

COVID facemasks as crime facilitators

Emily Sheard, School of Law, University of Leeds
Graham Farrell¹, School of Law, University of Leeds
August 2020

The problem

On 10 July 2020 in Scotland and 24 July in England it became compulsory for individuals to wear a face covering in shops and supermarkets, in addition to on public transport. The anonymity that facemasks provide could allow potential offenders to avoid detection by CCTV or prosecution using witness testimony. This could facilitate commercial robberies at premises such as betting shops, jewellery shops, off-licences, and takeaways – and this is the focus here. But masks could also facilitate street robberies, shoplifting, assaults and public disorder, offenders blending in more easily at places where a facemask would previously raise suspicion. In shops, they will be able get closer to stealable property without receiving scrutiny from staff or security personnel, and other customers in facemasks will provide camouflage.

What we know about commercial robbery and how we know it

The latest [Commercial Victimisation Survey](#) (CVS) indicates some year-on-year crime count increases in the Wholesale and Retail Sector (Home Office, 2019, pp.1-2). **Theft by customer** offences accounted for 71% of offences in 2018 with supermarkets experiencing higher prevalence and incidence rates than other premises. **Assaults and threats** increased on the previous survey year with larger businesses (50+ employees) suffering a higher incidence rate than smaller businesses. While victimisation rates declined for some crime types vs. the 2012 CVS, the percentage of premises **robbed** increased from 3 to 5 percent.

We know that commercial robbery, like most crimes, is highly concentrated at a few types of stores, and in a few places, and that successful robbers return to the same premises or those nearby or of the same type to do it again (e.g. Gill 2000, [Matthews et al. 2001](#)). There is also evidence in the literature that some commercial robbers wear face coverings as disguise (see e.g. [Kruize, 2001](#);173).

What we think might happen in the COVID-19 pandemic

In 2020 the commercial robbery rate fell as premises were closed; we need to wait for future surveys to determine the extent of this. As commercial premises reopen there is a possibility of a surge, facilitated by the increased use of facemasks. For example, although they were sometimes used before the pandemic, there have been news reports of commercial [robbers wearing surgical masks](#) and reports of [a surge in California](#). So, we need to continue to track crime data to find out (1) if the proportion of crimes using surgical masks is increasing, post reopening, and (2) if commercial robbery and other crimes are increasing disproportionately.

We focus here on what *might* happen as a result of the new legislation. We do not know for sure: news headlines are not sufficient evidence. But they suggest that some effort to anticipate and prevent such issues may be warranted, and that close monitoring of the situation is needed.

¹ This work was supported by grant ES/V00445X/1 from the Economic and Social Research Council

Some ideas in response

- Till and shop-counter screens introduced to prevent virus spread could be double-purpose if sufficiently target-hardened to reduce robbery. Screens reduced robberies at post offices ([Ekblom 1987](#)) and building societies ([Austin 1988](#)).
- Tactics to [prevent repeat and near repeat](#) robberies are likely to prove fruitful since we know that successful commercial robbers return to the same, nearby or same-type premises.
- Police and retail partners should consider offering relevant crime prevention advice to high risk businesses (see e.g. [that by West Yorkshire Police](#)).
- Close monitoring and further research are needed to establish if there have been changes in modus operandi and in rates of commercial crimes of different types since facemasks were introduced. Information from other countries may be useful here.

Relevant resources and references

- Austin, C. 1988. [The Prevention of Robbery at Building Society Branches](#). *Crime Prevention* Unit paper 14. London: Home Office.
- Cabinet Office. 2020. [Face coverings: How to wear one and how to make your own](#).
- Ekblom, P. 1987. *Preventing robberies at sub-post offices; an evaluation of a security initiative*. *Crime Prevention* Unit paper 9. London: Home Office.
- Gill, M. 2000. *Commercial Robbery: Offenders' Perspectives on Security and Crime Prevention*. London: Blackstone Press.
- Home Office. 2019. [Crime against businesses: Findings from the 2018 Commercial Victimization Survey, Statistical Bulletin 17/19](#). London: Home Office.
- Kruize, P. 2001. [Preventive and repressive strategies to limit the number of commercial robberies in Denmark](#). *Journal of Scandinavian Studies in Criminology and Crime Prevention*. **2**, pp.171-190.
- Matthews, R., Pease. C and Pease. K. 2001. [Repeated bank robbery: Themes and variations](#), in [Repeat Victimization](#). New York: Criminal Justice Press.
- West Yorkshire Police. 2020. [Commercial Robbery](#). (Accessed July 2020).