulting correlation highly significant ( $r_{33} = .809$ ;  $p = .000$ ).

The pretest mean on the *Fatalism Scale* was 11.17 as compared to 11.03 in the posttest. This finding was in the desired direction, but the resulting *t*-test was nonsignificant ( $t_{35} = 0.375$ ;  $p = .355$ ). The internal reliability of the brief, 5-item test was shown to be questionable from pre- to posttest with the reliability correlation insignificant ( $r_{35} = .02$ ;  $p = .904$ ).

Means on the *Control—Individual Protective Factors Index (CIPFX)* were 39.31 on the pretest as compared to 40.41 on the posttest—also in the predicted direction. The resulting *t*-test result approached significance ( $t_{32} = -1.35$ ;  $p = .094$ ). Internal reliability of the test was shown with the resulting correlation between pre- and posttests highly significant ( $r_{32} = .062$ ;  $p = .000$ ).

## Discussion

The implementation of the *Something for Nothing* shoplifting intervention program was completely successful based on the primary criteria of the court: fully 100 percent of participants successfully completed the entire workbook program in one day. The court's program completion issue was far more complex than it might seem. In the past, shoplifters who were placed on diversion or regular probation completed various probation requirements and performed community service. The vast majority of those assigned to probation and diversion were successful in completing the requirements. If a significant proportion of those attending the new program had failed to complete it, it would set in motion additional probation requirements that probation staff had to supervise. Since the probation staff were already overburdened, there was concern that a large number of shoplifters assigned to the program could be referred back to the court for failure to complete.

When the *Something For Nothing* program was devised, the primary issue was in addressing as many relevant issues as possible in the six-to-eight hours of group time. One important factor that was considered in the one-day implementation of the program was varying levels of reading ability in the assigned offenders. To ensure that everyone completed the program in the group setting, a simple procedure was devised. Each of the program's set of six modules was put onto cassette tape and played to the group sequentially. After each module was played, each individual completed the appropriate exercises and then presented his or her work with a group. This procedure worked well and maintained the needed pace to ensure that the entire program was completed.

In addition to the 100 percent program completion rate, all of the three pre- and posttest change scores were in the desired direction. Two tests, the *Rosenberg Self-Esteem Inventory* and the *Control—Individual Protective Factors Index* showed strong

internal reliability as well as desired changes approaching statistical significance. In brief, the results suggest that program participants have increased self-esteem as well as more perceived control over their future. Results from the *Fatalism Scale* were also in the desired direction, however, the reliability of the instrument is highly questionable.

In brief, the brief cognitive-behavioral shoplifting program achieved what it was intended to do. Participants completed a focused, structured series of exercises directly related to shoplifting attitudes and behaviors and test results show desired changes in the participants. However, the major objective of all such programs should be the reduction of recidivism of participants. Plans are underway to assess the recidivism of program participants and make comparisons to appropriate controls.

### References

Dahlberg, L. L., Toal, S. B., & Behrens, C. B. (Eds) (1998) *Measuring Violence-Related Attitudes, Beliefs, and Behaviors Among Youths: A Compendium of Assessment Tools*. Atlanta: Division of Violence Prevention, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Little, G. L. (2004) *Something For Nothing*. Memphis: Advanced Training Associates.

## Parole/Probation Program

### Shoplifting Program

## Something for Nothing

This program recently gained highly positive media attention in Nashville, TN where 70 shoplifters completed the program at one time in a private probation service. Participants' comments, which were unexpectedly insightful and remorseful, were reported in the news. *Something for Nothing* is an eight-hour, 17-page CBT workbook designed to be utilized in weekend or weekly groups with shoplifters—by Greg Little. Easy to implement, easy to follow workbook, shows virtually 100% completion rate with initial offenders in program. Also available in Spanish!

### *Something For Nothing*

English & Spanish versions: \$10 each.

Also Available: *Something For Nothing* Audiotape (English): \$50

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