

Summary: Project 'Damage Donation for Retailers': Evaluation of Program Theory and Implementation Process

Introduction

Damage Donation for Retailers is a project in which retailers make use of a provision in Dutch Civil Law to regain some of the (financial) loss or damage they face when confronted with a shoplifter. Article 6:162 of the Dutch Civil Code (the 'Unlawful Action') states the possibility for civilians to claim financial compensation from other civilians when it's proven that loss or damage occurred after an Unlawful Action. Since the claiming process can be rather tedious, a foundation is established that takes care of the civil claims on behalf of the individual retailers.

In short this process works as follows. A retailer signs in to the project. When he catches a shoplifter he hands him or her over to the local police. When the police arrives the retailer not only officially reports the crime to the police (by filling out the proper forms) but also fills out a special form in which he holds the suspect accountable for the damage he suffers from his action (for example the time it costs to detain the suspect, to fill out the forms, etc.). The standard claim amounts to 151 euro. Extra claims can be added for possible material damage (for example to the inventory of the store or to the merchandise). He sends the second form to the foundation in charge of the collection process. This foundation will start collecting the money for the retailer after assuring that the public prosecutor files a criminal case against the suspect (and after assuring it has the proper personal data of the suspect). The vast majority of these criminal cases lead to a conviction. This conviction in a criminal case is, in the end, the proof that the unlawful Action according to the Civic Code took place. It is assumed however that most suspects will pay right away. In the City of Utrecht the Office of the Public Prosecutor will conditionally close the criminal case when the suspect pays the civil claim.

According to the developers the project has many advantages, for example:

- it will lead to lower levels of shoplifting in participating retail areas
- it will lead to higher levels of security in shops (because retailers entering the project have to meet certain standards, a security check is conducted before they start participating)
- it will lead to higher levels of security in the shopping area (because part of the money that is collected goes into a fund for collective security)

- it will lead to more reporting of shoplifting to the police, which will improve police practice (of arresting shoplifters)
- it will compensate retailers for the loss they suffer from detecting and detaining shoplifters (that is probably the most important stimulus for retailers to participate).

Research Questions and Research Design

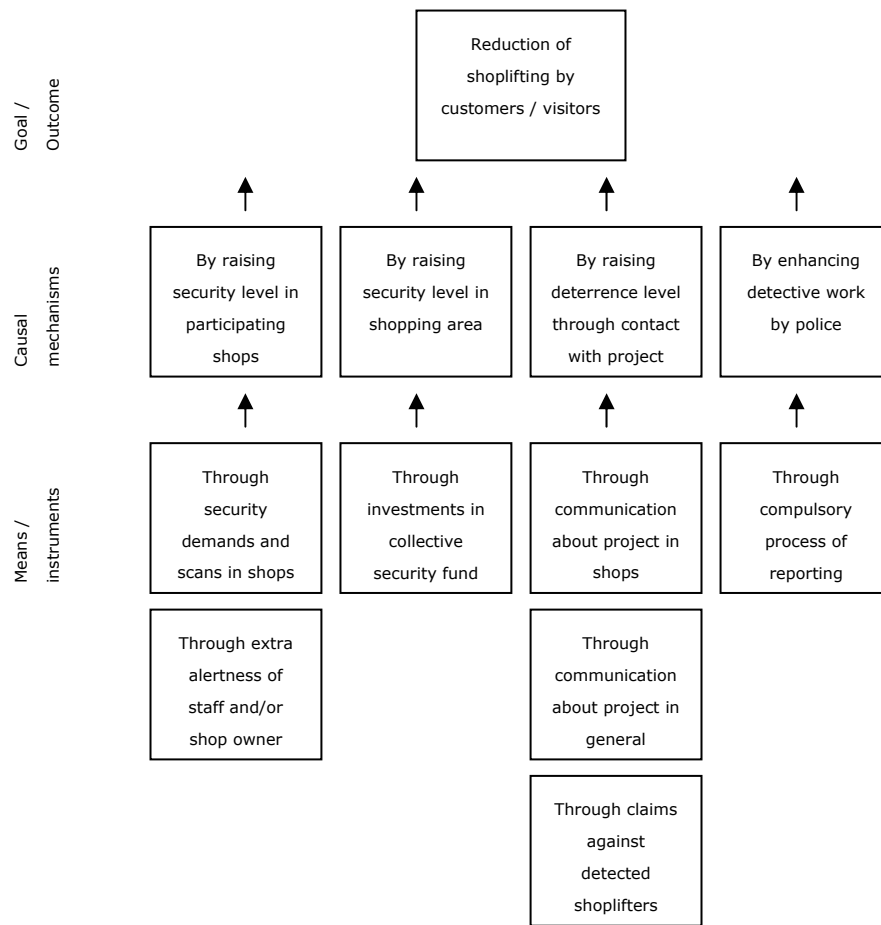
The Dutch Ministry of Justice co-financed a pilot of the project in the city of Utrecht after an earlier pilot in two shopping areas in Amsterdam turned out to be successful. Now the Ministry asks for an evaluation study of this project. The following research questions are articulated:

1. What is the program theory underlying this project? What is the empirical status of this theory? Can we expect this project –in theory- to be effective?
2. How did the implementation process of this project in the city of Utrecht proceed? Can the project be implemented as planned? If not, which difficulties occur? What are the critical factors for successful future implementation?

We first reconstructed the program theory of this project on the basis of available plans, project descriptions, publications, etc. On the basis of this information we built a conceptual model representing the main goal, the causal mechanisms assumed to achieve the outcome and the means used to 'fire' these causal mechanisms. We then tested this model against existing empirical literature. The process evaluation encompassed a field study in Utrecht. We conducted audits in different shopping areas, attended meetings, interviewed relevant stakeholders and consulted relevant written sources. This enabled us to describe the practice of this project in a specific context.

Results

Generally, the theory behind the project turned out to be very implicit. Our (re)construction of it revealed the following conceptual model:



The main goal of the project is to reduce shoplifting by customers. Four causal mechanisms are assumed to work in this direction. Our literature review shows that two of these mechanisms, i.e. raising the security levels in both shops and shopping areas, can contribute to this goal. However, the means to effect these mechanisms are not all sufficient in this project. Raising the security level in shops, for example, is for more than one reason a complicated process. There are reasons to assume that the project will mainly attract shops that already have high levels of security. Extra alertness in shops may also be an effective security tool. In this project however, there are no procedures to ensure that this will actually take place on a continued base. Raising security in the shopping area depends on the means that become available through claims (part of the 'claim money' is used for collective security). If the project becomes very successful, the funds for

collective security will dry out (because less shoplifters will get caught). Furthermore, for this mechanism to work certain conditions have to be fulfilled, like enough participants, enough claims against shoplifters, etc.

The third causal mechanism is less likely to occur. Empirical research indicates that the specific deterrent effects of the project are probably very limited. Specific deterrence takes action when someone is caught. This experience may change the shoplifters' analysis of cost and benefits for future shoplifting. Specific deterrence works mainly through perception of severity of punishment and the probability of being caught again. Literature shows that the first mechanism is very weak and might only work with a limited group of 'small-time' offenders. The second mechanism is a little stronger (still not very strong), but the project does not add to this mechanism, because detection is the main issue here (and not the extra 151 euro 'fine' that is added by the project). General deterrence might work, for example through continued communication about the project in the area and in local media. However, in this project the means to effect this mechanism are insufficiently developed.

The fourth mechanism is based on the premise that obligatory reporting of shoplifting to the police (which is a condition in the project) will lead to better detective work, which in turn will have a downward effect on the level of shoplifting. This is also, for more than one reason, a problematic assumption. It is assumed that the project will greatly enhance reporting to the police (100% reporting against less than 10% in the current situation). However, the baseline of this calculation is not correct. Important is the level of reporting in situations in which a shoplifter is detected (and possibly detained for handover to the police). In these cases the level of reporting is likely to be much higher. The project will probably not add a great deal to this. Furthermore, the functioning of an external organisation (the police force) plays an important role in this causal mechanism. However, decisions and actions taken by this organisation can not be influenced by the project. Therefore, this causal mechanism is not very realistic. There's an exception to this line of reasoning: when we look at the macro level, we assume that this mechanism might take place when massive numbers of shops will participate (i.e. on a regional or national scale). In that case the sheer numbers may effect detective work on shoplifters.

The implementation of the project in Utrecht has not been a very smooth process. On average however, stakeholders are enthusiastic about the concept of 'Damage Donation'. Especially retailers with high levels of shoplifting (and sufficient security infrastructure) are enthusiastic about the project. For them, the frequent detection of shoplifters now becomes a source of (modest) income as well. Other retailers (smaller shops, less 'sensitive' merchandise, etc.) are less interested.

The implementation of the project in Utrecht surfaced many practical difficulties. Some of these, we think, have a general significance: In short the following issues emerged:

- at the outset not all retailers are enthusiastic about the project (interest varies), some have also limited resources to detect and detain shoplifters (or are scared to do so);
- shops with lower levels of security and with lower levels of shoplifting are more difficult to incorporate in the project;
- the organisation level of retailers in a shopping area is of vital importance to the success of the project;
- the local organisation of the project is complex. This aspect is hitherto not well thought off. In Utrecht this turned out to be problematic. Lots of obscurity about who does what, etc.;
- many stakeholders have to be involved and informed. Ongoing internal and external communication and information processing is vital for success. In practice this turned out to be a weak point in many respects (within participating organisations as well as in cooperation between organisations);
- to prepare a shopping area for the project and to continue it for some time is not possible without additional funds.

Conclusion

For the project to become succesful there are various theoretical and practical problems to be solved. Some of these problems are more fundamental then others. Many practical and organizational problems seem solvable. Some of the theoretical problems (the hypothesized effects of the project on reducing shoplifting) appear more serious. The research suggests some options to strenghten the project.