

## Managing Retail Theft as a Public Crime: Institutional Perspectives on Shoplifting Policy Implementation

Arvin Joey Abines Romo<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Western Mindanao State University

Orcid : 0009-0009-8718-7472

### ABSTRACT

Retail theft (shoplifting) is a pervasive property crime generating substantial economic burdens despite being treated as "petty." In the Philippines, it is classified as theft and prosecuted as a public crime, implicating retailers, police, barangays, correctional facilities, and local government units in prevention, enforcement, and rehabilitation efforts. However, urban practice favors on-site settlements and non-reporting to avoid prosecution costs, contributing to underreporting and inconsistent enforcement. This study examined how institutions perceive and implement shoplifting policies as a public crime in an urban Philippine commercial district and identified the operational challenges and systemic constraints that shape policy enactment. Using a qualitative exploratory multiple-institution case study design, purposively sampled frontline actors (n = 25), including store managers/security staff, Philippine National Police officers, Bureau of Jail Management and Penology personnel, barangay mediation officers, and local government representatives, participated in semi-structured interviews. Transcripts and field notes were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis, with credibility supported through member checking, audit trails, triangulation across institutions, and integration with the quantitative results. Five themes emerged: fragmented institutional roles with weak accountability; procedural deficiencies, including non-standard documentation, limited training, and resource constraints; pervasive informal resolutions that reduce case burdens but erode consistency; systemic barriers, including understaffing, workload pressure, policy ambiguity, weak legal follow-through, and inadequate infrastructure; and proposed reforms emphasizing standardized protocols, inter-agency coordination, shared information systems, capacity building, and technological upgrades. Overall, shoplifting control was shaped by street-level discretion and institutional capacity, indicating that consistent public crime treatment requires integrated governance, clarified responsibilities, and collaboration among multiple agencies

**Keywords:** Enforcement; Institutional perspectives; Shoplifting; Public crime; ; Policy implementation; Rehabilitation

### 1. INTRODUCTION:

Property crime is common worldwide. It occurs more frequently than violent crimes. In Malaysia, theft and other property crimes were the most reported crimes from 2007 to 2017. This was true even though the government and police worked to reduce them (Mohd Hakim et al., 2022). Shoplifting is a significant property crime. This causes significant financial losses and problems for businesses. This makes it difficult for businesses to continue operating. People often think that shoplifting is a small crime, but it adds up. This causes significant problems for businesses, communities, and the legal system. Globally, people are fighting against shoplifting with stricter rules, better cameras, and teamwork among different groups. For example, during COVID-19 in Queensland, Australia, these efforts helped reduce shoplifting and other property crimes (Payne et al., 2021). These strategies are important for reducing retail theft and its effects.

In the Philippines, shoplifting is considered theft and a public crime. This means that the state handles prosecution, not private individuals. Many groups are

involved in dealing with shoplifting, such as stores, police, local councils, jails, and local governments (Buckingham et al. 2025). These groups need to work together, not separately, to manage shoplifting. They must combine efforts in enforcement and rehabilitation. However, there are problems in the Philippines because these groups have different resources, policies, and effectiveness. This can make it difficult to apply laws consistently and weaken the response to shoplifting. Therefore, it is important to improve cooperation between agencies and build their capacity. A strategy that includes enforcement, community assistance, and rehabilitation is needed to tackle shoplifting effectively..

In city shopping areas, shoplifting is often informally handled. Stores prefer to settle on the spot or not report it, as they want quick solutions instead of going through legal processes. This is because legal action takes time, costs money, and is complicated, which businesses want to avoid to keep things running smoothly (Mantilla 2021). These informal methods lead to uneven handling of shoplifting, making it harder to enforce laws and prevent theft. Police and correctional agencies also face problems

such as incomplete paperwork, late reports, and poor coordination, which exacerbate these issues. These problems weaken the response to shoplifting and reveal gaps in how agencies work together (Schiff et al., 2023). Consequently, a mixed approach exists, where quick, informal solutions exist alongside formal legal actions, often leading to inconsistent enforcement. Improving coordination and fixing procedural issues are crucial for better handling retail theft.

Most research on shoplifting focuses on big-picture data, such as crime rates and security systems. These studies show the extent of shoplifting but do not explain how rules are applied in real life. We do not know much about how stores, police, local communities, and jails handle these rules. Few studies have looked at shoplifting as a public issue needing teamwork, especially in cities in the Philippines, where different groups must work together. Therefore, we do not understand the informal ways and challenges that affect how rules are enforced. We need to study how these groups work to understand what affects the success and fairness of shoplifting policies in the future.

### General Research Question

How do key institutions perceive and experience the implementation of shoplifting policies as a public crime in an urban setting in the Philippines?

#### Specific Qualitative Research Questions

1. How do institutional actors describe their roles and responsibilities in managing shoplifting as a public crime
2. What challenges do institutions encounter in implementing shoplifting policies, particularly in relation to:
  - reporting and case documentation;
  - inter-agency coordination;
  - apprehension procedures;
  - civil recovery mechanisms; and
  - offender rehabilitation?
3. How do informal practices (e.g., on-site settlements, discretionary non-reporting) influence the enforcement of shoplifting policies as a public crime?
4. How do institutional constraints (legal, operational, cultural, and resource-related) affect consistent enforcement of shoplifting policies?
5. What institutional strategies and policy reforms are perceived as necessary to improve the management of shoplifting cases across agencies?

This study explores how key institutions perceive, experience, and implement shoplifting policies as a public crime in the Philippine urban context. It aims to identify the operational challenges, informal practices, and institutional constraints that influence the enforcement and management of shoplifting. By focusing on the perspectives of frontline actors such as retailers, police, barangays, and correctional officers, this study seeks to uncover the realities of policy implementation beyond

quantitative crime statistics. This study endeavors to generate evidence-based insights that can inform more effective, coordinated, and context-sensitive strategies for addressing shoplifting. Ultimately, this study seeks to bridge existing gaps by highlighting systemic barriers and promoting multi-agency collaboration to improve policy outcomes and enforcement consistency in managing shoplifting offenses. This approach aligns with emerging frameworks that emphasize the importance of good governance, inter-agency coordination, and evidence-based policymaking in the Philippines (Bernal-Sundiang et al., 2022; Zech et al., 2023).

## REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

### Shoplifting and Retail Theft as Property Crime

Shoplifting and retail theft, as forms of property crime, constitute a significant social and economic issue that warrants focused study. Property crimes, such as shoplifting, are generally more prevalent than violent crimes, making them a pervasive challenge for societies and economies. For instance, retail shrinkage, which includes losses from shoplifting and employee theft, represents a major financial burden for retailers, often eclipsing other sources of loss. Such losses have been reported to reach billions, as exemplified by UK retailers incurring over one billion GBP in shoplifting-related losses in 2018 alone (Reid et al., 2021). These losses impact operational costs, forcing retailers to invest heavily in security and loss prevention systems and sometimes pass costs onto consumers. The “dark figure” of theft—unreported shoplifting cases—exacerbates the problem, as many incidents go undetected or unprosecuted, undermining accurate prevalence assessments and hindering effective response strategies. This underreporting is particularly challenging for small and medium enterprises (SMEs), which often lack the resources to absorb such losses or implement robust prevention measures, threatening their economic viability (Jensen et al., 2019). Moreover, challenges in deterrence and prosecution stem from inefficiencies in law enforcement and legal frameworks, with studies indicating that the increased certainty and swiftness of punishment contribute variably to crime reduction (Abramovaite et al., 2022; Raj & Rahman, 2023). Consequently, understanding the operational and systemic dimensions of shoplifting is critical for developing tailored, multi-agency responses to minimize both financial and social harm and to justify targeted research on retail theft.

### Inter-Agency Coordination and Institutional Crime Management

Inter-agency coordination plays a pivotal role in effectively managing shoplifting as a public crime, particularly in urban areas. Successful crime prevention hinges on collaboration among businesses, police, barangays, and local government units, each of which assumes distinct yet interconnected responsibilities. In Sweden, integrated partnerships involving public authorities and civil society have demonstrated how multi-agency collaboration can target complex crime phenomena, such as gang activity and social disturbances,

with coordinators bridging diverse stakeholder interests to facilitate joint interventions (Forkby, 2018). Similarly, UK retail sector studies highlight challenges stemming from ambiguous role definitions and unclear data-sharing protocols between management and security teams, underscoring the importance of clear role-based frameworks to enhance coordination in crime prevention (Okeke & Eiza, 2022). The implementation of shoplifting policies across institutions often reveals coordination gaps and bureaucratic challenges that impede their enforcement. Leadership and governance structures, along with data transparency and trust between agencies, are critical factors in determining the efficacy of collaborative efforts (Forkby, 2018). These dynamics contribute to systemic procedural gaps, where policies fail not because of a lack of design but due to fragmented responsibility and insufficient inter-agency communication. Hence, the study's institutional focus foregrounds how overlapping yet unclear roles and responsibilities within multi-agency settings hinder cohesive actions. Understanding these coordination barriers illuminates why policy objectives frequently falter in practice despite formal mandates, emphasizing the need for strengthened governance, accountability, and partnership mechanisms to enhance public safety outcomes (Okeke & Eiza, 2022; Wagner, 2021).

### **Institutional Experiences, Discretion, and Policy Implementation Practices**

The application of policies on shoplifting and property crimes depends significantly on the experiences and choices of people on the ground. These policies are not followed exactly as they are written. Instead, store workers, police, and community leaders adjust the rules to fit real-life scenarios. This flexibility arises from a combination of official rules and real-world limits. Studies show that people often use informal talks, make up procedures, and find quick fixes to get around problems and meet policy goals (Lønsmann and Sanden, 2018). This highlights the importance of examining policy enforcement from the ground up, where personal decisions and real-life situations play a significant role. Many shoplifting cases are not reported or are handled informally, showing the limits and strategies of law enforcement agencies. Research in similar areas shows that agencies with few resources might allow some violations to manage their workload and capability (Clark et al., 2023). This tolerance changes how rules are enforced and creates a gap between written policies and what happens in practice. Research in the Philippines also shows how challenges affect frontline workers, such as lack of preparation and support, which makes it difficult to apply policies consistently. These findings highlight the need for better training, clearer roles, and support systems. By focusing on the experiences of frontline workers, research explains why policies often do not work as planned and shows the small-scale factors that affect enforcement. This approach supports the use of interviews and analysis to understand the complex realities of policy enforcement and the role of street-level workers in making policies effective.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Research Design**

This study employed a qualitative exploratory multiple-institution case study design to examine how institutional actors perceive, interpret, and implement shoplifting policies as public crimes in an urban Philippine setting. An exploratory qualitative approach was appropriate because the study sought to generate in-depth, contextualized insights into policy implementation processes, operational realities, and inter-agency coordination that cannot be adequately captured through quantitative measures. By treating each institution (retail stores, police, barangays, correctional facilities, and local government units) as embedded cases within a shared policy environment, the design enabled a comprehensive analysis of both individual experiences and systemic interactions across the agencies.

### **Participants and Sampling**

The participants consisted of key institutional informants directly involved in the management of shoplifting cases, including retail store managers and security personnel, Philippine National Police officers, Bureau of Jail Management and Penology staff, barangay mediation officers, and local government representatives. A purposive sampling strategy was employed to ensure that only individuals with first-hand knowledge and decision-making roles in shoplifting prevention, reporting, enforcement, or rehabilitation were selected. This approach ensured that the cases were information-rich and relevant to the study objectives. A total of twenty-five (25) participants were interviewed, with recruitment guided by the principle of data saturation, wherein interviews were concluded once no new themes or insights emerged.

### **Research Locale**

The study was conducted in an urban commercial district in the Philippines, characterized by a high concentration of retail establishments and reported property crime incidents, particularly shoplifting. The locale was selected because of the presence of multiple institutions that collectively manage shoplifting cases, including private retail businesses, law enforcement agencies, correctional facilities, and local governance units. This setting provided a comprehensive institutional ecosystem in which the implementation of shoplifting policies could be examined across different organizational levels and functional roles, allowing for a holistic understanding of inter-agency practices and coordination mechanisms.

### **Data Collection Instrument**

Data were gathered using a semi-structured interview guide that was specifically developed for this study. The instrument contained open-ended questions designed to elicit participants' experiences and perspectives regarding their institutional roles, operational procedures, implementation challenges, informal practices, inter-agency coordination, and policy gaps related to managing shoplifting. The semi-structured format allowed for consistency across interviews while providing flexibility for participants to elaborate on emerging issues. The interview guide underwent expert review and pilot testing

to ensure clarity, relevance, and alignment with the research objectives prior to its full implementation.

### Data Collection Procedure

Formal permission was obtained from the participating institutions before data collection. Interviews were scheduled at times and locations convenient for the participants to ensure their comfort and confidentiality. Each interview began with an explanation of the study's purpose and securing informed consent. Conversations were audio-recorded with permission and later transcribed verbatim to preserve their accuracy. Field notes were maintained to document contextual observations and nonverbal cues. Participants were subsequently provided with the opportunity to review their statements through member checking to confirm the correctness and authenticity of the recorded information.

### Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework. Audio-recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim and reviewed repeatedly to ensure familiarization with the data. An inductive coding approach was employed, allowing codes and themes to emerge directly from the participants' narratives rather than from predetermined categories. Initial open coding was conducted manually to identify meaningful units of text, after which related codes were grouped into categories and refined into broader themes that represented recurring patterns and shared experiences.

To enhance analytic rigor and minimize researcher bias, coding decisions were documented through an audit trail, and the transcripts were re-examined to ensure consistency across themes. Selected excerpts were cross-checked with participants through member checking to confirm their interpretive accuracy. The themes were subsequently reviewed, refined, and clearly defined to ensure coherence, distinctiveness, and alignment with the research questions. Finally, the qualitative findings were triangulated with the quantitative results to strengthen the interpretive depth and support the overall conclusions of the study.

### Trustworthiness

To ensure methodological rigor, this study adhered to the established criteria for trustworthiness. Credibility was enhanced through member checking and triangulation of multiple institutional sources. Dependability was maintained through an audit trail documenting the coding procedures, theme development, and analytic decisions. Confirmability was supported by using verbatim quotations and reflexive notes to minimize researcher bias. Transferability was achieved by providing detailed descriptions of the research context, participants, and institutional settings, enabling readers to assess the applicability of the findings to similar environments.

### Ethical Considerations

Ethical standards were strictly followed throughout the study. Participants were informed of the study's objectives, procedures, and their right to withdraw at any time without any consequences. Written informed consent

was obtained prior to their participation. Confidentiality and anonymity were ensured by removing identifying information and using coded labels during the transcription and reporting processes. All digital files and transcripts were securely stored and accessible only by the researcher. The study avoided any form of coercion or harm and respected the professional roles and sensitivities of all the institutional stakeholders.

### Results

This section presents the findings of the qualitative inquiry exploring how key institutions perceive and experience the implementation of shoplifting policies as public crimes. Using thematic analysis, five major themes emerged from the interviews with institutional actors across retail establishments, law enforcement, correctional facilities, barangays and local government units. These themes explain the institutional dynamics, operational realities, and systemic challenges that shape shoplifting policy enforcement, collectively illuminating the gaps observed in the quantitative results.

#### Theme 1: Institutional Roles and Responsibilities in Shoplifting Management

Theme	Description	Responses
Fragmented but Shared Enforcement Roles	Participants described shoplifting management as a collective responsibility distributed among retail stores, police units, barangays, and correctional institutions. Each agency performs specialized tasks such as detection, apprehension, investigation, mediation, or detention. However, these roles operate sequentially rather than collaboratively, resulting in a fragmented enforcement chain instead of an integrated system.	P3 (Store Manager): "We are the first to catch them, but after that it's already the police's job." P11 (Police Investigator): "If the store endorses the case, that's the only time we can process it." P22 (BJMP Officer): "Our role starts only after conviction. We don't handle the arrest or reporting."
Limited Inter-Agency Coordination	Informants emphasized that coordination between institutions is mostly reactive and incident-based rather than	P9 (Police Officer): "We only act when a complaint is formally filed." P14 (Barangay Official): "We usually try

	planned or systematic. Communication typically occurs only after a suspect is caught, with minimal proactive meetings, shared databases, or standardized reporting channels. This weakens information flow and leads to inconsistent case handling across agencies.	mediation first before escalating.” P18 (Store Security Head): “There’s no regular coordination meeting with the police unless something happens.”
Diffuse Accountability and Case Ownership	Participants expressed uncertainty regarding who holds ultimate responsibility for ensuring that shoplifting cases proceed from detection to prosecution. Once cases are transferred, institutions often disengage, resulting in weak follow-through and case attrition. This diffusion of responsibility reduces enforcement consistency and may contribute to repeat offending.	P5 (Store Supervisor): “After we turn them over, we don’t really follow up anymore.” P20 (Police Officer): “If the complainant withdraws, the case usually stops there.” P24 (Barangay Staff): “Sometimes it ends with settlement, so it doesn’t reach the court.”

The management of shoplifting involves multiple institutional actors, whose roles and responsibilities often appear fragmented yet interdependent. Enforcement roles are spread across diverse entities, such as store management, security personnel, and law enforcement agencies, creating a scenario of fragmented but shared responsibilities. This diffusion complicates accountability, as no single institution assumes comprehensive ownership of cases or outcomes. The literature on organizational governance highlights that responsibility denotes the obligation to perform tasks satisfactorily, whereas accountability refers to liability for ensuring that tasks are completed effectively. These concepts often transition across organizational levels, adding to enforcement complexity (Mcgrath & Whitty, 2018). In retail settings, vague role delineations and a lack of clarity in data sharing and security responsibilities pose significant challenges to coordinated prevention efforts

(Okeke & Eiza, 2022). Furthermore, limited inter-agency coordination, especially among retail entities and law enforcement, hampers effective case management, dilutes ownership, and weakens enforcement efficacy (Muneer et al., 2023). Accountability in complex multi-actor contexts must consider not only direct perpetrators but also organizational and systemic contributors, demanding clearer frameworks to define and share liability across the involved institutions (Cross, 2019; Van De Poel & Sand, 2018). Addressing these challenges requires improved coordination mechanisms, clearer accountability frameworks, and role-based clarifications to strengthen the collective response to shoplifting.

## Theme 2: Procedural and Operational Challenges

Theme	Description	Responses
Absence of Standardized Procedures and Documentation	Participants reported that shoplifting cases are often handled without uniform reporting templates, written apprehension protocols, or standardized documentation systems. Although incidents are recorded, the format and completeness vary across establishments and agencies. This procedural inconsistency creates delays, weakens evidence integrity, and reduces the likelihood of successful prosecution. The lack of formal structure forces personnel to rely on personal judgment rather than clear guidelines.	P6 (Store Manager): “We don’t have a standard form. Sometimes it’s just handwritten notes.” P11 (Police Investigator): “Incomplete reports delay the filing of cases.” P15 (Security Staff): “We just follow what the previous staff used to do. There’s no written guide.”
Insufficient Training and Human Resource Capacity	Many informants highlighted limited refresher training, lack of legal knowledge, and inadequate staffing as operational constraints.	P4 (Security Officer): “We only had orientation when we were hired. No follow-up training after that.” P10 (Store

	personnel often learn through experience rather than formal preparation, reducing their confidence and effectiveness in handling complex or confrontational situations. This results in inconsistent enforcement practices and missed opportunities for proper evidence handling or lawful apprehension.	Supervisor): “Some staff don’t know the correct legal process, so they avoid filing cases.” P19 (Police Officer): “Manpower is limited, so we prioritize bigger crimes first.”
Resource and System Constraints Affecting Case Processing	Participants described operational barriers such as limited CCTV coverage, outdated equipment, time-consuming paperwork, and heavy workloads. These constraints slow down investigations and discourage formal reporting. As a result, institutions sometimes opt for informal settlements or minimal intervention to save time and resources. Such compromises weaken deterrence and contribute to underreporting of shoplifting incidents.	P8 (Store Security Head): “Some cameras have blind spots, so we don’t always get clear footage.” P14 (Barangay Official): “Processing papers takes too long, so mediation becomes easier.” P23 (Police Officer): “By the time documents are ready, the suspect is already gone.”

Shoplifting management faces significant procedural and operational challenges, including the absence of standardized procedures and documentation, insufficient staff training, and resource constraints that affect case processing. The lack of uniform procedures complicates enforcement efforts, as organizations operate without consistent guidelines, leading to variable practices that undermine effectiveness. For example, the enforcement of food promotion regulations by local authority officers illustrated the complexity and inconsistency in

approaches, largely due to unclear procedures and limited alignment with existing frameworks (Dhuria et al., 2024). Insufficient training and human resource capacity exacerbate these challenges, with frontline staff often being underprepared to deal with complex enforcement demands. The same research highlights that workforce constraints cause officers to prioritize some regulations while applying only light-touch approaches to others, reflecting capacity limitations (Dhuria et al., 2024). Furthermore, organizational studies on retail internal crime prevention reveal that vagueness in roles and lack of clarity in responsibility sharing prevent effective coordination, which can be traced to procedural gaps and inadequate training (Okeke & Eiza, 2022). Resource and system constraints, such as insufficient IT infrastructure and standardization deficits, also challenge data integration and operational efficiency within enforcement contexts, limiting timely case processing and responses (Cabrera et al., 2025). Together, these procedural and operational barriers impede effective shoplifting management, underscoring the need for standardized protocols, enhanced training, and investment in resources to streamline case processing and enforce compliance.

### Theme 3: Informal and Discretionary Practices

Theme	Description	Responses
Preference for Informal Settlements Over Formal Prosecution	Participants frequently described resolving shoplifting incidents through on-the-spot settlements such as verbal warnings, restitution, or payment for stolen items rather than filing formal complaints. While these practices are perceived as faster and less burdensome, they bypass legal procedures and reduce the likelihood of accountability. This informal approach often prevents incidents from entering official records, contributing to underreporting and weakened deterrence.	P3 (Store Manager): “If they pay for the item, we usually let them go.” P9 (Security Staff): “Filing a case takes too long, so settlement is easier.” P14 (Barangay Official): “Most stores just want the items returned, not a police report.”
Situational Decision-Making Based on	Enforcement actions were often guided by discretion rather	P6 (Security Guard): “Sometimes we just warn them,

Personal Judgment	than standardized protocols. Staff described making case-by-case decisions depending on the suspect's age, behavior, or perceived intent. Although this flexibility allows quick responses, it leads to inconsistent application of rules and potential bias. The absence of formal criteria results in varied outcomes for similar offenses across establishments.	especially if they're minors." P12 (Store Supervisor): "It depends on the situation and how serious it looks." P18 (Police Officer): "Some stores endorse every case, others never report at all."
Workarounds to Reduce Procedural Burden	Informants acknowledged creating shortcuts to cope with lengthy documentation, limited manpower, and bureaucratic requirements. These include simplified reports, delayed endorsements, or avoiding formal coordination altogether. While these adaptations help manage workload pressures, they weaken procedural integrity and reduce the consistency of enforcement practices. Such workarounds reflect systemic constraints rather than deliberate non-compliance.	P5 (Store Clerk): "We don't always complete the forms because it takes too much time." P15 (Barangay Staff): "We settle it here so they don't have to go to the police anymore." P21 (Police Investigator): "Sometimes cases are not pursued because the complainant is already tired of the process."

Informal and discretionary practices significantly influence enforcement dynamics within the policing and regulatory contexts, often favoring informal settlements over formal prosecutions. Police officers frequently exercise their discretion to navigate procedural complexities, opting for resolutions that alleviate case burdens and expedite outcomes. For example, in the Danish victim-offender mediation program, police

discretion is evident in low referral rates influenced by officers' moral evaluations and intuitive judgments regarding offenders, resulting in decisions that prioritize pragmatic and relational considerations over formal procedures (Sandbye et al., 2023). This discretion also reflects situational decision-making, where personal judgment determines whether mediation or punitive action is pursued, illustrating a reliance on informal assessments to manage cases efficiently. During the COVID-19 pandemic, frontline police adapted by increasing the use of informal measures alongside their formal powers, balancing victim safeguarding with concerns over proportionality. Officers' discretionary decision-making is central to tailoring responses while managing procedural demands under exceptional circumstances (Johnson & Hohl, 2023). Similarly, frontline bureaucrats in Indonesia demonstrated improvisational "repair" of state policies through informal collaborative efforts, highlighting how informal networks and adaptive practices emerged to navigate resource constraints and inflexible formal mandates (Ningrum & Lotta, 2024). Moreover, frontline officers often experience policy alienation and legal ambiguity, leading them to interpret and enforce policies variably, which underscores the workarounds to circumvent procedural burdens and maintain operational effectiveness within institutional constraints (Ferencz et al., 2025). These discretionary practices shape enforcement outcomes but raise concerns about consistency, equity, and transparency, necessitating a nuanced recognition of how informal decision-making coexists with formal enforcement frameworks in China.

#### Theme 4: Institutional Constraints and Systemic Barriers

Theme	Description	Responses
Limited Manpower and Workload Pressures	Participants consistently reported that insufficient personnel and heavy workloads restrict their ability to thoroughly process shoplifting incidents. Retail staff often multitask between operations and security, while police officers prioritize more serious crimes. As a result, shoplifting cases receive minimal attention or are deprioritized, reducing	P4 (Security Officer): "We are only two guards for the whole store, so we can't watch everything." P10 (Police Officer): "Shoplifting is minor compared to other crimes, so it's not always prioritized." P17 (Store Manager): "We focus more on operations, not every small theft can be documented."

	enforcement consistency. These manpower limitations lead institutions to adopt quicker but less formal responses.	
Inadequate Technology and Infrastructure Support	Informants described operational challenges related to limited CCTV coverage, outdated surveillance systems, and lack of integrated reporting platforms. Blind spots, poor footage quality, and the delay evidence gathering and weaken case credibility. Without reliable technological support, detection and documentation become inconsistent, forcing staff to rely on observation and memory rather than objective proof.	P8 (Security Head): "Some cameras are old or not working, so we miss incidents." P13 (Store Staff): "We don't have a system to store reports digitally, everything is manual." P22 (Police Investigator): "Without clear CCTV, it's hard to build a strong case."
Policy Ambiguity and Weak Legal Follow-Through	Participants expressed uncertainty regarding legal procedures, civil recovery mechanisms, and prosecution processes. The absence of clear institutional policies and perceived complexity of legal requirements discourage formal case filing. Some institutions avoid escalation due to fear of legal mistakes or prolonged court processes. This	P6 (Store Manager): "We're not sure about the legal steps, so we just settle it." P14 (Barangay Official): "People prefer mediation because court cases take too long." P20 (Police Officer): "Even if we file cases, sometimes they don't push through."

	ambiguity weakens accountability and reduces confidence in the justice system's ability to resolve shoplifting cases effectively.	
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#### Theme 4: Institutional Constraints and Systemic Barriers

Institutional and structural constraints are fundamental barriers to the consistent enforcement of laws against shoplifting. Participants described chronic manpower shortages, heavy workloads, outdated surveillance systems, and limited logistical support that restricted their ability to document, investigate, and pursue cases thoroughly. These operational limitations reduce institutional responsiveness and often compel agencies to prioritize more serious crimes, leaving shoplifting incidents minimally addressed in the process. These findings align with organizational capacity research, demonstrating that insufficient resources and workforce deficits weaken policy implementation and produce uneven enforcement outcomes across institutions (Bernal-Sundiang et al., 2022). Moreover, investments in technological systems are increasingly recognized as critical for improving operational efficiency, documentation accuracy and service delivery. Evidence from Philippine higher education similarly shows that technology-supported innovations enhance institutional effectiveness and user engagement when accompanied by adequate training and system readiness (Anselmo et al., 2025), suggesting that digital infrastructure and human capacity development must advance together to strengthen enforcement. Beyond material shortages, unclear procedures and bureaucratic delays further complicate case processing, discouraging formal reporting and prosecutions. Similar studies have noted that structural inefficiencies and administrative burdens frequently lead frontline actors to adopt simplified or selective enforcement strategies to cope with constraints (Dhuria et al., 2024). Together, these conditions indicate that enforcement gaps stem not only from individual behavior but also from systemic limitations, suggesting that sustainable shoplifting control requires comprehensive institutional strengthening rather than isolated operational fixes to be effective.

#### Theme 5: Strategies and Policy Improvements

Theme	Description	Responses
Need for Standardized Policies and Clear Protocols	Participants emphasized the importance of establishing uniform procedures such as standardized reporting	P3 (Store Manager): "It would help if all stores follow the same reporting format." P11 (Police

	templates, written apprehension guidelines, and formal civil recovery policies. They expressed that consistent documentation and clear step-by-step protocols would reduce confusion, improve legal defensibility, and promote fairness across institutions. Standardization was viewed as a foundation for professionalizing shoplifting management.	Investigator): “Complete and standard documents make filing cases faster.” P15 (Security Staff): “If we had written procedures, everyone would know exactly what to do.”
Strengthening Inter-Agency Coordination and Information Sharing	Informants recommended closer collaboration among retail stores, police, barangays, and correctional agencies through regular meetings, shared communication channels, and joint planning. Participants noted that collective action would improve response time, reduce case dropouts, and ensure continuity from detection to prosecution. Coordinated systems were perceived as more effective than isolated efforts.	P9 (Police Officer): “We should have regular coordination meetings with store managers.” P14 (Barangay Official): “If we share information, repeat offenders can be tracked.” P18 (Store Security Head): “Working together is better than handling cases individually.”
Capacity Building Through Training and Resource Support	Participants highlighted the need for refresher training, legal orientation, upgraded surveillance tools, and additional manpower to enhance operational readiness. Continuous professional	P4 (Security Officer): “Regular training would make us more confident in handling suspects.” P13 (Store Staff): “Better cameras and systems would make documentation easier.” P21

	development was seen as critical for adapting to evolving shoplifting tactics. Investments in human and technological resources were viewed as long-term solutions that would strengthen both prevention and enforcement outcomes.	(Police Investigator): “With more personnel and equipment, we can respond faster.”
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The participants’ proposed strategies emphasized that effective shoplifting management depends on systemic coordination rather than isolated institutional actions. Recommendations for standardized reporting templates, written protocols, and unified documentation procedures reflect the need for consistency and legal clarity across agencies. Governance literature similarly highlights that clearly defined roles, shared standards, and structured processes enhance accountability and improve collaborative crime prevention outcomes (Forkby, 2018; Okeke and Eiza, 2022). In addition, calls for regular inter-agency meetings, information-sharing platforms, training programs, and technological upgrades underscore the importance of organizational capacity in translating policies into practice. Evidence suggests that integrated systems and sustained resource investments strengthen frontline performance and promote more reliable enforcement (Zech et al., 2023). Collectively, these recommendations point toward coordinated governance and capacity building as essential foundations for treating shoplifting as a public crime rather than an informal private matter.

## DISCUSSION

This study shows that managing shoplifting as a public crime depends less on formal policies and more on how frontline institutions interpret and operationalize them in practice. The enforcement responsibilities dispersed across retail stores, police, barangays, and correctional agencies create fragmented processes, weak accountability, and inconsistent case outcomes. Such disjunctions reflect broader governance research, demonstrating that unclear roles, limited information sharing, and fragmented institutional mandates undermine collaborative crime prevention (Forkby, 2018; Okeke & Eiza, 2022). Similar patterns have been documented in urban Philippine public safety contexts, where gaps in coordination and enforcement capacity constrain the effective implementation of city ordinances and weaken overall security outcomes (Gile et al., 2025). Procedural gaps, inadequate training, and resource constraints further restrict implementation, often leading to selective enforcement (Dhuria et al., 2024). To cope, actors adopt informal settlements and discretionary practices, consistent with street-level decision-making, where pragmatism overrides formal mandates (Lønsmann & Sanden, 2018; Clark et al., 2023). Although expedient,

these practices weaken deterrence and contribute to underreporting. Participants' calls for standardized protocols, stronger coordination, and capacity-building support provide growing evidence that integrated governance, institutional clarity, and organizational support enhance policy effectiveness (Bernal-Sundiang et al., 2022; Zech et al., 2023).

## Implications

### Theoretical Implications (100 words)

This study contributes to theory by extending the institutional and street-level bureaucracy perspectives into the domain of retail crime management. The findings demonstrate that policy outcomes are shaped not only by formal regulations but also by frontline discretion, organizational capacity, and inter-agency coordination. The results support the view that fragmented governance structures produce policy-practice gaps, where implementation diverges from legal intent because of unclear accountability and resource constraints. By integrating institutional theory with collaborative governance and discretionary decision-making frameworks, this study advances a contextualized explanation of how public crime policies are negotiated in practice, particularly within multi-sector and resource-limited environments such as urban Philippine settings.

### Practical Implications

Practically, the findings highlight the need for operational improvements within frontline institutions responsible for managing shoplifting. Standardized reporting templates, clear procedural guidelines, and routine inter-agency communication can reduce delays and inconsistencies in case management. Regular training and legal orientation programs are essential for strengthening staff competence and confidence in applying formal procedures. Investments in surveillance technology and digital documentation systems can enhance the quality of evidence and case tracking. Moreover, promoting collaborative mechanisms, such as joint meetings and shared databases, can ensure continuity from detection to prosecution. Collectively, these measures enable institutions to shift from reactive, informal responses to more systematic and professional enforcement practices.

### Policy Implications

From a policy perspective, this study underscores the importance of coordinated governance frameworks that formally integrate retail establishments, law enforcement, barangays, and correctional agencies. Policymakers should institutionalize standardized protocols, clarify accountability structures, and mandate information-sharing mechanisms among agencies. Resource allocation must prioritize manpower augmentation, training support, and technological upgrades to ensure a consistent enforcement capacity. Legal processes should be streamlined to reduce procedural burdens that discourage formal reporting. By embedding collaboration and capacity building within policy design, shoplifting can be addressed as a genuine public crime rather than an

informal private matter, thereby improving deterrence, transparency, and justice outcomes.

### Limitations of the Study

This study had several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the qualitative design and purposive sampling of twenty-five key informants limited statistical generalizability beyond the selected urban context. Second, reliance on self-reported experiences may introduce recall bias or socially desirable responses, particularly among institutional actors discussing procedural flaws. Third, focusing on a single city restricts comparisons across different geographic or organizational environments. Finally, this study did not incorporate direct observation or quantitative case records that could further triangulate the findings. Despite these constraints, this research provides rich, contextualized insights applicable to similar multi-agency settings.

## CONCLUSION

This study illustrates that the management of shoplifting as a public crime is influenced by institutional realities, rather than solely by policy design. Although roles are formally delineated across retail stores, police, barangays, and correctional agencies, fragmented coordination, procedural inconsistencies, discretionary practices, and systemic constraints undermine the enforcement outcomes. These conditions create discrepancies between legal intent and practical implementation, leading to informal resolutions and the underreporting of cases. Nonetheless, participants identified viable improvements through standardization, collaboration, and capacity building. Overall, the findings underscore that sustainable retail theft prevention necessitates integrated governance, shared accountability, and enhanced institutional support, positioning coordinated multi-agency action as the foundation for effective and consistent shoplifting prevention.

## RECOMMENDATION

Based on these findings, institutions should adopt standardized reporting procedures, clear operational protocols, and unified documentation systems to ensure consistency across agencies. Regular inter-agency coordination meetings and shared databases are recommended to enhance communication and ensure case continuity. Capacity-building initiatives, including legal training, refresher programs, and technological upgrades, should be prioritized to strengthen frontline competence and improve evidence quality. Policymakers should streamline legal processes and allocate sufficient manpower and resources to reduce the procedural burdens that discourage formal reporting. Future research may expand to multiple cities and incorporate mixed methods to validate these patterns and develop broader models for coordinated retail crime management.

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