

The cost of retail theft in Harlem

Introduction

Before going into the topic of discussion in this paper I want to talk about the circumstances that brought me to this neighborhood and why I chose the topic of discussion. I haven't been living in Harlem for that long, I was born and raised in Brooklyn and lived there for many years. I've only been living in Harlem for less than a year now, I was fortunate enough to take over my cousin's lease to her Harlem apartment when she decided to move out of state. I visited this neighborhood several times but I'm not hugely familiar with it some of the descriptions of the neighborhood that I'll share with you today are brand new to me as well. I chose today to look at retail theft in the neighborhood of Harlem, but not just any retail theft. I want to discuss retail theft in big box retail theft, I'm talking about those massive franchises that have hundreds of stores across the nation. I've worked in many of these kinds of retail chains in my life and they all have the same sort of policies regarding external theft and those policies are very hands off. No employees are allowed to apprehend any persons that are witnessed stealing from the store. All that is asked of the employees is to observe and report for insurance purposes. My thinking is that with these hands-off policies coupled with the rising presence of big box retailers in Harlem that there is an effect on the number of theft statistics in the neighborhood.

Neighborhood report: Harlem

The neighborhood that I'll be discussing, my neighborhood, is Harlem. If you ask most

people, the neighborhood of Harlem is mostly associated with a period in American history known as the “Harlem Renaissance” in which the neighborhood exploded with black culture which included art and music. The neighborhood of Harlem stretches from the tip of central park at exactly 110th street towards the top of Manhattan ending at 155th street.

The specific area of Harlem where I reside is near 145th street which is a very busy street in the neighborhood. My home is very close to the Harlem River which separates Harlem and the Bronx. My neighborhood is located near the very top of Manhattan where there are not many blocks separating the Harlem River from the Hudson River. I would say that a ten to fifteen minute walk east or west of my street would take you to the end of the island of Manhattan. I stay near the 145th street station which is a very busy station on a given day. On the same block there is a bus stop for the BX19 bus which crosses the 145th street bridge into the Bronx just a couple of blocks away. Along 145th street are many shops and restaurants, both large chains and “mom and pops”. You’ll find chains like Checkers, Popeyes, and Duane Reade alongside smaller businesses like a restaurant named “Famous Fish Market”, an African & Caribbean Market and “Charles Pan-Fried Chicken” which has been serving Harlem since the 1990’s. Any turn of a corner off 145th street and you’ll most likely walk into residential areas, many houses alongside housing projects. There’s also an elementary school, P.S. 194, which is also used as a polling location during elections, there is also PS/MS 123.

Several blocks south of Harlem will lead you to 125th street which is probably one of the most popular areas of the Harlem neighborhood, located here is the world-famous Apollo Theater. On any given day you can find many tourists gathered outside of the theater located between Frederick Douglas blvd and Adam Clayton Powell Jr blvd, just a few feet away from the 125th st station.



All along 125th there are many name brand shops on almost every block. You could even say that 125th street is a major shopping destination in Harlem. On Malcolm X blvd and 125th street there are two massive rental properties on opposite ends of the street that are home almost exclusively to name brand companies. On one side you have a CVS Pharmacy, Dunkin Donuts, and a Marshalls. The other building is occupied most notably by a Whole Foods Market, Raymour & Flanigan, American Eagle Outfitters, Burlington Coat Factory and other national and world retail chains. All these stores that I just mentioned only occupy two street corners of the massive 125th st stretch. The area is also home to many fast-food chains, clothing stores, cell phone company brick and mortar stores, and movie theaters. So, it should come as no surprise

why 125th has become a major shopping destination for the people of Harlem and the areas immediately surrounding the neighborhood.



I also want to talk about block-to-block environmental elements of Harlem. The neighborhood doesn't have a lot of greenery but there are a few large notable parks in the area. There is Marcus Garvey Park, which is at the very end of east Harlem on 5th ave between 124th and 125th st. Right in the middle of the neighborhood is a large stretch of parklands cold St. Nicholas Park. This park stretches all the way from 128th st to 141st st. This massive park is home to children's playgrounds and several ball courts. The park is also host to grounds where people can barbecue on special occasions. St Nicholas Park is also home to the Hamilton Grange national Museum, which is a monument of Alexander Hamilton's Manhattan home. In my immediate Harlem neighborhood, there is Jackie Robinson Park. Just like St. Nicolas, Jackie

Robinson Park is a long thin stretch of land covering ten blocks from 145th st up to 155th st. Located inside the park is Jackie Robinson recreation center which host a public gym and an outdoor swimming pool. The last significant park in the neighborhood would be Riverbank State Park on the west side of Harlem. This park is located on the Hudson River. This is a massive park that houses many ballcourts, including a soccer field right in the middle of it. Along with basketball and tennis courts. There are more parklands in Harlem, but they're very small and not as significant as the parks I mentioned previously. They are also spread very thin across Harlem.

Population and demographic data

Now I want to go through some population data of my neighborhood. When looking up racial data for my neighborhood I decided to focus on my immediate area of central Harlem rather than Harlem as a whole. Data gathered in 2019 by The NYU Furman Center found that out of the 136,351 people residing in central Harlem, 54.3% identified as black, 23.6% Hispanic, 15.5% as white, and 3.6% as Asian. When compared to data gathered by the same institution in 2010 you can see that there were population increases among the Asian and white population, while the Hispanic population remained stabilized. Among the black population however, there was a decrease from 58.6% to the mentioned above 54.3%. From 2010 to 2019 the overall population of central Harlem increased by almost 10,000 people from 126,558 in 2010 to 136,351 in 2019. The number of residents in the population aged 65+ increased by 1.4% from

2010 to 2019 (NYU Furman Center 2020).

Indicator	2000	2006	2010	2019	2020	2021
Population						
Born in New York State		57.6%	57.5%	58.5%		
Disabled population			11.8%	10.6%		
Foreign-born population	17.8%	20.8%	19.7%	20.5%		
Population	109,091	118,143	126,558	136,351		
Population aged 65+	11.3%	10.3%	10.5%	11.9%		
Households						
Households with children under 18 years old	34.0%	32.5%	27.8%	22.8%		
Single-person households		46.9%	41.5%	42.7%		
Race and Ethnicity						
Percent Asian	0.8%	2.3%	3.5%	3.6%		
Percent Black	77.3%	69.5%	58.6%	54.3%		
Percent Hispanic	16.8%	18.4%	23.6%	23.6%		
Percent white	2.1%	6.8%	11.8%	15.5%		
Racial diversity index	0.37	0.48	0.59	0.62		

Lastly, I want to mention some crime statistics concerning my neighborhood, specifically prison population statistics and specific theft related statistics. In my specific area of Harlem, zip code 10030 the imprisonment rate is 679 per 100,000. There are also 203 people in state prison who were residing in this specific zip code (Prison Policy Initiative 2020). I also want to mention the arrests in my neighborhood that concerned felony larceny. I chose to gather data from three major precincts near central Harlem which is where I reside, so I will provide arrest information from the 26th, 28th, and 32nd precincts. In the 26th precinct the year of 2021 yielded 273 arrests for felony grand larceny, which was the lowest of the three precincts in 2021. This number increased from the 241 arrests in 2020 but decreased from the arrests in 2019 (334) and an even bigger decrease from 2018 (381). At the conclusion of the year 2021 the 28th precinct made 384 grand larceny arrests which increased from 2020 (317), and 2019 (348) but decreased from the year 2018 which yielded 445 felony grand larceny arrests. Finally, the 32nd precinct tabulated 320 arrests for felony grand larceny in 2021. This amount slightly decreased from 2020 (321), but increased from the year prior in 2019 (315) (NYPD 2022).

Seven Major Felony Offenses

PCT	CRIME	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
26	MURDER & NON NEGL. MANSLAUGHTER	4	1	2	4	5	5	0	2	4	2	2	3	1	2	0	0	1	1	2	2	2	2
	RAPE	6	9	12	12	25	19	12	8	16	10	13	7	10	9	16	6	10	11	11	8	10	5
	ROBBERY	225	218	232	213	230	270	250	206	201	197	175	154	145	135	125	123	107	96	107	128	93	74
	FELONY ASSAULT	159	122	150	116	125	82	102	93	79	77	107	100	113	122	84	78	94	87	100	94	115	158
	BURGLARY	201	124	123	127	111	108	102	71	78	58	79	57	60	59	59	64	55	56	61	71	113	77
	GRAND LARCENY	380	333	292	363	343	365	367	347	331	272	268	269	324	343	311	302	309	329	381	334	241	273
	GRAND LARCENY OF MOTOR VEHICLE	117	123	111	94	70	64	56	53	49	34	26	27	23	20	20	24	22	16	22	21	47	47
TOTAL SEVEN MAJOR FELONY OFFENSES	1092	930	922	929	909	913	889	780	758	650	670	616	678	689	617	597	597	596	683	658	621	636	
28	MURDER & NON NEGL. MANSLAUGHTER	5	8	3	5	8	5	12	4	5	2	6	6	5	2	1	3	3	4	0	5	7	2
	RAPE	24	19	24	25	16	20	18	12	14	9	13	18	17	12	14	13	11	8	18	11	15	9
	ROBBERY	315	252	246	282	234	334	308	278	255	240	254	223	210	211	176	189	209	202	156	163	143	172
	FELONY ASSAULT	314	291	226	186	217	187	196	167	189	208	187	213	241	222	202	233	243	203	204	235	207	245
	BURGLARY	210	141	137	155	153	119	173	97	127	111	111	126	102	82	79	102	114	91	102	90	147	153
	GRAND LARCENY	252	152	167	172	200	288	344	286	363	300	301	308	350	352	329	378	426	440	445	348	317	384
	GRAND LARCENY OF MOTOR VEHICLE	77	105	92	89	84	52	54	42	50	27	20	17	20	39	22	27	27	18	22	28	47	52
TOTAL SEVEN MAJOR FELONY OFFENSES	1197	968	895	914	912	1005	1105	886	1003	897	892	911	945	920	823	945	1033	966	947	880	883	1017	
30	MURDER & NON NEGL. MANSLAUGHTER	9	11	9	5	9	6	12	5	3	1	7	2	2	3	7	2	4	1	3	4	4	3
	RAPE	27	30	23	30	33	32	24	18	12	19	35	21	11	21	18	20	22	9	19	20	13	7
	ROBBERY	394	296	310	333	299	316	300	324	293	205	253	246	257	218	150	168	174	153	159	190	164	106
	FELONY ASSAULT	353	390	306	272	285	250	228	235	172	193	178	189	189	181	202	172	180	135	193	178	167	187
	BURGLARY	344	213	184	179	218	137	145	119	123	100	101	134	151	130	100	99	71	85	85	89	103	111
	GRAND LARCENY	189	151	165	225	255	280	275	219	223	172	144	180	230	244	250	247	240	291	321	289	264	334
	GRAND LARCENY OF MOTOR VEHICLE	167	120	99	110	87	80	69	55	62	47	49	25	28	35	22	25	31	22	27	27	59	59
TOTAL SEVEN MAJOR FELONY OFFENSES	1483	1211	1096	1154	1186	1101	1053	975	888	737	767	797	868	832	749	733	722	696	807	777	774	807	
32	MURDER & NON NEGL. MANSLAUGHTER	17	22	14	13	18	9	17	9	13	11	8	10	11	7	6	3	7	4	5	10	9	16
	RAPE	45	34	34	45	34	43	32	30	35	24	31	27	33	27	17	35	32	17	20	25	21	18
	ROBBERY	432	442	362	372	387	407	411	351	280	265	292	244	243	261	254	278	197	199	193	219	167	183
	FELONY ASSAULT	510	487	444	411	407	356	361	305	329	302	305	321	279	295	299	349	354	335	314	375	387	519
	BURGLARY	292	245	232	217	196	161	208	189	174	155	121	152	108	82	94	113	132	97	124	110	128	168
	GRAND LARCENY	253	217	229	240	301	289	354	309	315	280	293	302	315	297	297	305	282	267	329	315	321	320
	GRAND LARCENY OF MOTOR VEHICLE	148	155	131	112	112	99	92	85	58	68	68	53	52	40	31	29	37	48	31	41	34	67
TOTAL SEVEN MAJOR FELONY OFFENSES	1697	1602	1446	1410	1455	1364	1475	1278	1204	1105	1103	1108	1029	1000	996	1120	1052	950	1026	1088	1100	1278	

Larceny theft arrests in Harlem

Now I want to focus on a specific precinct in Harlem, the 28th precinct, when focusing on big box retail theft in Harlem. The reason for this is that this particular precinct is nearest the area of 125th that I described above. In the above section I only used grand larceny data going back only a few years, but now I want to go back even farther into the historical data. Starting in the year 2000 there was a total of 252 grand larceny arrests. For the next 3 years there was actually a major drop in in grand larceny arrests in this part of Harlem. 152, 167, and 172 arrests from 2001 to 2003. For the next decade the grand larceny arrests were back on the rise. The numbers were consistently north of 300 arrests, ending with 352 arrests in 2013. Interestingly, there was a spike of arrests from 2016 to 2018 where the numbers in all three years was north of 400 arrests. It would eventually fall back to the 300's finally ending with 384

arrests in 2021. It would be interesting to try to track the rise of big box retail stores alongside the arrest counts over the years in the 28th precinct.

Literature regarding retail theft

First I want to outline how much lose retailers suffer from retail theft. In an article outlining “Organized Retail Crime” the damages of retail theft are plainly laid out for the reader in detail. In a study conducted in 2010, 90% of retailers surveyed said that they were victims of organized retail crime. The financial loses by retailers range from as \$15 billion on the low end and caps off at \$37 billion annually (Finklea 2012). These figures show a major increase from a study done by an Australian organization that showed that US based retail losses totaled anywhere between \$8 and \$10 billion in the year of 1996 (Nelson 2000). The “Organized Retail crime” article makes it plain to see that these retailers aren’t dealing with petty theft shoplifters, these are professionals known as booster who deal in not only theft but also gift card, and receipt fraud (Finklea 2012). There are organized groups out there who are targeting major retailers and with the rise of such retailers in the 28th precinct this could add to the number of grand larceny arrests made and reported in that area each year.

Retails do look for ways to curb these loses with some mixed results. I personally don’t think it is enough to deter retail theft, however. In an article detailing the effectiveness of two different retail theft control methods which slow down retail theft but falls short of stopping it completely. The two methods that were being tested were a protective display fixture which had the high targeted items (shaving products) in a case that only dispensed one item at a time and an enhanced public view monitor that recorded shoppers and had the feed displayed on a monitor in

the same aisle (Hayes 2017). My issue with these methods is that they don't stop potential shoplifters from getting their hands on the targeted items. The enhanced view monitor only displays an image of a potential shoplifter on a monitor and the fixtures only slows a potential shoplifter down by only allowing them to take one product at a time. As the results of the article show that there was a significant reduction in losses when the fixtures were used, a 21% reduction to be exact. While the enhanced view monitors showed no reduction in losses, the losses stayed the same during the pre-test and post-test phases (Hayes 2017). These results show that while one of the methods does show an improvement in preventing retail theft it doesn't really address the issue. It only slows down the rate at which the products are stolen. These methods merely act as a band aid to slow the bleeding. Also both of these methods mentioned above are being used by retailers in many department stores across the city, including the 125th street shopping area and other parts of Harlem.

Another issue that bothers me about how retailers deal with shoplifting is how much responsibility is placed on shop workers or customers to thwart potential shoplifters. Of course, these are just store associates and don't have the investigative abilities nor the authority to properly deal with retail crime. This was made obvious when I looked through a couple of articles on the matter. In an article the study revealed that not all shoplifting is reported or even witnessed, and that certain groups are selectively sanctioned by the shop workers. Non German citizens, adults and blue collar workers were disproportionately represented amongst the group that are actually shoplifting (Blankenburg 1976). In another article researchers wanted to find out what it would take for customers to report shoplifting. I feel that this is a waste of time when trying to deal with the issue of shoplifting. Researchers would observe as costumers would witness a subject stealing from a department store and would proceed to interview these

customers upon exiting the store or later by phone, asking them questions about their actions to either report the theft or do nothing. These customers were also asked what it would take for them to report shoplifting to authorities if they witnessed the act in the future (Hartmann 1972). Too much emphasis is placed on what the customer or store associate could have done to stop shoplifters, they shouldn't be obligated to put themselves in that sort of position. These methods by researchers and retailers such as fixtures and recordings, and customer reporting I feel do little in the fight against retail crime. They are merely a way to pass the buck onto someone (customer or store associate reporting) or something (fixtures, and video monitoring) else to deal with retail crime.

Conclusion

Trying to find out how to stop shoplifting isn't an easy issue I admit. What I do know is that all the methods I mentioned above only stem the tide of shoplifting. I feel that the issue of shoplifting should be addressed by local government in Harlem. The city government should be working to create a city that provides opportunities for its citizens. That also including the citizens who are returning from incarceration. The city should also invest in communities that experience more poverty and have less opportunities than others. It's not an easy fix or one that creates instant results which is why I feel that it may be difficult for city officials to get behind such a plan. Coming up with silly fixtures and setting up monitoring area's is a waste of money and doesn't address the issue of shoplifting at major retailers which is most likely adding to the major larceny arrests in Harlem. Furthermore, putting the responsibility of curbing shoplifting on the shoulders of store associates and customers is both irresponsible and lazy.

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