

In bad economy, stores see more shoplifting

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Adrene Ashford's upscale boutique in Castleberry Hill has been targeted by shoplifters so many times in the year since it opened, she's starting to wonder if it's even worth staying in business.

"We're just surviving right now. That's all we're doing," Ashford said Tuesday as she tended to a few loyal customers. "When you're a business owner and financier, you work really hard to establish a business."

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Andria Simmons/asimmons@ajc.com

Adrene Ashford, who owns Adrene's Boutique in the Castleberry Hill neighborhood of Atlanta, readjusts merchandise on Tuesday. Ashford said an organized shoplifting gang looted about \$40,000 worth of designer clothing from the store on Friday.

Last week, four men who appeared to be in their 30s scooped up \$40,000 worth of designer jeans, jackets and T-shirts and ran out the door while a lone clerk looked on helplessly. A few months ago, Ashford caught a woman stuffing a pair of brand-name jeans into her handbag.

Young or old, woman or man, wealthy or poor, it seems sticky fingers are everywhere — especially since the economy went down the drain last year.

Reports of shoplifting rose by 13 percent in 2008 over the previous year for the Atlanta Police Department. The Gwinnett County Police Department reported a 7 percent rise, and the Fulton County Police Department saw a 5 percent increase.

The Cobb County Police Department doesn't track shoplifting specifically; it lumps the crime together with other property thefts. However, department spokesman Sgt. Dana Pierce said "with the economy the way it is, we have seen an increase in thefts, which would include shoplifting."

High unemployment is giving people with less pocket money more free time to roam around stores, said John Heavener, president of the Georgia Retail Association. He blamed the recession for an uptick in shoplifting across the state.

"We think some people who normally would not shoplift may be tempted and actually do shoplift," Heavener said.

The recession also is creating a perfect environment for organized shoplifting gangs to flourish. That's because it's easier than ever to fence stolen goods such as designer jeans, flat-screen TVs or fashionable handbags.

“Consumers are looking for a good deal,” said Joseph LaRocca, senior adviser for the National Retail Federation. “Unfortunately, these criminal groups understand that. They steal the products at retail stores and sell them at a deep discount. The demand is fueling these professional groups to steal more.”

Budget-conscious shoppers are turning to pawn stores, online auction sites and corner kiosks to purchase heavily discounted items without questioning the source. Oftentimes, that source is a thief, like the “blue jean bandits” who began hitting stores that carry designer brands in Atlanta last year, said LaRocca. Loss prevention experts say organized retail theft accounts for about a third of all shoplifting losses.

Police made several arrests last year in connection with such organized retail thefts in metro Atlanta, but it’s a moving target. Authorities say different groups of bandits are carrying out the crimes.

Unfortunately for consumers, retailers struggling to recoup their losses will inevitably pass on the cost by hiking prices. LaRocca said there is a “hidden crime tax” of about a penny per dollar on everything shoppers buy in a store — or about \$350 per household every year.

LaRocca estimates shoplifting increased nationwide anywhere from 5 percent to 15 percent in 2008, although official statistics are not yet available. A National Retail Security Survey conducted by the University of Florida said American retailers lost an estimated \$11.8 billion because of shoplifting in 2007.