



WASHINGTON RETAIL  
ASSOCIATION



# Organized Retail Theft

## *Insights for Retailers*

A Washington Retail Association Member Resource



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*A Washington Retail Association Organized Retail Crime Resource*

## **INSIGHTS FOR RETAILERS ON ORGANIZED RETAIL THEFT**

### **PURPOSE**

Washington Retail (WR) is the primary advocacy group for retailers across the state, from the largest national chains to the smallest independent businesses. As stewards of Washington State's retail experience, our goal is to protect retail jobs and the employers who provide them.

### **POSITION**

WR is committed to providing support to Washington State's retailers, including our members and the industry as a whole. With the swell of retail thefts and the growing persistence of organized retail crime, WR stands ready to provide retailers with tools to protect their employees and customers while helping to safeguard their place of business.

WR addresses retail crime on several fronts, the most important being advocates of sound policy.

### **POLICY**

Washington Retail has been steadfast in its work to improve our state's laws to ensure protections for employees and employers alike. WR supports:

- A comprehensive public policy response involving federal, state, and local law enforcement with open inter-agency communication and coordination.
- Exploring the viability of an inter-agency state taskforce to tackle retail crimes head-on.
- The House INFORM Consumers Act (HR 5502) on a federal level as well as Washington State's HB 1614.
- Updating Washington State's definition of ORC and expanding the definition of theft with significant criminal penalties.

The retail industry employs nearly 400,000 people in Washington State, paying nearly \$20 billion dollars in annual wages. It is of paramount importance to ensure the state's statutes support jobs while making workplaces safe. To this end, Washington Retail Association cofounded the Washington Organized Retail Crime Association (WAORCA), and partners with other city and county law enforcement agencies and organizations.

## PLAN

While laws can be a deterrent, they are not guaranteed to ward off all crime in retail businesses. This document is an essential resource to help retailers be strategic in their approach to thefts and organized retail crime, including specific recommendations retailers can refer to when creating strategies of their own.



*In the pages ahead, retailers will learn how to:*

## PREPARE

Recognize the signs that their business is being surveilled for a potential retail crime.

## PREVENT

Implement best practices to discourage would-be thieves from targeting their business.

## PROTECT

Make their retail establishments safe for their customers and employees. Protection of business assets and inventory is important, but protecting customers and workers is essential.

## POST-CRIME

Know what to do in the aftermath of a retail crime event. The scope of retail crimes can vary, including someone stealing a single item, flash mobs consisting of dozens of organized thieves, and gunpoint robberies.





### ***COULD YOUR BUSINESS FALL VICTIM TO AN ORGANIZED RETAIL CRIME INCIDENT?***

Washington State experienced over \$2.7 billion in retail theft in 2021, the second highest in the nation per capita, according to the Retail Industry Leaders Association (RILA).

Incidents of organized retail crime (ORC) were on the rise prior to 2020, but the pandemic seemed to exacerbate the trend. While businesses had to pivot and restructure how they provided goods and services to the public, resourceful criminals exploited gaps in security and stole retail merchandise in bulk before quickly selling it online and on street corners. Organized retail criminals took advantage of a perfect chaos, leaving disastrous results in their wake.

Law enforcement agencies in cities throughout the US have been reporting “flash mob” types of thefts at a seemingly increasing rate. ORC rings have targeted jewelers, pharmacies, high-end retailers, convenience stores, hardware stores, cannabis dispensaries, and other retailers. These groups range from a handful in convenience stores to “flash mob” groups of over a hundred when descending on large stores or malls. The flash mob robberies occur day and night, with stores open or closed, but all are in and out in a matter of minutes—long gone before law enforcement can be on the scene.

“Loss prevention” isn’t always a guaranteed outcome when it comes to dealing with organized retail crime. Still, businesses can implement countermeasures and take steps to discourage criminals. More importantly, employers can prepare their workers for such an incident and put best practices in place to help keep their employees safe.



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## WARNING SIGNS

### **POTENTIAL WARNING SIGNS A BUSINESS IS UNDER SURVEILLANCE AND MAY BE AT RISK:**



- Employees report missing keys or access cards
- Removal of keys for security devices, pins, or rings disappear
- People taking photos or videos of the business security cameras or devices
- Unusual numbers of license plates are missing, covered up, or are from out-of-state
- Patrons wearing extremely oversized or padded clothing to mask their identity
- Employees are approached about staffing and security
- Loitering and actively observing the business's opening and closing methods and procedures
- "Accidentally" opened emergency exits
- Employee-only or unauthorized areas are entered into "mistakenly"
- Large bags, totes, or backpacks that can conceal stolen items are brought into the store
- Heavy/oversized coats worn in warm months
- Groups of stopped or idling vehicles in front of entry and exit areas
- Crowds suddenly forming outside of the business
- Employees report finding doors propped open
- Posts on social media discussing or encouraging coordinated criminal activity

# PREPARATIONS

## BEST PRACTICES FOR RETAILERS:

### Law enforcement/external support

- Establish points of contact with law enforcement agencies
- Consider hiring private security or off-duty police and have them placed near entrances, exits, and other visible locations
- Consistently report and document suspicious activity to the local authorities
- Consider paying for a real-time security monitoring service that could react to visual verification of an incident or receive a text code to alert local law enforcement

### Stay informed/get involved

- Remain aware of local/regional crime trends
- Establish crime watch contact groups in the business community
- Assemble a retail and law enforcement organized retail crime prevention coalition to collectively develop prevention and reaction strategies relevant to your neighborhood, city, or region
- Research laws in your area to clarify what actions can be legally taken to protect your employees and business
- Lobby for new legislation that brings serious penalties to those involved in flash mob robberies



- Consider starting or joining an ORC task force in your city or state to help monitor, alert, prevent, and react flash mob crimes

# PREPARATIONS

## BEST PRACTICES FOR RETAILERS, CONTINUED:

### Communications

- Maintain communication channels with local police or sheriffs and inquire about patrol checks of your premises
- Make a regularly updated list of law enforcement contact numbers and emails
- Determine if your jurisdiction is capable of receiving 911 texts [with this list](#), which is updated monthly by the FCC
- Have emergency supplies on-site and accessible to employees, including first-aid kits, flashlights, at least one AED (automated external defibrillator)

### Planning and training employees

- Develop and regularly update emergency plans for management, employees, and customers
- Don't make your business's non-pursuit policies public
- Train employees to log or photograph suspicious vehicles, including license plates
- Ensure all your employees have annual first-aid and CPR training
- Demotivate theft
  - Minimize store access after sunset, before sunrise, and when closing or opening your business
  - Install physical barriers to prevent would-be thieves from ramming their vehicles into stores, such as landscaping boulders, storefront crash protection bollards, or gabion baskets filled with stones
  - Put preventative measures into place that limit access to high-ticket items
  - Regularly make a security planning sweep through your store and identify displays that make bulk theft quick and easy, such as a large number of expensive perfumes and colognes that could be swept off a countertop into a shopping cart

*\*<https://www.fcc.gov/files/text-911-master-psap-registryxlsx>*

# PREPARATIONS

## BEST PRACTICES FOR RETAILERS, CONTINUED:

- Consider placing less costly items on accessible displays and high-priced items behind glass
- Block access to parking lots overnight or during off/closed hours
- Remove high-value merchandise from external display cases when closed business, or consider installing theft-proof steel roll-down curtains, doors, or gates to block access
- Place high-value items in a secure safe during off-hours
- For clothing, alternate hangers on racks with some facing inward and others outward to make grabbing armfuls of clothing difficult



## Planning for crimes-in-progress

- Consider ways store personnel could intervene at the outset of different types of ORC events safely, including pre-written verbal statements, audio alarms, visual distractions, cutting the interior lights while turning on strobe lights
- Devise a coding system to announce over loud-speakers to give direction to store employees without making the strategies known to the thieves, e.g., “Code magenta,” or, “Paging Mr. Stevens... you have a call on line 1”

## Employee care

- Be aware of how a crime event may affect the mental health of employees—thefts can have emotionally debilitating effects on store employees, who will need the understanding and support of management in the hours and days that follow.





### **Cameras and surveillance:**

- Install high-resolution (4K) IP video cameras which can “see” a wide range of contrast details
- Don’t conceal cameras or make their appearance hidden—cameras should be visible to deter would-be thieves.
- Have a network video recorder in place with 3-4 weeks of storage capacity
- Consider sharing external camera feeds with local law enforcement
- Consider a secondary backup system for real-time uploads in case thieves take or destroy your recorder
- Get UPS (uninterruptable power supplies) units to back up your cameras, digital recorders, and internet connection



- Regularly test cameras and verify your recording and cloud storage systems are functioning correctly

# INCIDENT RESPONSE

## IF AN ORGANIZED TEAM OR “FLASH MOB” THEFT OCCURS:

- Ensure at least one employee can call or text 911 as soon as possible to report the incident
- Placing a call or text to 911 may not be prudent if perpetrators are armed and see the employee doing so
- Businesses should have written response plans included in their employee handbooks
- Direct store staff and customers to stay out of the perpetrator’s way as much as possible
- Response protocols should include having employees make notes of what they saw and experienced, specific details and descriptions of the assailants, tactics used in entry/exit, transporting of stolen goods out of the store, and details about getaway vehicles if seen
- If video surveillance footage of the incident is recorded, make several copies to share with law enforcement, submit to insurance companies, use in future employee training, and one copy for safe off-site storage
- Share your experience with the media and other retailers
- Monitor and identify how much and what type of product was stolen
- Photograph and secure any physical evidence left by the thieves to assist law enforcement with their investigation
- Put strategies, policies, and procedures in place ahead of time for employees to provide first aid to each other and patrons after an event until EMS arrives on site
- Review instructions, response policies, and protocols during staff meetings to keep the potential threat of ORC top of mind for all employees
- Document plans to safely evacuate customers out of the store following an event and regularly run response drills with employees
- Designate a meeting area for all staff to assemble post-event to ensure all employees are safe and accounted for





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## KEY LINKS AND RESOURCES

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### Surviving an active shooter

<https://youtu.be/DFQ-oxhdFjE> <https://youtu.be/DFQ-oxhdFjE>

### Department of Justice Office of Crime Victim Services

<https://ovc.ojp.gov/directory-crime-victim-services>

### Recovery in the Aftermath of Workplace Violence: Guidance for Workers

<https://www.cstsonline.org/resources/resource-master-list/recovery-in-the-aftermath-of-workplace-violence-guidance-for-workers>



### Legal Disclaimer

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