



The Organized Retail Crime Research Series

The Boosters: Don't Get Used to the Boost

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Research



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Executive Summary

Criminal boosters—individuals who steal and transport merchandise in support of Organized Retail Crime (ORC) enterprises—serve as the enterprise’s foundation, acquiring the goods it sells for profit. In this sequent report to our November 2023 publication on criminal fencers (who resell the stolen goods), we provide insight into methods, motivations, and practices ORC enterprises employ when commissioning and directing boosters. Partnerships with multiple major retailers and direct investigations into numerous case studies enabled our research.

Boosters regularly employ traditional methods of stealing; however, many also use unique or sophisticated methods to lift merchandise from retailers. We provide this overview on boosters to inform consumers and retailers how to identify potential interactions with boosters to protect themselves from the growing issue of ORC and protect employees from possible dangerous confrontations.

ORC Update

In our initial report, we highlighted the pervasive issue of ORC, emphasizing its distinct nature from ordinary shoplifting. ORC enterprises engage in large-scale theft of retail merchandise with the intent to resell the items for financial gain, causing harm to both major and minor retailers. Fencers play a crucial role in this illicit trade, selling stolen goods online or through various channels at considerable markdowns. ORC enterprises regularly ship products across state lines or even operate internationally, causing evolving challenges to online platforms, particularly with the implementation of the European Union’s Digital Services Act (DSA).

The European Union’s (EU) DSA went into effect on February 17, 2024, requiring online platforms to actively combat the distribution of illegal goods, services, and content.¹ Online platforms could potentially be held responsible for the sale of illicit goods and services if they are aware of the activity and fail to stop it.² To combat products sold by ORC enterprises, online marketplaces must verify the identities of third-party sellers and ensure products are not stolen or illegal goods. The DSA is forcing digital marketplaces to tackle organized retail crime and e-commerce fraud, likely motivating ORC enterprises to regularly adapt some of their tactics to attempt to evade these measures.

¹[https://digital-strategy.ec.europa\[.\]eu/en/policies/dsa-impact-platforms](https://digital-strategy.ec.europa[.]eu/en/policies/dsa-impact-platforms)

²[https://eur-lex.europa\[.\]eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32022R2065](https://eur-lex.europa[.]eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32022R2065)



Recommendations

Consumers

We provide the following recommendations for consumers who may interact with boosters during the course of their in-person shopping. While boosters generally steal from and interact directly with retailers, many events have the potential to become confrontational or violent. As such, we recommend that consumers keep the following in mind if they witness a booster at work:

- **Do not attempt to immobilize the booster or reclaim stolen goods.** Contesting a thief is not a customer's responsibility, and many retailers enforce non-engagement policies for store employees to ensure safety.
- Maintain distance from those conducting boosting activities, as brazen actors move quickly and are likely apathetic to those in their way.
- Inform store security of ongoing events, if possible. **However, individual safety supersedes any other possible customer actions.**

Retailers

We provide the following recommendations to merchants who fall victim to ORC. These actions will allow retailers, law enforcement, and Managed Intelligence partners (Nisos) to use the intelligence gathered to identify, disrupt, and dismantle ORC enterprises. In addition, the intelligence can help retailers develop prevention measures to deter ORC.

- Invest in store security measures that deter and stop booster activity, and regularly update policies to counter changing booster techniques.
- Document and monitor for stolen inventory, as boosters deliver products to fencers who generally turn these products for resale quickly.
 - Monitor local online marketplaces, particularly within the first 24-48 hours of the larceny event, for resale of the documented stolen inventory.
- Maintain lists or pictures of repeat shoplifting offenders, as boosters hit the same stores multiple times.
 - Many boosters identified in our research had prior arrests and criminal histories. Correlated with retailer images, previous arrest information could help law enforcement identify repeat offenders.
- Maintain documentation of IDs used in returns and consider reassessing the threshold at which a unique ID or individual is flagged for multiple returns.



- Multiple boosters identified in our research conducted fraudulent returns at different locations for the same retailer on consecutive days, including some days with multiple returns.
- Consider enforcing stronger return policies, particularly if a location allows non-receipted returns in exchange for store credit.
 - Closer inspection of IDs used during returns or return limits could deter ORC enterprises from consistently targeting locations they deem amenable to their procedures.
 - Some employee attempts for closer ID inspection have led to physical confrontations, possibly increasing the risk of altercations if such a policy is enforced, particularly soon after its implementation.
 - Boosters traveled to alternate retailer locations to attempt similar returns when challenged on IDs, suggesting policies must be implemented and enforced simultaneously across all retailer locations to deter boosters.

What is “Boosting?”

Criminal boosters are individuals who steal merchandise to be sold by fencers. Boosters provide the foundational products required to sustain an ORC enterprise. Individuals who act as boosters in ORC enterprises represent a wide range of demographics. In our review of ORC-associated criminal cases and original research into ORC theft rings, boosters consisted of both male and female individuals. Boosters often expose themselves to significant risk of legal or other repercussions by conducting the operation’s “on-the-ground” public work and often—but not exclusively—represent vulnerable populations.

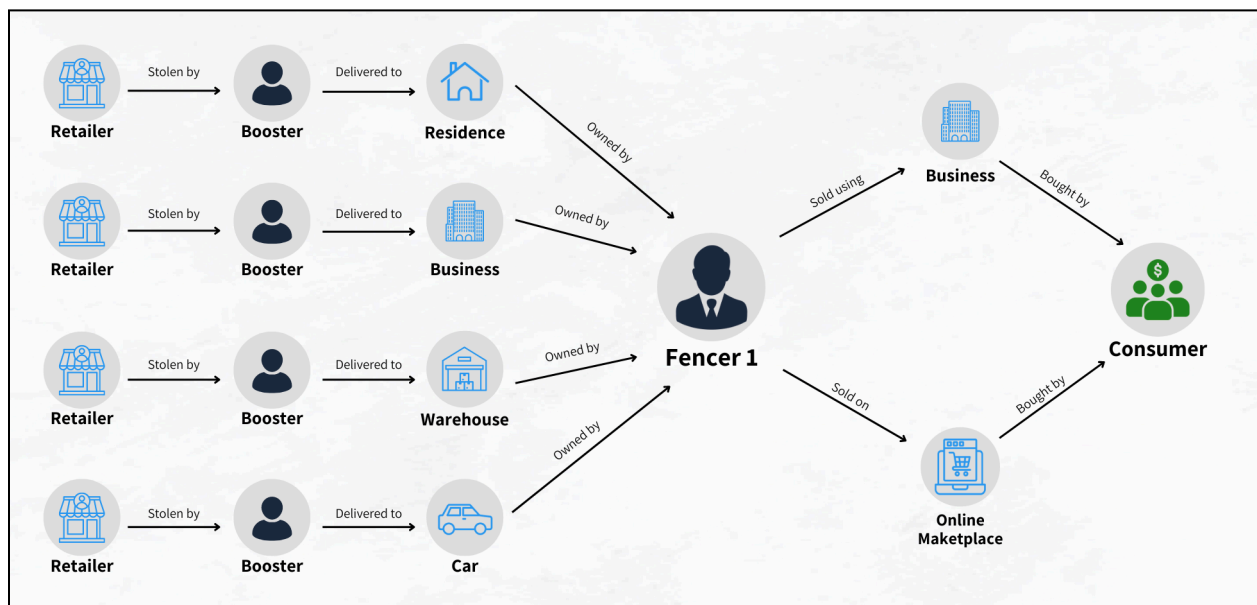
Our research into booster networks identified multiple operational procedures, including **traditional shoplifting, exploiting company policies to obtain products and store credit, and working as a store employee “insider” providing stolen goods to fencers**. While fencers regularly recruit individuals to steal goods, ORC enterprises also utilize and rely on close friendships or familial relationships to centralize trust, ease coordination, and simplify goods acquisition and shipment.

Boosters in an ORC Enterprise

Our November 2023 report on fencers provided information on boosters’ role in relation to fencing operations. We provide abbreviated data points from that report for additional context on boosting activities and supporting the wider ORC ecosystem. The following data was derived from a review of ORC-associated criminal cases. Please see the [full November 2023](#) report on fencers for more information.



- Boosters generally sell shoplifted merchandise to fencers for a percentage of its market value or established cost per item.
- Organizations with a larger number of boosters will often employ individuals to serve as crew bosses.
- Fencers use positions of power to recruit boosters and seek out individuals who struggle with substance abuse, are financially desperate, subordinate to them, such as members of the fencer’s religious congregation or group, or in vulnerable positions, such as undocumented status.
- Fencers communicate with and pay boosters through electronic platforms and in person. Communication generally also includes directions on what items to steal.
- Boosters regularly target items small in size, high in value, and difficult to track. However, ORC enterprises also target machinery, generators, new-in-box tools and equipment, and other large items.



Graphic 1: Examples of how stolen merchandise typically flows through small ORC enterprise fencers.

Shoplifting

Shoplifting represents the most traditional booster method, requiring participants to physically enter a location, obtain merchandise, and exit the store without being stopped or effectively identified. Some boosters attempt to conceal their identities using medical or other masks and conceal their shoplifting using “booster skirts” or purses—large clothing capable of holding and concealing merchandise—as



well as technologies that block or remove security tags, although many boosters conduct more brazen theft.^{3 4}

Get a really strong magnet and/or a tool that unlocks anti theft tags that stores put on high dollar items. Wear a medical mask, go to the next town over and steal a bunch of shit. Resell online for half or a little more than half the retail price

There's multiple methods to this hustle, it can also be very risky for a beginner

Sorry man I'll train my students better. Y'all gotta use the receipt method. Bring extra bags to bag things that makes it look like you bought it. Fake stroller method with a female that's closed to put shit in. Not a huge ass hoodie but good enough to cover ur waist band

Graphics 2 and 3: Examples of common discussions on social media of how to conduct concealed shoplifting.

Criminal Histories

As identified in our previous report, many boosters are recruited while dependent on substances or experiencing financial hardship, some of whom have criminal histories related to similar activities. In the course of our research, we identified boosters with previous histories of retail theft, drug possession, aggravated battery, firearm usage, and gang affiliations. Dealing with unknown individuals with unknown propensities to violence or a level of desperation is why we highly recommend that all civilian shoppers avoid confrontation with boosters. It is likely why many stores maintain non-engagement policies to protect their employees. However, many boosters are aware of these policies and target these locations for that reason.

Use of Vehicles

Boosters researched in our case studies regularly used vehicles attributed to their friends and extended family members in their activities, possibly to obscure their involvement or because they lacked ownership of a personal vehicle. In some cases, boosters used license plates attributed to alternate vehicles as a method to conceal involvement. One network used rentals as getaway vehicles when boosters conducted fraudulent returns.

³<https://www.justice.gov/usao-ndtx/pr/jury-finds-illinois-man-guilty-operating-20-million-retail-crime-scheme>

⁴<https://www.justice.gov/usao-ndtx/pr/illinois-man-sentenced-15-years-operating-20-million-nationwide-retail-crime-ring>



Exploitation of Store Policies

We identified multiple ORC enterprises exploiting flexible retailer return policies to obtain a store credit. In many cases, boosters used the store credit gained by returning almost certainly stolen goods to purchase products with high resale value, such as laptops, tablets, and other technological devices.

Non-Receipted Returns

Not all non-receipted returns can be effectively looked up and confirmed in retailer systems, particularly if an individual allegedly paid for a product with cash. As such, many major retailers have policies that allow merchandise returns for store credit if the individual attempting a return does not have a receipt. In these events, store credit is offered for the return versus a direct refund. Some booster networks take advantage of this system by stealing and later returning goods, often using different individuals to return the product at alternate locations.

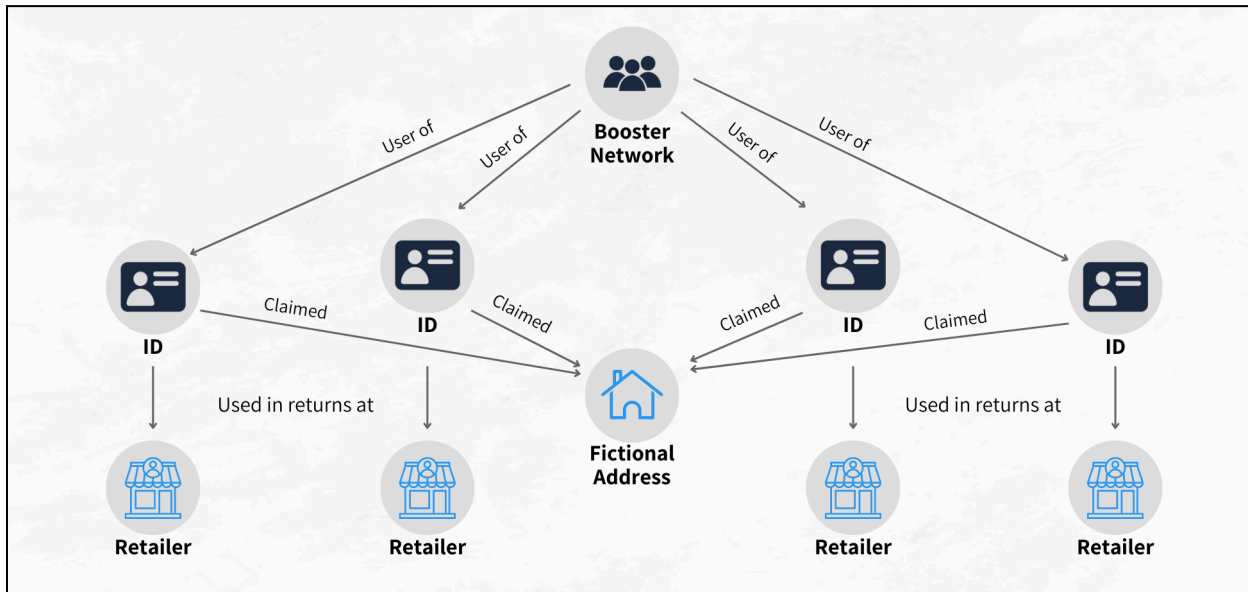
ID Roulette

Some retailers scan the returner's government-issued ID to detect abuse through factors such as return frequency, types of products returned, and the number of events without a receipt. To combat this, boosters are recruiting additional individuals to conduct returns on their behalf or collecting IDs—possibly sometimes fraudulent ones—from associates. We identified boosters creating social media posts asking for spare IDs, some of which were asked for in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, suggesting the booster particularly sought IDs belonging to deceased individuals.

We identified an ORC enterprise using IDs belonging to deceased individuals, some of whom had died less than four months before the ID's fraudulent use. The same individuals were confrontational and sometimes violent towards store employees who questioned them on the IDs or sought to view the image and information on the front, as the boosters regularly attempted to quickly scan the ID while obscuring it from further employee interaction and validation.

Counterfeit IDs

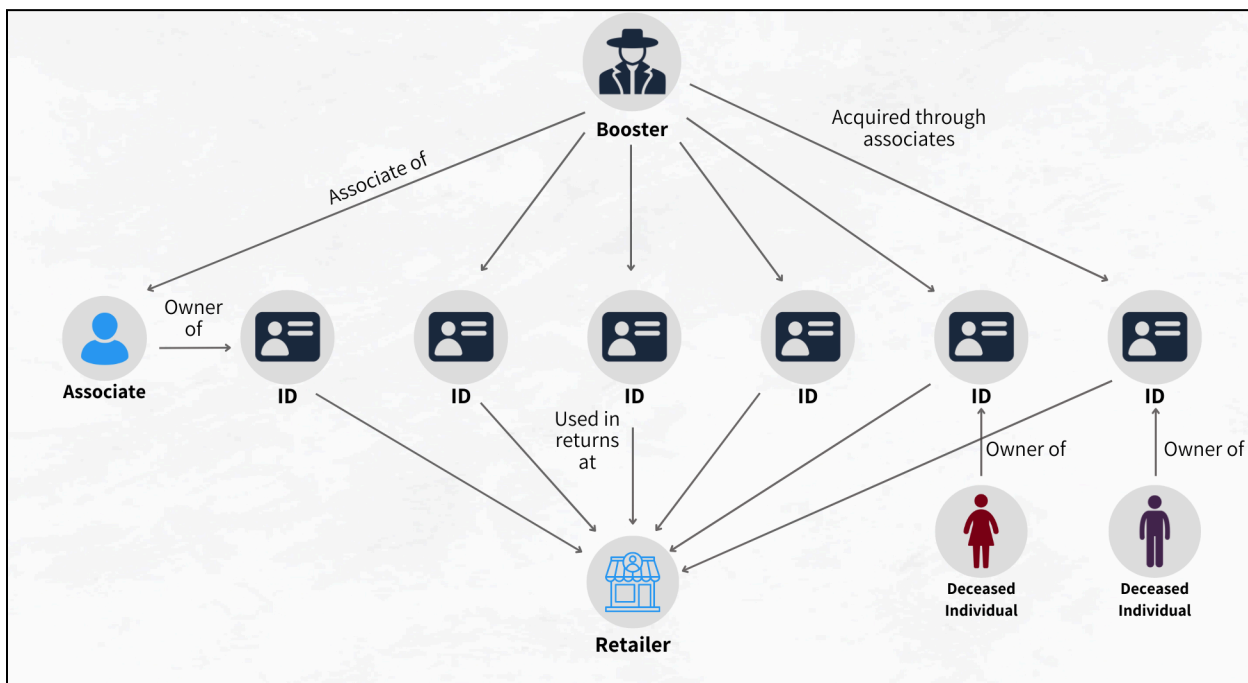
Some ORC enterprises may have in-house capabilities to fabricate official documents and IDs or purchase fabricated documents from other individuals. In one booster network, we identified at least eight unique individuals whose IDs used in non-receipted returns listed the same non-existent address. The consistent use of similar information—particularly fraudulent information for fictional locations—suggests advanced capabilities or vital access to unique fabricated documents. However, the majority of IDs associated with the network almost certainly belonged to—or were crafted to reflect genuine data associated with—legitimate people, suggesting a stronger reliance on recycled legitimate IDs over fabricated ones.



Graphic 4: Example of IDs sharing the same fictional address used in fraudulent returns at different franchise locations.

Store Credit

Some boosters sought social media contacts interested in store credit at specific named retailers. This was almost certainly to recruit individuals into conducting a return using their own ID and likely owing the booster a percentage of the return to benefit both participants. In these cases, boosters are likely taking advantage of close friends, associates, or other interested parties who are potentially unaware of their involvement in stealing operations.



Graphic 5: Examples of stolen and/or fraudulent IDs used in fraudulent returns.



Insider Threats

Some ORC enterprises access stolen goods through booster insiders employed at retail stores who supply fencers with stolen merchandise. The operation is mutually beneficial: fencers obtain a more reliable stream of stolen goods and an inside partner who can divert suspicions or explain missing products, and the boosters are paid for what they provide.

Online Resale

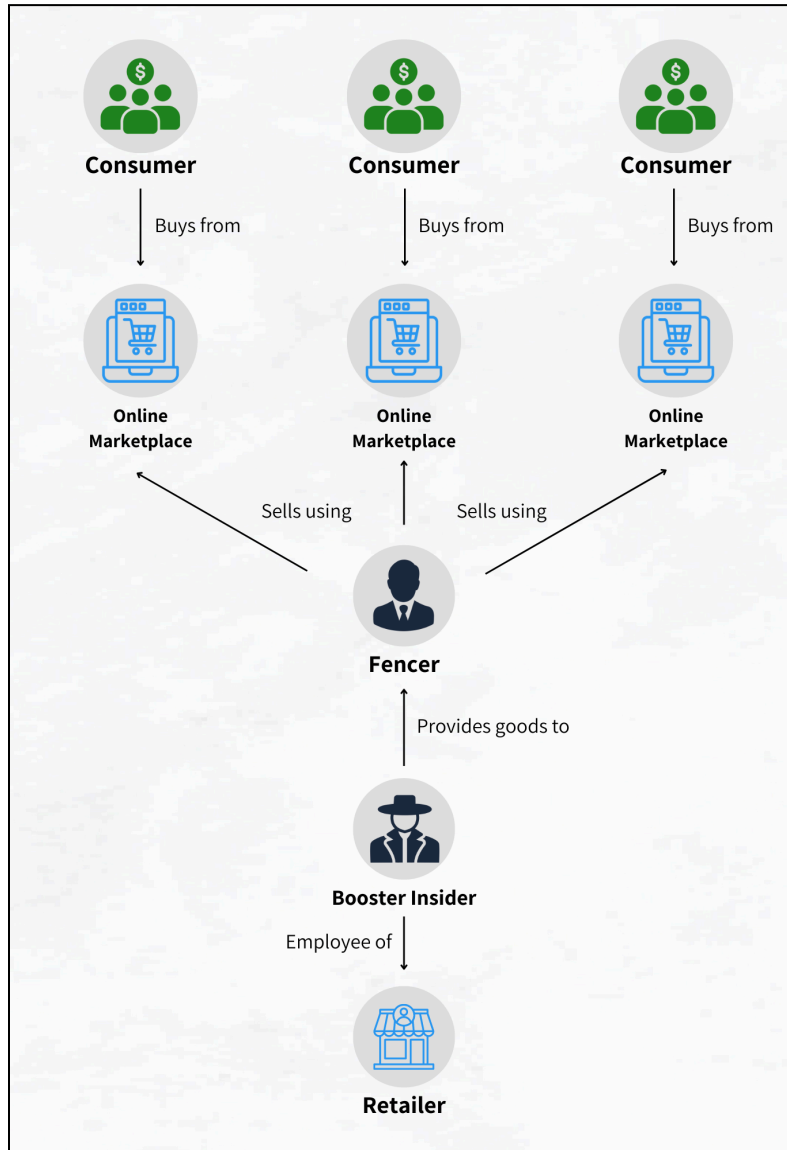
Most commonly, fencers who acquired stolen merchandise from insiders resold the products on multiple online marketplaces. Research into their selling profiles and interactions with other accounts suggests numerous individuals involved in similar acquisitions and resales may purchase from or exchange certain goods with other online sellers. These pages sometimes attempt to mask their activities through such claims as acquiring goods “wholesale” to resell at low prices.

Money Laundering

In addition to direct payments made from fencers to booster insiders, we identified instances of fencers possibly paying these boosters or moving money using online profiles and gaming platforms. In one instance, an insider stole goods and provided them to the fencer who sold the goods on multiple online marketplaces. Over the last eight years, the fencer had also sent nearly \$200,000 and received over \$80,000 in gifts on an online video game platform.

Physical Locations

While many of the cases Nisos investigated alongside major retailers for this report related to boosters providing stolen goods to fencers for sale on online marketplaces; some likely resold products at physical locations or through in-person interactions. Depending on the size of an ORC enterprise, some boosters—particularly leaders of booster crews—may play a more significant role in the selling side of the operation. In some instances, we identified booster ringleaders posting pictures of stacks of almost certainly stolen smartwatches on their personal social media accounts.



Graphic 6: Example of an insider's role in supporting ORC enterprises.

About Nisos

Nisos is The Managed Intelligence Company™. Our customized, scalable services enable cybersecurity, corporate security, intelligence, and trust & safety teams to leverage a world-class intelligence capability tailored to their needs. We fuse robust data collection with a deep understanding of the adversarial mindset delivering smarter defense and more effective response against advanced cyber attacks, disinformation, and abuse of digital platforms.

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