Shoplifting and juvenile crime

Why do some young people shoplift?
Young people like Faith who have been forced to leave home, or like Donnie and Ava, who have been in care, are caught in a vicious cycle:

- they have nowhere to live
- they're unemployed
- their lives are chaotic
- they have no money
- they don't know where to get advice.

Donnie was in care because his dad was in prison and his mum had left home. Children in care are more likely to drop out of school. With no qualifications, no job and no money they can become homeless. It isn't easy to find out how to claim benefits. And young people like Ava and Donnie want to steer clear of the authorities. To survive, young people can resort to stealing.

What do we know about young people and crime?
Children and young people are generally law-abiding. Ava thought stealing was wrong and she even returned a free meal because she felt she’d lied to get it. But the media often portrays young people as ‘yobs’ and ‘hoodies’. Children who come into contact with the criminal justice system are from the most disadvantaged families and communities:

- 50% have been in care or are in contact with social services
- 88% have been excluded from school
- 29% have difficulties with literacy and numeracy
- 25% have a statement of special educational needs
- 31% have a mental health disorder.
  (the Howard League for Penal Reform)

What happens to young people who shoplift?
Donnie stole sandwiches from a café. Then Faith was seen running into a house with a stolen bag of chips. So it’s likely that Faith, Ava and Donnie will come into contact with the police. Locking a young person up is usually seen as a last resort. On a first offence, young people who shoplift may be dealt with in various ways:

- through ‘restorative justice’ – they may have to return the goods and do voluntary work
- some large stores charge for the stolen items plus an ‘administration fee’
- under 18s may be given a reprimand or a final warning.

Scotland has a Children’s Hearings System to help young people who are vulnerable or who have committed an offence. A panel of volunteers meets the children and their families to try to find ways of solving their problems and avoid them getting into trouble.
Facts about young people and crime

- the age of criminal responsibility is 10 in England and Wales and eight in Scotland (the lowest ages of criminal responsibility in Europe)
- England and Wales have the highest rate of child imprisonment in Western Europe
- young people have the highest reoffending rates of any age group
- three quarters of under 18s reoffend after leaving prison.

Why did so many young people take part in the recent riots?

In some TV footage we saw young people stealing mobile phones and trainers. We know that all the riots took place in economically deprived areas of England, though in many of the poorest areas there were no riots. There are different views about why the riots happened:

- we live in a ‘broken society’
- young people are out of control
- there is not enough discipline in schools
- families are falling apart
- there is too big a gap between rich and poor
- we are defined by our material possessions
- young people lack jobs, money and opportunities.

What happened to the young people who were arrested?

More than 2,000 people were arrested by the Metropolitan Police in the weeks after the London riots this summer.

- Just over half of those who appeared in court were 20 or under
- about a fifth were aged between 10 and 17
- 31% were aged between 18 and 20
- the main offence they were charged with was burglary
- one in 10 of the juveniles who appeared in court received custodial sentences
- 45% of juveniles who appeared in court had no recorded criminal history. The average sentence given out by magistrates was twice as long as for similar offences last year. Many people believed the sentences were too harsh.

[BBC Analysis - The riots so far: http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-14931987]

Some of the toughest sentences were given to those accused of inciting riots through Facebook. Two young men, aged 20 and 22, were jailed for four years each.
Where can young people get legal advice?

The Howard League for Penal Reform runs a free helpline for children and young adults that is staffed by solicitors. Tel: 0808 801 0308
11am - 5pm: Tuesdays and Wednesdays
11am - 7pm: Thursdays

The Children’s Legal Centre provides free independent legal advice to children, parents, carers and professionals. Child Law Advice Line: 0808 802 0008