

Presentation from CSNA (Convenience Stores and Newsagents Association)

to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Enterprise, Trade and Employment

Wednesday 13th December 2023.

“Shoplifting and how it is affecting retailers”

We welcome the opportunity afforded to us to present on this important topic, mindful that it is not only retailers that are affected by shoplifting, our employees and our customers are also victims of these practices.

Shoplifting is not a victimless crime, it can play a large part in reducing choice for communities, it can have a long term debilitating effect on the physical and mental wellbeing of owners, managers and retail staff.

Shoplifting , using the words that a Superintendent used at a recent briefing attended not just by myself , but others also present this morning, has reached PANDEMIC LEVELS. In some ways it was gratifying to hear this acceptance of the level of problem we are experiencing across the retail sector. The invitation from this Committee today further demonstrates that there is a growing problem that needs urgent attention.

The most worrying aspect of shoplifting today are the accompanying threats, the actual violence, the obscenities, the misogyny and the vile racist abuse levelled at owners and staff.

There is no doubt but that these abuses are increasing year on year and have, most certainly, become more pronounced Post Covid.

It is impossible to conceive a more worrying aspect of running a retail business for the majority of our 1500 members than to have to console someone that has been assaulted and abused just for doing their job. It may not be considered Parliamentary language in this House but I cannot think of a more appropriate term for these people than THUGS.

The Committee will most likely seek to learn today from the various representatives whether we consider there are needs for additional powers for An Garda Siochana or whether the Department of Justice should consider extra legislation to alleviate the terrors that we and our staff currently experience- the short answer is NO, we don't need more laws but we do need better service from our Gardai and those charged with responsibility for managing young offenders. We also certainly need our Court Service, and in particular our judicial system pay attention to the trauma occasioned against the victims of these crimes, and seek to ensure that restitution is not only awarded, but enforced.

A number of shopkeepers are aware that those involved in shoplifting "progress" to other (so called) more serious crimes and have commenced with a policy of demanding that all reports of

shoplifting carried out by juveniles is the subject of a mandatory referral by the investigating Garda to the Child Agency Tusla.

CSNA suggests that the Committee recommends that each theft or abusive behaviour carried out by youths be the subject of a Tusla referral.

We would also ask that the Committee would recommend the setting up, possibly on a Pilot basis of a “clearing house” or “sorting Office”, possibly run by local Chambers that would help retailers to report crime and share evidence with An Garda Siochana, ensuring a consistency of reports and supporting evidence such as CCTV.

It will come as no surprise to the members of the Committee to learn that Garda intelligence has pinpointed that the majority of offences are carried out by a relatively small number of criminals stealing on a regular basis. It is of great concern to our Association that attempts by Dublin City, RGDATA and CSNA to replicate the very successful approach used by Belfast retailers and PSNI were consistently shot down by AGS, even when the representatives from the Department of Justice saw merit in doing a similar scheme in the Republic. GDPR and different protections afforded to criminals leave a very bitter taste in our mouths. Balance needs to be restored, we are on the frontline.

There is only one reason that Anti-Social Behavior Orders ,ASBO’s are not commonplace throughout Ireland as an added deterrent , and that is the unwillingness of AGS to manage and oversee them. CSNA would ask the Committee to seek explanations from the Gardai as to the reasons that these Orders, used extensively in other jurisdictions, have not found favour here.

The final part of our suggestions to the Committee is to accept that our staff are proving an essential service and are fully deserving of

protection- a recent change was made to the sentencing available to judges where the victim was a Garda or First Responder; CSNA suggests that our vital and essential employees deserve similar accelerated protections.

It should not be necessary to have to debunk suggestions, some of which have surprisingly been made by members of the Oireachtas, though not, I wish to stress by anyone here this morning, that the rise in shoplifting is directly related to the increase in the Cost of Living. This is NOT true, it is not basic foodstuffs that are most frequently stolen. Shoplifting by gangs are not carried out by Robin Hood and his Merry Men; individuals secreting alcohol on their person or persons literally emptying whole display sections of expensive personal hygiene products or washing machine refills are not robbing to feed a starving family. Anyone suggesting that retailers get what they deserve due to their position in society is guilty of perpetrating a falsehood.

Finally, it is a great concern to our members to note a deterioration in service from the Gardai in recent years. We are frequently provided with “lack of resources and personnel “ as an explanation for slow, and in many cases no, responses to calls for assistance. One of the most annoying comments made by members of the force is “ why don’t you get your own security?”, or the more recent, and most certainly offensive comments has been “ take it up with your politicians / Drew Harris” !!

I am accompanied this morning by CSNA member Michael O Driscoll who owns a Spar convenience store in Dublin on Talbot Street, less than 100 yards from the Store Street Garda Station and

whose business is affected each day by the activities of anti social thugs. Michael is willing to provide you with an account of his frustrating interactions with those who are supposed to protect him, his staff and his customers.

Thank you for your attention. We are willing to expand upon these matters as you consider this most important topic.

Vincent Jennings

CEO CSNA.

December 2023.