



Reported Flash Mob Shoplifting Incidents: 2020–2024

FBI's Uniform Crime Reporting (UCR) Program

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Highlights

The FBI describes a flash mob as a form of shoplifting that occurs when an organized group selects a specific retail store from which to collectively steal. Flash mob shoplifting is not a dedicated offense for law enforcement agencies to report in the National Incident-Based Reporting System (NIBRS) of the FBI’s UCR Program; however, NIBRS data are versatile and can be used to compile incidents that align with the FBI’s description.

This report defines a flash mob shoplifting incident as one that includes a reported shoplifting offense occurring at a location defined as a store or otherwise dealing in buying/selling activity, with six or more offenders, and no more than one business reported as a victim. This study analyzes shoplifting data over five years, from 2020 through 2024, that meet this constructed definition for a flash mob.

- More flash mob shoplifting incidents were reported in 2024 than in 2020, although there was not a continuous year-over-year increase when considering consistency of NIBRS-reporting agencies.
- Offenders participating in reported flash mob shoplifting incidents from 2020 through 2024 stole \$8,366,280 worth of goods and destroyed \$51,139 worth of property.
- Clothes/furs were the most targeted stolen property in reported flash mob shoplifting incidents.
- Flash mob shoplifting incidents were more likely to involve weapons or force than non-flash mob shoplifting incidents.
- Victims were more likely to be injured in flash mob shoplifting incidents than in non-flash mob shoplifting incidents.

Introduction

The term “flash mob” has been applied to criminal incidents in which groups of offenders collectively shoplift, using a large number of offenders as an overwhelming tactic to avoid preventative measures. The FBI’s UCR Program does not have a dedicated offense or data element to indicate whether a shoplifting incident was a flash mob; however, the versatility of NIBRS data allows for the creation of a constructed definition to identify shoplifting incidents that meet flash mob conditions.

Initiated in the 1980s by the FBI, NIBRS collects more detailed information on crime than the FBI’s Summary Reporting System, which was created in the 1920s. Through NIBRS, agencies

can report distinct larceny-theft offenses (e.g., shoplifting) and can report up to ten offenses occurring within a single incident.¹ NIBRS also provides a multitude of data elements describing the details of each incident, including incident date and time, involved weapons, particulars on stolen or damaged property, sustained injuries, and demographics on victims, offenders, and arrestees.

The population represented by the agencies contributing NIBRS data has grown in recent years, surpassing 87% of the U.S. population covered by agencies enrolled in the FBI’s UCR Program in 2024. This increasing coverage offers a unique opportunity to study more intricate crime trends at a national level. An exploration of flash mob shoplifting incidents is one example of the analytic flexibility of NIBRS.

How does this report define a flash mob shoplifting incident?

Participating Offenders

The FBI’s UCR Program defines shoplifting as the unlawful taking of goods or merchandise exposed for sale by a person (other than an employee). Nearly four million (3,978,403) incidents with a shoplifting offense were reported to the FBI’s UCR Program via NIBRS from 2020 through 2024. More than 60% of these shoplifting incidents were perpetrated by a single offender. About 16% involved a small group of two to five offenders, and more than 20% of incidents did not indicate offender data. Only 0.1% of these shoplifting incidents involved groups of six or more offenders.

Table 1. Number of Offenders in Reported Incidents with Shoplifting Offenses, 2020–2024

Offenders	Incidents	Percentage
Unknown offender(s)	847,842	21.3
1 offender per incident	2,493,767	62.7
2 – 5 offenders per incident	633,290	15.9
6+ offenders per incident	3,504	0.1
Total	3,978,403	100.0

Location Types

Law enforcement agencies submitting data via NIBRS report the type of location/premises where each offense in an incident took place. A shoplifting offense may occur at any NIBRS location type, except for cyberspace. From 2020 through 2024, the ten most common location types for

¹ The FBI’s UCR Program defines an offense as a violation of the law, and an incident as one or more offenses committed by the same offender, or group of offenders acting in concert, at the same time and place.

shoplifting offenses involving six or more offenders occurred at locations defined as a store or otherwise participating in buying/selling activities, or at a location specified as Other/Unknown.

Nearly all (97.7%) of the 3,504 incidents with shoplifting offenses involving six or more offenders occurred at one of these ten most common location types. To align with the FBI's description of flash mobs targeting retail stores, the remaining 80 incidents (2.3%) at non-retail locations were not considered as potential flash mob incidents.

Table 2. Locations of Shoplifting Offenses Involving Six or More Offenders, 2020–2024

Location Type	Incidents	Cumulative Percentage
Department/Discount Store*	1,192	34.0
Specialty Store*	638	52.2
Convenience Store*	464	65.5
Grocery/Supermarket*	329	74.9
Shopping Mall*	242	81.8
Other/Unknown*	161	86.4
Service/Gas Station*	135	90.2
Drug Store/Doctor's Office/Hospital*	123	93.7
Commercial/Office Building*	81	96.0
Liquor Store*	59	97.7
Restaurant	22	98.3
Highway/Road/Alley/Street/Sidewalk	20	98.9
Parking/Drop Lot/Garage	9	99.2
Residence/Home	7	99.4
School – College/University	6	99.5
Hotel/Motel/Etc.	5	99.7
Government/Public Building	3	99.8
Construction Site	2	99.8
School – Elementary/Secondary	2	99.9
Air/Bus/Train Terminal	1	99.9
Field/Woods	1	99.9
Industrial Site	1	100.0
Rental Storage Facility	1	100.0

*Locations considered to meet the constructed definition of a flash mob incident

Victim Types

Incidents submitted via NIBRS may involve more than one victim, each of which may be classified as a specific victim type, e.g., individual or business. To exclude incidents in which multiple offenders may have shoplifted from multiple separate businesses, shoplifting offenses involving six or more offenders and more than one business victim were not considered as potential flash mob incidents.

Constructed Definition

By collectively analyzing the offense, offender, and victim data, this report defines a flash mob as an incident with a reported shoplifting offense occurring at a location defined as a store or otherwise dealing in retail, with six or more offenders, and no more than one business reported as the victim of the shoplifting. From 2020 through 2024, there were 3,321 incidents matching this constructed flash mob definition reported to the FBI's UCR Program.

Figure 1. Flash Mob Conditions Applied to Reported Shoplifting Offenses, 2020–2024

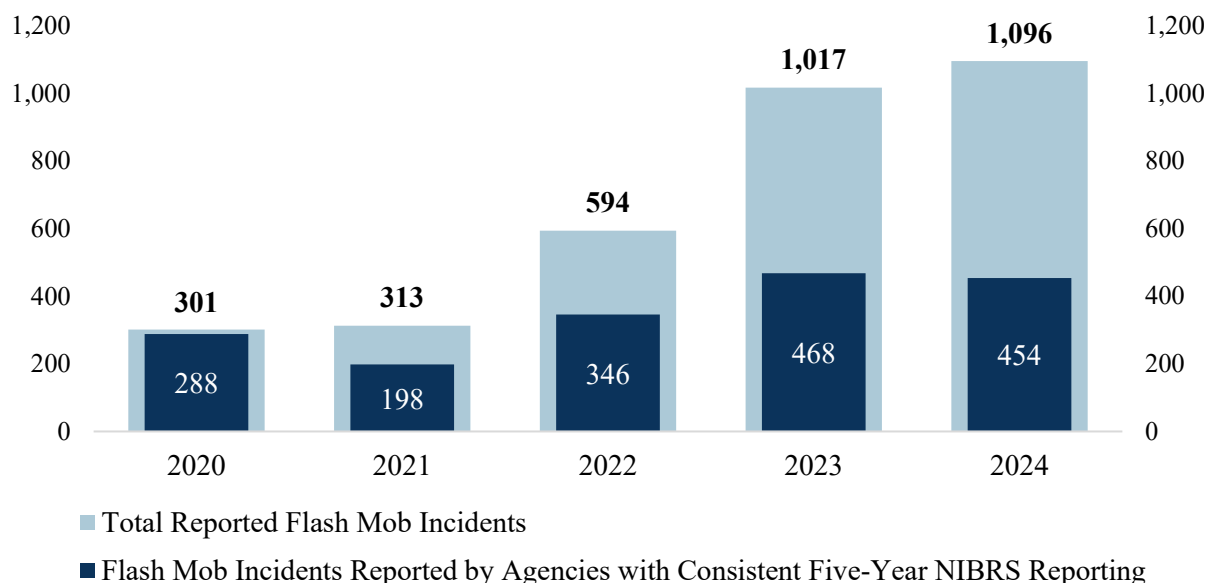


Are flash mob shoplifting incidents increasing?

Although more than three times as many total flash mob shoplifting incidents were reported to the FBI's UCR Program in 2024 than in 2020, this may not accurately reflect a true comparative increase in this type of shoplifting. One consideration is the year-to-year increase in NIBRS participation; as more agencies submit NIBRS data, the number of flash mob shoplifting incidents reported to the FBI's UCR Program may consequently rise.

Figure 2 shows that the incidents reported by those agencies that had the ability to submit NIBRS data throughout the entire 5-year span of 2020 through 2024 (i.e., agencies with a NIBRS start date on or prior to January 1, 2020) increased by 166 incidents, from 288 in 2020 to 454 in 2024.

Figure 2. Reported Flash Mob Shoplifting Incidents, 2020–2024



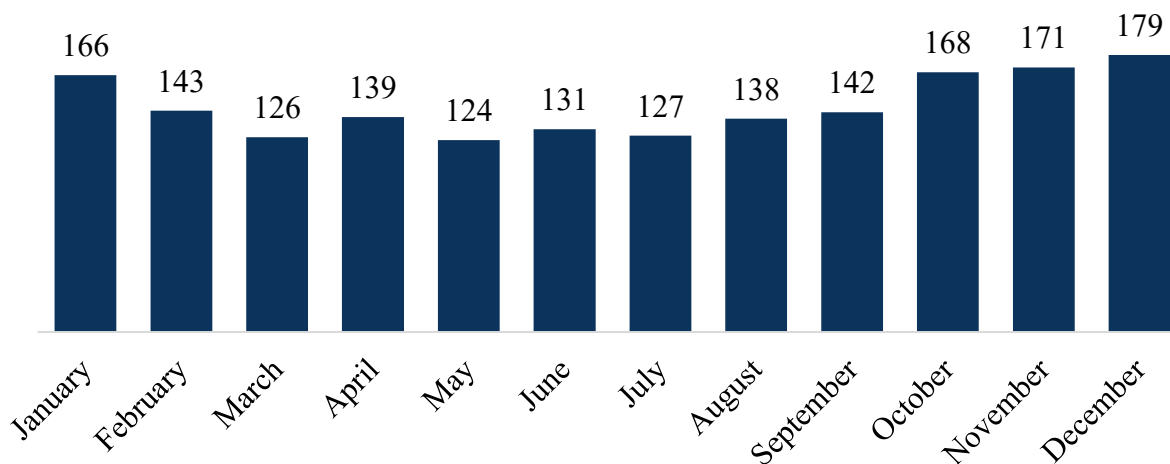
Characteristics of Reported Flash Mob Shoplifting Incidents

Incident Dates and Times

For a more comparable view of temporal changes in reported flash mob shoplifting incidents, only incidents reported by agencies consistently able to submit NIBRS data over the entire five-year period were considered for the following month-to-month and time of day evaluations.

From 2020 through 2024, there were 1,754 flash mob shoplifting incidents reported by agencies with a NIBRS start date on or before January 1, 2020. Figure 3 illustrates how flash mob shoplifting incidents were slightly more common toward the end of the calendar year, with 29.5% (518) occurring in the final quarter from October through December.

Figure 3. Reported Flash Mob Shoplifting Incidents, by Month, 2020–2024



Sixteen (16) of the 1,754 flash mob shoplifting incidents reported by agencies with the ability to submit data via NIBRS for the entire five-year period did not report the time the incident occurred. Table 3 shows the time of day and day of week for the 1,738 flash mob shoplifting incidents with a reported incident time. About one-fifth (20.7%) occurred between 5 p.m. and 7 p.m. Please note, Table 3 provides a limited temporal analysis of reported flash mob shoplifting incidents. It does not consider factors like seasonality or geographic region, which may influence such date and time trends.

Another consideration when viewing Table 3 is that law enforcement records management systems (RMS) may default the time of an incident to 12:00 a.m. when the actual time is unknown or not specified. The FBI's UCR Program is not able to determine whether an incident reportedly occurring at 12:00 a.m. in fact occurred at that particular time, or if 12:00 a.m. was a default value supplied by the agency's RMS.

Table 3. Reported Flash Mob Shoplifting Incidents, by Time of Day and Day of Week, 2020–2024

Time of Day	Sun	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat	Total
12:00 a.m. – 12:59 a.m.	6	11	7	9	16	17	13	79
1:00 a.m. – 1:59 a.m.	1	0	4	2	3	2	4	16
2:00 a.m. – 2:59 a.m.	5	4	4	4	3	3	2	25
3:00 a.m. – 3:59 a.m.	4	1	3	2	2	4	0	16
4:00 a.m. – 4:59 a.m.	4	1	1	1	1	3	3	14
5:00 a.m. – 5:59 a.m.	1	1	1	0	0	2	0	5
6:00 a.m. – 6:59 a.m.	1	1	1	3	1	3	5	15
7:00 a.m. – 7:59 a.m.	2	3	5	3	2	1	2	18
8:00 a.m. – 8:59 a.m.	4	4	3	6	2	2	4	25
9:00 a.m. – 9:59 a.m.	4	4	4	6	3	1	2	24
10:00 a.m. – 10:59 a.m.	2	9	8	6	2	8	6	41
11:00 a.m. – 11:59 a.m.	15	11	9	14	12	8	6	75
12:00 p.m. – 12:59 p.m.	14	14	12	11	11	14	15	91
1:00 p.m. – 1:59 p.m.	9	10	18	19	16	15	13	100
2:00 p.m. – 2:59 p.m.	18	16	19	7	25	24	17	126
3:00 p.m. – 3:59 p.m.	23	17	25	22	18	16	20	141
4:00 p.m. – 4:59 p.m.	21	22	13	21	28	24	23	152
5:00 p.m. – 5:59 p.m.	30	25	22	24	28	22	27	178
6:00 p.m. – 6:59 p.m.	17	27	28	31	24	30	24	181
7:00 p.m. – 7:59 p.m.	18	20	25	22	22	13	37	157
8:00 p.m. – 8:59 p.m.	11	19	28	19	13	20	15	125
9:00 p.m. – 9:59 p.m.	6	13	4	6	12	8	11	60
10:00 p.m. – 10:59 p.m.	3	6	11	2	3	4	8	37
11:00 p.m. – 11:59 p.m.	2	4	4	5	7	8	7	37
Total	221	244	261	247	255	253	266	1,738

Table 3 Legend

Incident Count



Associated Offenses

Most flash mob shoplifting incidents (88.1%) reported from 2020 through 2024 only involved one offense: shoplifting. The remainder of the incidents reported a shoplifting offense and one or more additional distinct offense type. The 3,975,082 incidents with a reported shoplifting offense that did not meet the constructed definition of a flash mob (non-flash mob shoplifting incidents) reported over the same time frame were more likely to only contain a single offense, with 93.8% of these incidents limited to the one shoplifting offense.

Table 4. Reported Offense Counts per Shoplifting Incident, 2020–2024

Distinct Offense Types per Incident	Flash Mob Incidents	Percentage	Non-Flash Mob Incidents	Percentage
1	2,926	88.1	3,727,974	93.8
2	326	9.8	200,027	5.0
3	50	1.5	40,471	1.0
4	13	0.4	5,560	0.1
5	3	0.1	866	<0.1
6	2	0.1	144	<0.1
7	1	<0.1	34	<0.1
8	0	<0.1	4	<0.1
9	0	<0.1	2	<0.1
Total	3,321	100.0	3,975,082	100.0

The most common offense type that occurred in connection with flash mob shoplifting incidents was destruction/damage/vandalism of property, which was reported in 73 (2.2% of) flash mob shoplifting incidents from 2020 through 2024. Simple assault was reported in 63 (1.9% of) flash mob shoplifting incidents, and burglary/breaking & entering was reported in 53 (1.6% of) flash mob shoplifting incidents over the observed five years.

Table 5 shows the frequency of offenses most often occurring in connection with flash mob shoplifting incidents and how those frequencies compare to non-flash mob shoplifting incidents. For example, while the offense of destruction/damage/vandalism of property occurred in connection with 2.2% of flash mob shoplifting incidents from 2020 through 2024, this offense only occurred in connection with 0.5% of non-flash mob shoplifting incidents within the same time frame.

Table 5. Offense Types More Frequently Associated with Shoplifting Incidents, 2020–2024

Offense Type	Flash Mob Incidents	Percentage	Non-Flash Mob Incidents	Percentage
Destruction/Damage/Vandalism of Property	73	2.2	21,287	0.5
Simple Assault	63	1.9	31,706	0.8
Burglary/Breaking & Entering	53	1.6	7,708	0.2
Drug/Narcotic Violations	51	1.5	77,783	2.0
Stolen Property Offenses	48	1.4	30,634	0.8
All Other Larceny	33	1.0	9,174	0.2
Aggravated Assault	24	0.7	7,795	0.2
Drug Equipment Violations	18	0.5	56,818	1.4
Robbery	16	0.5	2,977	0.1
False Pretenses/Swindle/Confidence Game	16	0.5	11,690	0.3

Arrestees

More than 3,600 (3,673) people were arrested in connection with reported flash mob shoplifting incidents from 2020 through 2024. Over half (58.1%) were males, and more than two-fifths (42.4%) were between the ages of 10 and 19. Comparatively, the 1,694,231 persons arrested in connection with reported non-flash mob shoplifting incidents also tended to be male (56.1%), but only 11.6% of the non-flash mob shoplifting arrestees were between the ages of 10 and 19.

Figure 4. Sex of Shoplifting Arrestees, 2020–2024

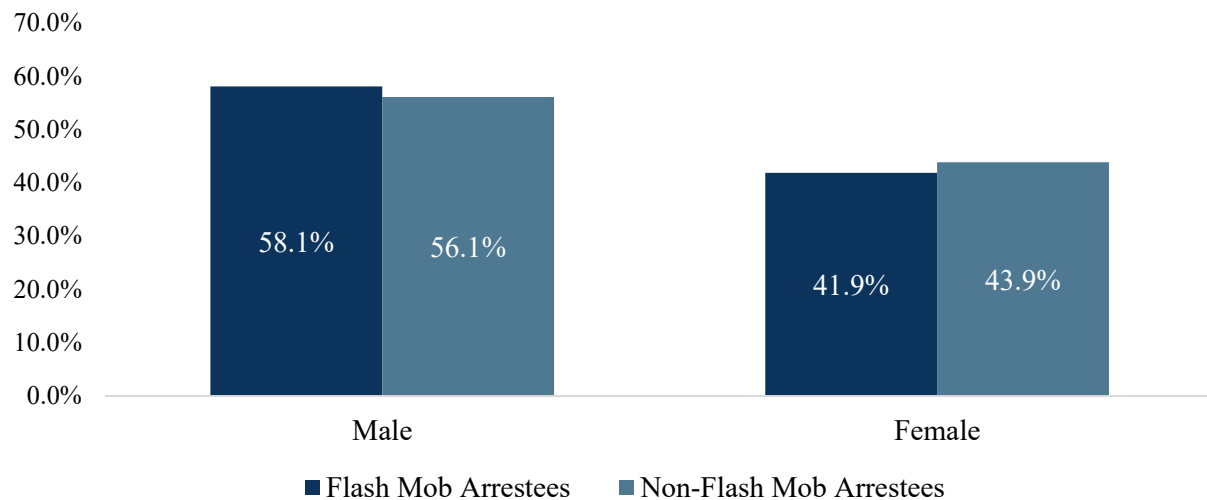
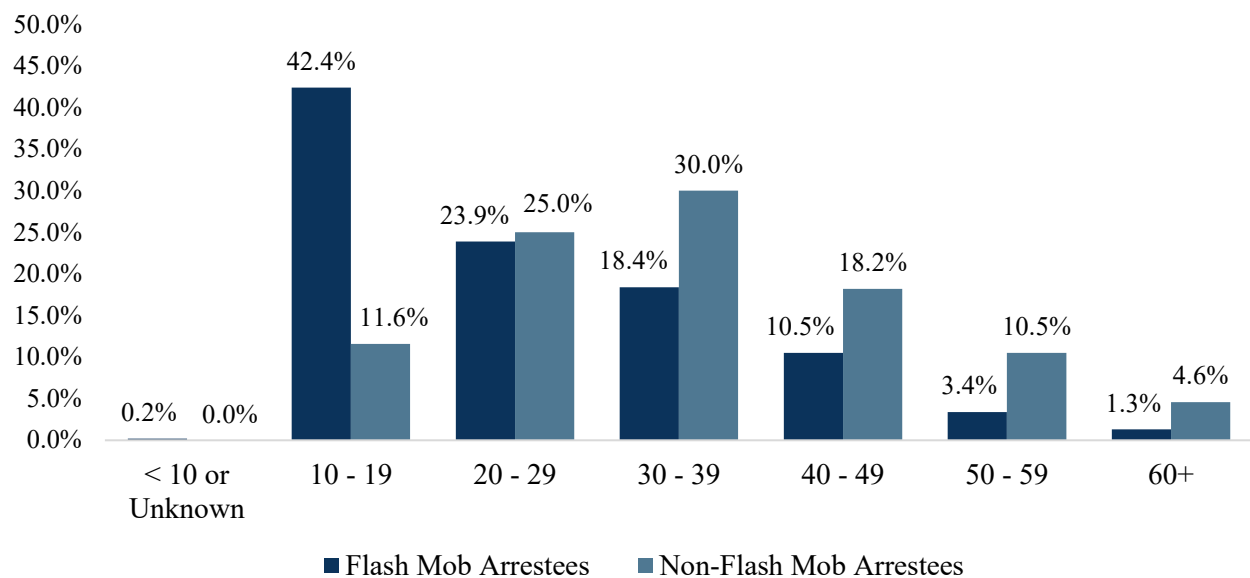


Figure 5. Age of Shoplifting Arrestees, 2020–2024*



*Due to rounding, the percentages may not add to 100.0%

What merchandise do flash mob shoplifting offenders target?

From 2020 through 2024, merchandise described as clothes/furs was reported stolen in over a quarter (25.2%) of reported flash mob shoplifting incidents, with offenders stealing an average of \$2,840 worth of clothes/furs in each incident with this stolen property description. Table 6 displays the types of property most frequently stolen in flash mob shoplifting incidents over the five-year period.

Table 6. Merchandise Most Often Targeted in Flash Mob Shoplifting Incidents, 2020–2024

Stolen Property Description	Total Stolen Property Value	Incidents Involving Stolen Property	Average Value Stolen per Incident
Clothes/Furs	\$2,374,638	836	\$2,840
Consumable Goods	\$748,999	815	\$919
Merchandise	\$1,392,138	750	\$1,856
Other	\$1,620,261	693	\$2,338
Alcohol	\$103,610	239	\$434
Household Goods	\$127,084	151	\$842
Purses/Handbags/Wallets	\$599,028	66	\$9,076
Jewelry/Precious Metals/Gems	\$631,624	50	\$12,632
Tools	\$89,529	41	\$2,184
Portable Electronic Communications	\$229,595	40	\$5,740

How violent are flash mob shoplifting offenders?

Weapons

For incidents involving certain offenses, agencies reporting via NIBRS may indicate up to three types of weapons or force used by the offender(s), if any were used.² All other offenses cannot, by definition, involve weapons or force. As a larceny-theft offense, shoplifting cannot involve

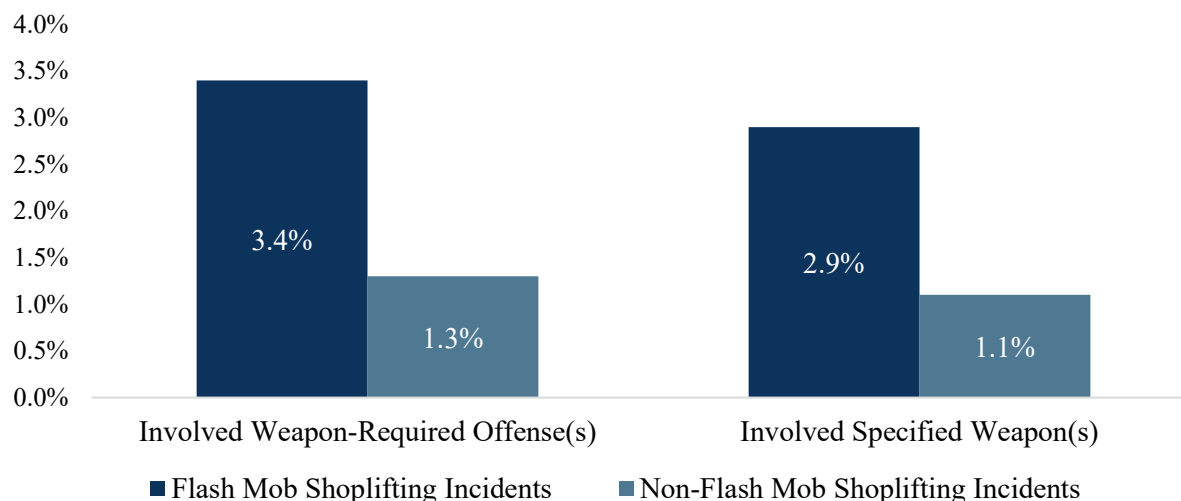
² Weapon-required offenses include homicide offenses, kidnapping/abduction, rape, sodomy, sexual assault with an object, fondling, robbery, aggravated assault, simple assault, human trafficking offenses, extortion/blackmail, weapon law violations, violation of National Firearm Act of 1934, and weapons of mass destruction.

any weapons or force; however, a shoplifting offense can be reported in conjunction with an offense that involves weapons or force during the same incident.

When reporting an offense with a weapon or force requirement, agencies may select a specified known weapon type, e.g., firearm, blunt object, or personal weapons. Agencies may also select “None,” indicating no weapon or force was used by the offender(s) to commit the offense, or “Unknown,” indicating either that it is unknown if a weapon or force was used to commit the offense or that a weapon or force was used to commit the offense, but it is unknown what type of weapon or force was used.

From 2020 through 2024, a total of 113 (3.4% of) flash mob shoplifting incidents and 50,558 (1.3% of) non-flash mob shoplifting incidents involved an offense for which reporting of weapon type was required. Considering only the shoplifting incidents involving an offense with a specified weapon type (i.e., offenses with a weapon type other than “None” or “Unknown”), a total of 96 (2.9% of) flash mob shoplifting incidents and 43,856 (1.1% of) non-flash mob shoplifting incidents involved the use of at least one specified weapon or force from 2020 through 2024.

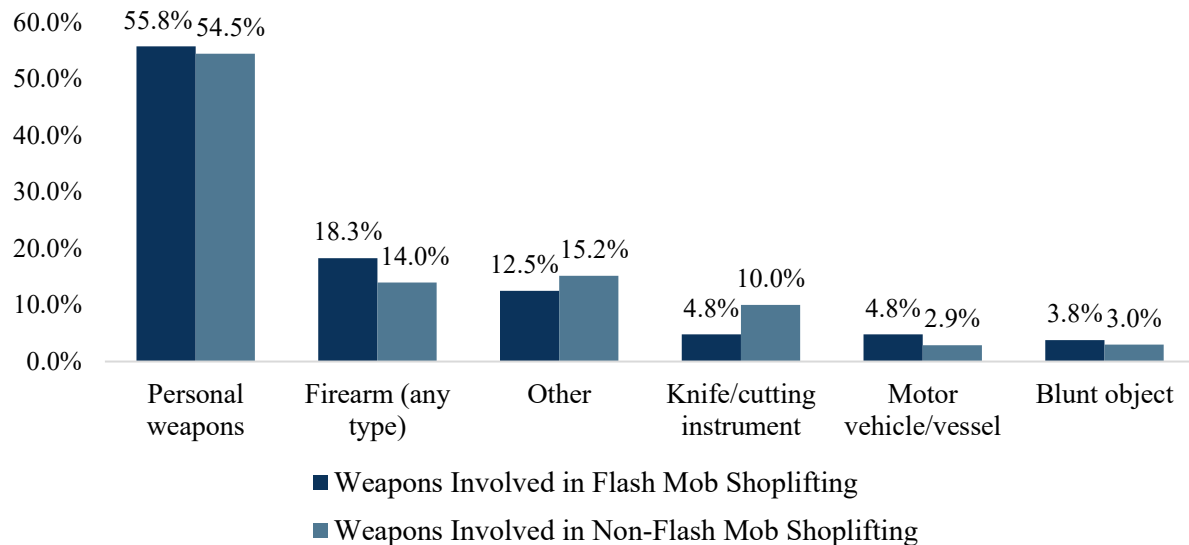
Figure 6. Weapon Involvement in Shoplifting Incidents, 2020–2024



Personal weapons (hands, fists, feet, arms, teeth, etc.) were the most common weapon reported in connection with shoplifting incidents, comprising 55.8% of known weapons in flash mob shoplifting incidents and 54.5% of known weapons in non-flash mob shoplifting incidents. Firearms comprised 18.3% and 14.0% of known weapons used during flash mob and non-flash mob shoplifting incidents, respectively.

Figure 7 displays all specified weapon types associated with reported flash mob shoplifting incidents from 2020 through 2024. Non-flash mob shoplifting incidents reported during the same time frame may have included additional weapon types not shown in Figure 7.

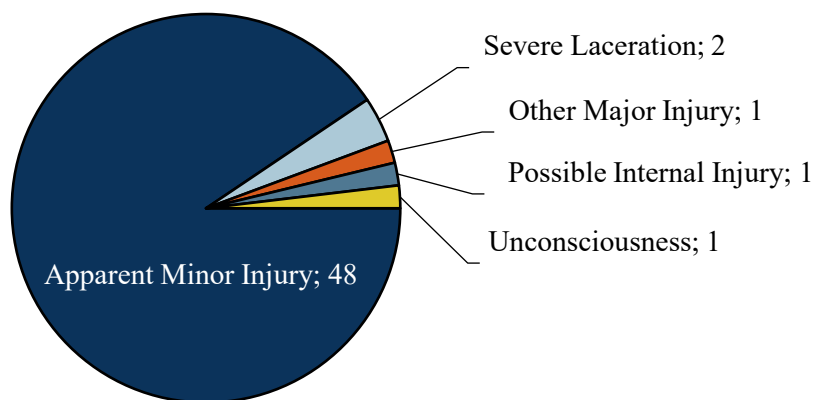
Figure 7. Specified Weapons Involved in Shoplifting Incidents, 2020–2024



Injuries

NIBRS provides agencies the ability to report up to five types of bodily injury sustained by each human victim within an incident. From 2020 through 2024, 43 (1.3% of) flash mob shoplifting incidents resulted in one or more injuries, compared to 13,027 (0.3% of) non-flash mob shoplifting incidents.

Figure 8. Injuries Reported in Flash Mob Shoplifting Incidents, 2020–2024



Property Damage

The 3,321 flash mob shoplifting incidents reported to the FBI's UCR Program from 2020 through 2024 caused \$51,139 in destruction, damage, and vandalism. The costliest damage was done to property described as "Other," followed by "Building Materials."

Figure 9. Value of Property Destroyed in Flash Mob Shoplifting Incidents, 2020–2024



Conclusion

NIBRS data allows the FBI's UCR Program to analyze specific parameters of reported incidents and explore innovative ways of viewing national crime trends. The definition of flash mob shoplifting incidents constructed for this report revealed details of this criminal occurrence and produced statistics based on shoplifting data submitted by law enforcement agencies throughout the United States.

In addition to providing a general profile of flash mob shoplifting incidents reported from 2020 through 2024, the data demonstrated that flash mob shoplifting incidents are more likely to involve additional offenses beyond shoplifting when compared to non-flash mob shoplifting incidents. Flash mob shoplifting incidents are also more likely to involve weapons, result in injuries, and involve younger offenders than non-flash mob shoplifting incidents. Over two-fifths of persons arrested for flash mob shoplifting incidents were between the ages of 10 and 19.

Accounting for continual year-to-year increases in agencies participating in NIBRS, the comparative number of reported flash mob shoplifting incidents fluctuated over the examined time frame, first decreasing from 2020 to 2021 and then increasing from 2021 to 2023. There was a slight decrease in reported flash mob shoplifting incidents from 2023 to 2024.

Clothes/furs were most frequently stolen in flash mob shoplifting incidents reported from 2020 through 2024. These items, along with consumable goods, alcohol, and household goods, were stolen more often in flash mob shoplifting incidents than items like tools, jewelry, and portable electronic communication devices. This may suggest that offenders participating in flash mob shoplifting incidents consider ease of access over monetary value when selecting which items to steal from establishments.

Although a small portion of all shoplifting incidents reported via NIBRS might be classified as flash mob shoplifting incidents, these crimes can result in physical harm to individuals and financial harm to businesses. Analyzing the incident details available through NIBRS can help generate practical deterrents to these distinctive thefts and encourage a continuation of the recent decrease of reported flash mob shoplifting incidents.