# Inside Britain’s retail centres where facial recognition cameras now spy on shoplifters

2023-2024

oral sessions with C. Hamard

# Mark Townsend, [www.theguardian.com](http://www.theguardian.com), July 2023

# Last Tuesday, a woman in her 70s sauntered through the main entrance of the Ruxley Manor garden centre in London. Upstairs in its offices, the phone of director James Evans pinged. Facial recognition cameras had identified the pensioner as a potential criminal. Two weeks earlier, she had been caught stealing £15 worth of toys for her granddaughter and her image uploaded on to a private watchlist of known shoplifters. Evans deployed staff to discreetly follow her around his store. “We’ll just keep an eye on her,” he said.

# Even if she was caught stealing again, Evans had already ruled out calling police. With the cost of living crisis and corresponding surge in shoplifting, retailers need to find solutions. Crime in outlets hit record levels – increasing by more than one-third over the past year. There is shared footage of masked youths ransacking shelves. Elsewhere, images circulated on social media of Sainsbury’s encasing chocolate bars in security tagged containers to prevent them being stolen.

# Evans, 48, says that the number of shoplifters has never been higher at Ruxley Manor. Yet the chosen alternative to policing – the move to install facial recognition technology by hundreds of retailers – has reignited familiar concerns over mass surveillance, privacy and human rights.

# Although use of the technology by police has provoked widespread controversy, its adoption by private companies has, by comparison, received little scrutiny. The revelation that the Home Office is covertly backing the rollout of facial recognition cameras by British company Facewatch to tackle retail crime – effectively sanctioning a private business to do the job that police once routinely did – is likely to change that.

# Simon Gordon, founder of Facewatch, said that police should not be expected to help stores improve security. “It’s not the police’s job to look after your staff – you’ve got to take basic precautions,” said Gordon.

# Monitoring all entrances, Ruxley Manor has four Facewatch cameras that read the biometric information of a face as a shopper enters, before checking it against a database of flagged people. The garden centre has put up notices saying it uses the technology. Before the system was introduced in early 2020, Evans relied on the police to deter criminals, calling officers when catching even low-level shoplifters. Eventually, though, he gave up. “We needed to keep staff with them, sometimes tying up vital workers for four to five hours as we waited for the police to turn up.”

# Of the dozens of shoplifters apprehended at Ruxley Manor and handed over to police, only one prosecution was recorded. On average, 71% of serious retail crime is not responded to by police.

# Campaigners call for the deployment of facial recognition cameras to be halted, arguing that their use to tackle low-level offending could be unlawful under privacy law, which decrees biometric technologies must have a “substantial public interest”. Mark Johnson, advocacy manager of Big Brother Watch, said: “Live facial recognition is an authoritarian mass surveillance tool that turns the public into walking ID cards. When used in retail settings, these face-scanning systems work by adding customers to secret watchlists with no due process, meaning people can be blacklisted and denied the opportunity to enter shops despite being entirely innocent. (529 words)