

Latest Tool Of Shoplifters: Metal in Bags

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Body

In what the Nassau County police called the method of choice for professional **shoplifters**, five people have been charged with using shopping **bags** lined with **metal** to circumvent store security systems and steal more than \$8,000 in merchandise from a mall in Massapequa.

The suspects, all illegal immigrants, may be part of a shoplifting ring operating along the East Coast, the police said.

"This is not the first time we have seen this," said Detective Lieut. Andrew Fal. "It has occurred in other malls in New York and even in other states."

The **shoplifters** were caught when officers, on patrol for car thieves at the Sunrise Mall, saw something odd Thursday afternoon: a group of shoppers kept coming out of the mall, dumping merchandise in a car and going back in.

The officers quickly concluded, "Either they're very fast shoppers, or something is wrong here," Lieutenant Fal said. What they found, he said, was a team of thieves.

Along with the \$8,000 in jeans, boots, blouses and shirts that had been taken from stores including Macy's and J. C. Penney, the police found a map and list indicating that the suspects had been stealing from malls throughout the metropolitan area, and perhaps as far away as Delaware, for months.

The five people arrested, all Queens residents and all illegal immigrants from Mexico, Peru and Argentina, were using three large shopping **bags** marked on the outside with the name of a department store and lined with a second **bag** apparently made of **metal**.

"There is no question that for the last six to eight months we have seen an increase in this technique where **shoplifters** are using aluminium-foil-lined **bags**," said Louis J. Chiera, a spokesman for Sensormatic Electronics Corporation, the world's biggest supplier of electronic surveillance systems for stores.

Mr. Chiera said in a telephone interview from company headquarters in Deerfield Beach, Fla., that retailers with newer systems that could penetrate the aluminum had caught thieves using variations on the theme.

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A would-be thief at a New York City discount store had constructed a pair of metal boxer shorts, a West Coast department store arrested a customer with a metal pouch inside his pants and several stores reported bags lined with duct tape that apparently had a high enough metal content to defeat the anti-shoplifting devices.

Anthony Davis, the security manager at the Nordstrom department store in Paramus, N.J., said some women had stuffed merchandise into specially designed girdles. In recent months, one woman was caught with 15 dresses in her girdle. Another attempted to conceal two leather jackets.

"It's just a common thing to see them now," Mr. Davis said. "Before, it was like, 'Oh my God, look at this.' You are not talking about a person who is shoplifting a \$25 pair of jeans. You are talking about a person who conceals over \$1,000 at a pop."

In hardware stores, thieves have occasionally filled metal garbage cans with goods they wanted to steal.

The Tower Records chain, an early victim of the technique, decided two years ago to invest the extra \$4,000 to \$5,000 per store for a newer system that can overcome the metal-lined bags and clothes, said Rodney A. Harris, assistant director for loss prevention.

The anti-theft devices first introduced over 12 years ago worked on low-frequency radio signals. Shoppers walked through an electronic bubble of radio waves created around the entrance to the store. If they left with one of the metal-lined plastic tags on an item of clothing, it would trip an alarm.

The metal-lined shopping bags prevented the security tag from returning the radio signals. The latest systems use sound waves instead to activate the security tags. The sound waves can penetrate the metal.

Retailers estimate the losses from shoplifting across the country in the hundreds of millions of dollars annually.

"This area has been victimized by these people and their bags," said Peter di Spagna, an investigator with the police burglary squad in Stamford, Conn. "The bags come in all varieties, shapes and sizes."

Sometimes referred to as booster bags, he said the shoplifters sometimes use pizza delivery bags and line them with lead sheeting similar to engine insulation in tractor-trailers. The pizza bags can be slung over the shoulder of the shoplifter and hidden under large winter coats.

"They are going after the high-ticket items," Officer di Spagna said. "These guys do this for a living. They are sort of like semiprofessionals."

The police said such thieves often work in pairs, with one distracting the salespeople while the other stuffs the bags. They said it was not uncommon for thieves using the bags to make off with thousands of dollars in goods in a day.

On Long Island, Lieutenant Fal said that the Federal Bureau of Investigation and the Immigration and Naturalization Service have been called in to investigate because a pattern was emerging of illegal aliens -- many who could not speak English -- working in teams as shoplifters.

The five arrested were Juan Martinez, 47, of Flushing, and Pedro Ramirez, 36, Adela Desoto, 39, Lucia Chanduvi, 38, and Jesusa Castro, 23, of Corona. All were arraigned yesterday at First District Court in Hempstead and charged with criminal possession of stolen property and possession of burglar tools.

The police said goods stolen in stores are often sold at a discount on the streets of large cities or to retailers who are involved in the ring.

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