

## Why bag theft is a common yet significant crime?

Home Office estimates of all the costs of total non-vehicle thefts in 2003-4 was £2bn<sup>1</sup>. But the precise value of property stolen from bags and purses is more difficult to work out. These crimes are often reported as ‘theft from the person’<sup>2</sup>, ‘thefts of personal property’<sup>3</sup>, ‘non-vehicle theft’<sup>4</sup> and ‘robbery’<sup>5</sup>.

The Home Office<sup>6</sup> estimated that in 2003-4 non-vehicle theft cost £7,282 and robbery cost £634, and in 2006/7<sup>7</sup> there were 574,000 thefts from the person and 1.14 million other thefts of personal property. The British Crime Survey estimated in 2004-5<sup>8</sup> that there were 492,000 incidents of snatch theft from the person and 92,000 other incidents of theft of personal property.

Bag theft constitutes an unknown, but significant proportion of these crimes; the costs to individuals, companies, the Criminal Justice System and taxpayer are phenomenal, especially since they may generate further offences such as credit card fraud and identity theft. Psychological costs to victims are also difficult to assess.

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<sup>1</sup>Dubourg, R., Hamed, J. and Thorns, J. (2005) *The economic and social costs of crime against individuals and households 2003/04*. Home Office Online Report 30/05. London: Home Office. Available from: <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/pdfs05/rdsolr3005.pdf> [Accessed 20th November 2007].

<sup>2</sup>‘Theft of the person’ usually describes thefts of bags, purses, wallets, etc, and “comprises both snatch and stealth theft. There may be an element of force in snatch theft just to snatch the property away and victims are usually aware of the incident. No force is used in stealth thefts and victims are often unaware of incidents at the time they occur”. Source: Walker, A., Kershaw, C. and Nicholas, S. (2006) *Crime in England and Wales 2005/6*. Home Office Statistical Bulletin. London: Home Office. Available from: <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/pdfs06/hosb1206.pdf> [Accessed 20th November 2007].

<sup>3</sup>‘Theft of personal property’ “covers thefts where no force is used and the victim is not holding or carrying the items when they are stolen, for example thefts of unattended property in the workplace” or at licensed premises such as bars and cafes, and open spaces. Source: Walker, A., Kershaw, C. and Nicholas, S. (2006) *Op. Cit.*

<sup>4</sup>Dubourg, R., Hamed, J. and Thorns, J. (2005) *Op. Cit.*

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup>Nicholas, S., Kershaw, C. and Walker, A. (2007) *Crime in England and Wales 2006/7*. Home Office Statistical Bulletin. London: Home Office. Available from: <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/pdfs07/hosb1107.pdf> [Accessed 20th November 2007].

<sup>8</sup>Nicholas, S., Povey, D., Walker, A. and Kershaw, C. (2005) *Crime in England and Wales 2004/5*. Home Office Statistical Bulletin. London: Home Office. Available from: <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/pdfs05/hosb1105.pdf>. [Accessed 20th November 2007].

Estimates of the costs of each crime of ‘theft from the person’ is based on the idea that each bag theft costs the victim at least £80 in terms of the value of personal items lost<sup>9</sup>. Of course, this figure does not include estimated cost of policing, or the subsequent cost to the criminal justice system of prosecuting criminals if they are caught. Nor does it include estimates of the cost of personal time to individual victims who lose not only their belongings but often time off work canceling credit cards or suspending mobile phone accounts, or even arranging for new door locks to be fitted or shopping for replacement items such as phones, bags and purses.

An additional problem is the losses notched up on stolen cards where clever thieves, even after the cards have been reported stolen and supposedly ‘cancelled’ by victims, seem to manage to spend someone-else’s money in foreign countries or over the internet. In Britain in 2006 such credit fraud has been estimated as costing the industry 68.4 million<sup>10</sup>.

We think the figures from most recent British Crime Survey account of losses to the victim of £80 per bag theft are actually quite conservative.

The Capital Link Partnership who was based in Covent Garden, London, ten years ago, estimated that the total cost of bag theft in 1997 was £22 million and this was assessed based on crimes from *just three streets* in the area of Covent Garden they surveyed<sup>11</sup>.

Their account might seem overstated, but they argued that other factors must be accounted for, namely: the spend on stolen credit cards; the costs of police time following up enquiries; the costs to the Criminal Justice System if police were successful in locating thieves; costs to the community; costs to the venue where the bag was stolen (who lose staff time and sometimes their reputation); and costs to the victim.

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<sup>9</sup>Home Office (2007) ‘*Crime in England and Wales 2005/06: Supplementary Tables: Nature of burglary, theft, criminal damage, vehicle and violent crime*’ (Table 3.05). Available from: [http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/crimeew0506\\_tables\\_bvv.html#personaltheft](http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/crimeew0506_tables_bvv.html#personaltheft) [Accessed 20<sup>th</sup> November 2007]

<sup>10</sup>APACS (2007) ‘*Fraud: The Facts*’ [online]. London: APACS. Available at: [http://www.apacs.org.uk/resources\\_publications/documents/FraudtheFacts2007.pdf](http://www.apacs.org.uk/resources_publications/documents/FraudtheFacts2007.pdf) [Accessed 20<sup>th</sup> November 2007].

<sup>11</sup>Report by James Cooke/Capital Link, ‘*Handluggage Theft – The Hidden Costs*’, Piccadilly Circus – Leicester Square – Covent Garden, June 1998, p.1 (unpublished).

It was the Capital Link Partnership who first argued that victims lost much more after an incident of bag theft than the British Crime Survey estimates reveal (in 1997 they suggested, on average, £1040). Capital Link went on to count the loss of business time and the estimate the value of time loss from work by the individual cancelling cards and replacing all the data lost during the theft, as a cost that should be understood and respected.

However the statistics are compiled and represented, it is clear that bag theft is a crime that needs to be designed out of public spaces. Ultimately for the sake of the majority of people who are often just having a well-deserved break from work, and who would like to return home with their belongings, and their sense of freedom, intact.

DAC Team