

# Shopping Carts and the Morality Discount

By Cameron Chyun



Among many symbols representing the homeless and the poor, a random shopping cart strewn on the street is one of the most well-known. See one abandoned in the middle of a neighborhood or if your store is missing a considerable number one day, it's always "the homeless taking them". The very image of an abandoned, decorated cart has even been used frequently in art installations to promote homeless activism. And more than likely, the assumption is correct.

It is an understatement to say that, to some, they are entire lifelines with a Swiss army knife level of functionality. Shopping carts are large fortified, mobile storage units and are incredibly easy to shoplift at that. What a steal! For the homeless who have no family, friends, or funds that can help with storing their belongings, carts happen to be a convenient method to do so. Carts have also been frequently used as a structure for mini shelters to curl into within dangerous locales or weathers. For those with pets or a disability the wheels of a cart can help with transportation and resting during long travels. In states that have monetary rewards for

recycle centers, carts offer a convenient way to collect recyclables off the street for sufficient pay. More creative cases have had shopping carts completely dismantled as completely new appliances such as grills, portable toilets, or a foldable bed. One of the wildest usages is also as a racing vehicle that can go up to 60 mph down steep slopes explained and shown beautifully in the Canadian documentary *Carts of Darkness*. To many homeless, carts are essential belongings to create entire livelihoods out of.

However, viewing the casual shoplifting of shopping carts has its own problems. First being that theft shouldn't just be accepted with open arms. Shopping carts aren't simply a business's property to openly give away, they're vehicles of customer satisfaction and financial stability. Even if you care less about a faceless company's profits but there is redirected pain delivered onto individuals grinding hours as retail workers and sanitation workers that are often considered responsible for cart shortage, street waste, and pickups. Shopping carts are costly, going up to \$200 each and even when carts are outfitted with anti-theft technology such as sensors on their wheels, maintaining and repairing them are considerably expensive too. Not that this matters much, as some homeless are desperate enough to take even carts with broken wheels. Abandoned carts may often place carts so far from the original company that retrieval is either impossible or the cart is simply grinded into metal by waste trucks. Sometimes abandonment is so common that waste trucks may even destroy unoccupied carts after trashing the rest of the belongings still in there. Completely loss on both sides.

Pressure from companies in increasing security and establishing stricter policies naturally pit their workers against the homeless. Giving the benefit of the doubt, most employees don't have the loyalty or moral degradation to chase down a homeless person and dump their belongings for their company. Nor is it a smart to openly antagonize the homeless, risking your life or a PR disaster for an ultimately replaceable item. However, patience and morality can run thin if compromises are repeatedly made. Especially under the complaints of retail customers unable to transport their items and neighbors who want random carts out of their streets. For community service workers in official clean-up efforts, having to ignore pleas and insults to confiscate carts is simply part of the job regardless of how fair it is. The homeless have much more to lose and gain from cart theft, but the mutual animosity this system can create with even the most sympathetic of blue-collar workers can't be ignored.

As a result, discussions of shopping cart ordinance constantly juggle with extremes of legality and morality. How much cart theft can we let slide before it becomes an unrealistic, damaging precedent? And how many more restrictions and prosecutions do we need to place on the homeless and poor before their survival becomes unmanageable? But as complex regulations often do, the question isn't so much about shopping cart theft than the resources the homeless lack that lead to shopping cart theft. Alternatives to shopping carts such the promotion of cheaper or free storage, more accessible transportation, safer shelters, etc. are difficult but necessary policies that won't leave workers to fix the scraps. Statewide efforts to create homeless resource centers, storage centers, and homeless bus passes shouldn't be

ignored, incorporating them everywhere else is very possible and enough to discourage cart theft entirely. But until then, each lost shopping cart will continue to be a situation where someone is always losing.

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