



## Community Capital beats Community Crime: developing a local shop theft network.

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**Initiative:** Waitara Community Development Project, Waitara.

**Theme:** Working Together in Place

**Although Waitara crime statistics have shown a huge decrease in recent years, shop theft continues to be a problem. Yet shop theft wasn't known to local Waitara police as a big issue until the Waitara Community Development Project (WCDP) Advisor told them it was. In 2010, for example, only four incidents had been reported. However, taking time to chat to local retailers revealed a real concern.**

Some retailers reported losing up to \$7000 each year but past experience had taught them that reporting shop theft to police left them feeling powerless and frustrated because "nothing was ever done about it". Retailers also reported not knowing how to handle the situation or the offenders effectively and not knowing their rights.

To develop some local solutions, it was decided to host a Shop Theft Prevention Seminar to help retailers work together to learn how to prevent shop theft and to strengthen their business against crime more generally. The WCDP partnered with the Waitara Business and Promotions Association and the Local Police to contract Educators NZ Ltd who are a company specifically trained in educating retailers about shop theft.

60 local businesses and retail people came together for the seminar. This significant representation from a town with a total population of only 6,500 further highlighted the local interest in reducing crime and taking action themselves. It also showed the huge impact of effective local relationships in Waitara, as in New Plymouth (population 70,000) a few weeks later the same educator was booked for a similar event where only two people turned up.

In Waitara, those attending learned some great skills to help them in the prevention, detection and apprehension of suspected offenders. The seminar also created an opportunity to strengthen relationships with police, neighbourhood support and with one another. This was enhanced when the core idea emanating from the seminar proved to be the building of a network to share information about shop thieves and thereby assist in the prevention and spread of theft by known offenders. The idea was based on a shop theft network run successfully in a nearby town. In Waitara's version, photos, names and descriptions of offenders are circulated by email to be

displayed to shop staff, but not to the public, in order to make theft more difficult for known thieves. The network also enables retailers to support one another through the stresses associated with shop theft situations and consequences.

The success of the implementation of this project is based on the theory of community collaboration. The WCDP, Waitara Police and the Business Association successfully formed this project not only by ensuring the seminar went off well, but also by initiating a social change process – together in the seminar and afterwards, communities were able to advance their thinking and action about crime in such a way that they changed the ways they acted. And, by putting resource into hosting the seminar, the organising group enabled the community to collaborate, to learn together, to develop tools and strategies to deal with crime. By doing these things a ‘community movement for change’ (Born, undated) was created and local capacity and capabilities were strengthened and advanced.

Local Waitara retailers are now developing other initiatives including further seminars about dealing with staff theft, empowering both owners and staff to deal with thieves in the critical moments after theft is confronted and circulating their own crime information. All of this is happening primarily because the retailers now talk to one another and work together more. Very quickly, this activity has become independent from organisation by WCDP, the police and the Business Association because in the experience of the initial seminars and follow up co-creation, local business owners have enhanced their own capacity and capabilities to tackle the issue together, amongst themselves.

**Intent:**

To reduce shop theft and empower local retailers in their dealings with recognised shop thieves.

**Key Learnings:**

- Statistics are only a part of the picture. Digging deeper and talking to those involved on the ground can reveal quite a different take on specific situations.
- Local solutions come about through partnering and working to the strengths of those involved. By working together, not only are particular situations revealed but innovative local solutions can be generated which go on to underpin further collaborative efforts.
- Seeding and facilitating collaboration can very quickly enable the growth in capability and capacity of those involved, especially when the issue or opportunity resonates with them. Yet without the investment in seeding and facilitation, issues and opportunities can remain unrealised potential.

**Key Outcomes:**

- Relationships were further strengthened and formerly disenfranchised retailers have realised that they can rely on police and neighbourhood support for even very small issues.
- Retailers now see themselves as part of a retail community in Waitara. While competition is still there, there is a growing recognition that they have many aims and aspirations in common too.
- By achieving true community collaboration in Waitara our retailers were led by a vision of reduced crime and they saw not only this end vision but the required steps to get there.
- Shop theft as reported by retailers is down!

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**References:**

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