



Money, Drugs and Burglary in WA: Examining the Currencies of the Local Stolen Goods Market

Joe Clare and Anna Ferrante

In late 2005 a WA-based, interview-style study was conducted to explore local burglary (Ferrante & Clare, 2006). This research involved voluntary interviews with incarcerated offenders in Perth metropolitan prisons and resulted in 235 completed records. All offenders interviewed had recorded at least one conviction for a burglary offence in the last five years. This bulletin summarises aspects of the findings from questions regarding the link between stolen goods and drugs – covering issues such as the frequency of trading for drugs, the types of drugs received, and the relative use of drugs by different offender groups. Some implications for crime reduction resulting from these findings are also discussed. The demographic details of the offenders who participated in this research are displayed in Table 1.¹

Detailed analysis of the offender sample revealed that, overall, highest drug use was associated with non-Indigenous status, high-frequency offending and age, with adults being more likely to report high-usage than juveniles. The link between age, serious drug use and high-frequency offending is not surprising as it has been argued that as some offenders get older and their level of drug use becomes more serious, their addiction becomes a significant driver for committing burglary. This finding supports the theory that heavy involvement in drug use leads to an increase in the rate of offending amongst existing offenders but does not provide support for the hypothesis that all burglaries are motivated by a drug habit, with 41% of our offender sample not frequent or severe drug users.

How Frequent Are Stolen Goods Traded for Drugs?

Table 2 displays the overall frequencies with which stolen goods were traded across the various disposal avenues. As can be seen, across all transactions there was approximately a 50:50 split between money and drugs as the chosen 'currency' for the stolen goods. Unsurprisingly, drug dealers traded drugs the greatest percentage of the time (59%), whereas family, friends, and fences were more likely to 'pay' offenders in cash for their stolen goods. Legitimate businesses were the only disposal avenue that did not trade in drugs. It is important to emphasise here that drug dealers were by far the most popular avenue for disposing of stolen goods, and were involved in over 57% of all transactions discussed by offenders.

Crime Research Centre
35 Stirling Hwy
WA 6009
Tel: 6488 2830
Fax: 6488 1111
www.crc.law.uwa.edu.au

Disclaimer: The findings and opinions expressed in this report are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the policies or views of the government departments who supported the research.

Office of Crime Prevention
Tel: 9222 9733
www.crimeprevention.wa.gov.au



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These research findings suggest that there is a blurring of roles between drug dealers and fences. On the one hand, drug dealers appear willing to accept non-cash items in exchange for drugs and to 'pay' offenders in cash for stolen goods, while on the other, fences are dealing in drugs and money when paying for stolen goods.

Trading with drug dealers was the most common disposal avenue for amongst respondents (74% of respondents reported that they 'always' or 'mostly' used this avenue) and had the fastest turnaround time (5.5 hours). Notwithstanding this, adult offenders tended to trade with drug dealers more often than juveniles. Cromwell and colleagues (1993) suggest that there are two major reasons why drugs dealers are prepared to barter for stolen goods. First, this interaction increases their drug sales, and second, the unequal power balance between drug dealer (buying the stolen goods) and addict (selling stolen goods) ensures the dealer can acquire the stolen property for a vastly reduced price which they can then easily make profit on through resale.

Demographic characteristic	Sub-category	N	% N
Age at recent offence	Adult offender (21 yrs +)	141	60.0%
	Young offender	94	40.0%
Indigenous status	Indigenous	122	51.9%
	Non-Indigenous	113	48.1%
Offending frequency	High frequency	132	56.2%
	Low frequency	103	43.8%
Illicit drug-use frequency/severity	Frequent &/or severe use	139	59.1%
	No frequent &/or severe drug use	96	40.9%

Table 1. Offender Demographic Profile (N = 235).

What Drugs do Offenders Trade for Stolen Goods?

Figure 1 displays the relative frequencies of drugs received by offenders who traded stolen goods from their most recent burglary with drug dealers and were paid in drugs. As can be seen, speed (51%) and cannabis (29%) were the most frequently received drug for stolen goods following the most recent offence.

Across all offender types the drugs of choice were speed and cannabis, with smaller amounts of heroin received. It is interesting to consider if these drug-types are being used by distinct offenders (that is, people who use speed exclusively) or if offenders are using a mixture of speed and cannabis depending on the reason for drug use at the time.

The lower incidence of heroin relative to other Australian states is presumed to reflect the market of readily available drugs in Western Australia.

Serious drug users were generally slower to dispose of goods to family and friends than infrequent or low level drug users, suggesting this disposal avenue may not be their preferred option. Few differences were observed in the types of goods traded with family and friends by high-use and low-use offenders. Across all offender categories, money was used as payment in more than half of all transactions, while drugs accounted for between 30% and 40% of payments by family and friends for stolen goods. This finding supports previous research which has shown that people who use drugs can, and often do, deal to those around them who are also users. This may also indicate that the prevalence of drug use,

Disposal avenue	Frequency	Money %	Drugs %	Other %
Family/friends	50	52.0%	34.0%	14.0%
Businesses	16	100.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Drug dealers	163	40.5%	58.9%	0.6%
Fences	36	66.7%	33.3%	0.0%
Other	19	73.7%	26.3%	0.0%
Total	284	51.4%	45.8%	2.8%

Table 2. Frequencies of Transactions across the Various Stolen Disposal Avenues.

as well as the prevalence of drugs, is very high among offender networks.

As can be seen from Figure 2, the overall career patterns for drugs received in turn for stolen goods across all offenders closely mirrors the relative percentages at which each drug-type was traded during the most recent offence. Across all offenders careers speed and cannabis were the most traded and used drugs.

Implications for Crime Prevention

Findings from the research suggest that drug-dealers have become a convenient 'one-stop shop' for many offenders and play a pivotal role in the initial disposal of stolen goods. Given the speed and volume of these transactions, drug dealers appear to have (access to) well-established and well-organised redistribution networks for the goods that come into their possession. For offenders with a serious drug problem, it is likely that their need to satisfy an addiction coupled with other factors such as convenience and the 'trusted' nature of the relationship

with their dealer will outweigh all other factors. However, for many offenders and many burglars, their involvement in property crime has more to do with supplementing their income than a drug addiction (Moffatt et al, 2005).

The results of this study highlight the potential for combining investigations into property crime and investigations into drug dealing. This may mean broadening search powers when investigating a suspected drug dealer's premises to also search for stolen goods. Police may see drug-related surveillance operations as opportunities for intelligence gathering into the stolen goods market (and vice versa).

Prosecution of drug dealers who are found to be in possession of stolen goods has the potential to disrupt a drug distribution network and a stolen goods disposal system. Noting the involvement of family and friends in the receipt of stolen goods and exchange of drugs, these individuals become part of the group worthy of surveillance once a burglar has been identified.

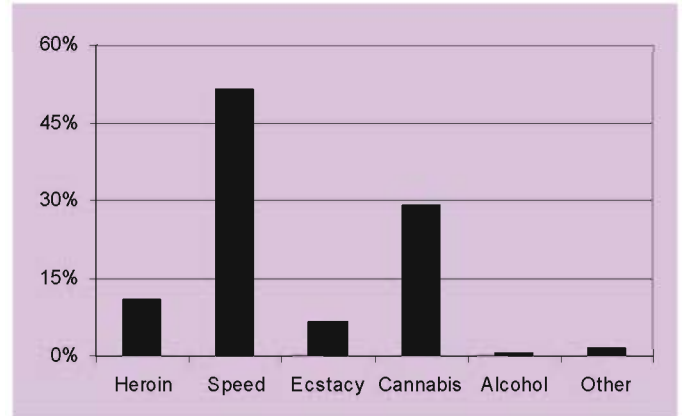


Figure 1. Relative percentages at which are drugs received when trading stolen goods with drug dealers following their most recent burglary (N = 97 offenders).

Recent research has identified links between heroin use and shoplifting and crack using and drug-dealing (Bennett & Holloway, 2005). The authors concluded that generalized approaches to the problem of illicit drug use and crime might not be as effective as targeted approaches. They argue that targeting specific drug-crime combinations may be more effective strategies in the long run. As a result of this finding and the link in the present study between burglary and speed, the authors recommend that consideration be given to supporting policing efforts aimed at reducing or restricting the availability of amphetamines as this is likely to have a greater impact on the stolen goods market. A reduction in the supply of speed is likely to have a significant 'knock-on' effect on the stolen goods market (through the types of goods stolen, effects on the currency of transaction and so on) and, for many offenders, also on the motivation for burglary. However, any operation aimed at restricting the supply of one particular drug should be accompanied by others designed to limit displacement to other drugs and/or other crimes.

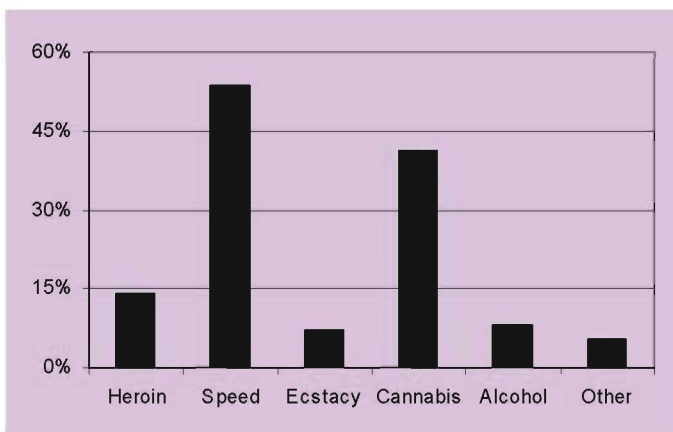


Figure 2. Relative percentages of offenders who 'Always' and 'Mostly' traded stolen goods for each drug type over their burglary careers.

References

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¹ The offenders responded to a series of questions asking them to rate the frequency of their use of various drugs. Participants responded using a scale of frequency that included the options 'Always', 'Mostly', 'Sometimes', 'Rarely', and 'Never'. Offenders were classified as 'Frequent and/or Serious Illicit Drug Users' (labelled 'High use' throughout) if: (a) they 'Sometimes' or more often used heroin, or (b) 'Sometimes' of more often used speed, or (c) 'Mostly' or more often used ecstasy, or (d) 'Always' used cannabis. If none of these conditions were satisfied, the offender was considered to not be a frequent and/or serious illicit drug user, and was subsequently labelled 'Low use'. No offenders were excluded from the analyses due to responses to this question.

This bulletin highlights aspects of the findings from research conducted by the Crime Research Centre at The University of Western Australia and funded by the WA Office of Crime Prevention (OCP). This research examined stealing, burglary, and stolen goods markets in WA and was designed to assist in the development of appropriate policy and policing responses and to complement the joint OCPWA Police initiatives, the State Burglary Reduction Taskforce and the development of a State Stolen Goods and Stealing Strategy.

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