



# Burglary and the Stolen Goods Market in WA: What is Stolen and Where Does It Go?

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*Despite the fact that about 20% of break-ins and 73% of attempted break-ins in Western Australia (WA) go unreported to police (ABS, 2006), WA has the highest burglary rate in Australia (at 2,251 incidents of unlawful entry with intent per 100,000 persons, ABS, 2005). The financial and social costs of burglary are significant and this issue is identified as the major crime problem in many areas and a contributor to community-level insecurities and fear about crime (Mayhew, 2003; ABS, 2003). As such, understanding the elements of the stolen goods trade in WA is fundamental to the design of effective crime reduction strategies. Policy-makers and law enforcement officers need accurate information about the size of the market, the types of goods that make up the market, the supply and demand for those goods, their prices, the distribution of those goods to different market segments, the size and length of the distribution chain, and so on.*

*Crime reduction strategies that are aimed at disrupting the stolen goods trade are also likely to have 'spin-off' effects in other areas. Research has shown that the existence of a market for stolen goods provides motivation for theft and influences the types of goods that are actually stolen (Sutton, 1995). Consequently, efforts to disrupt or reduce the size of the stolen goods market in WA may bring about changes in burglary rates and patterns. This bulletin summarises aspects of research into burglary and the stolen goods market in WA, focusing on what is stolen, where it is traded, and the frequency at which receivers of stolen goods request certain goods be stolen. Finally, some implications for crime prevention from this research will be considered.*

## Researching Burglary in Western Australia

To provide information about these issues a WA-based, interview-style study was conducted to explore the process of burglary and the types of avenues used by local burglars in the disposal of stolen goods (Ferrante & Clare, 2006). Conducted in late 2005 this research involved 235 voluntary interviews with incarcerated offenders completing custodial sentences in Perth metropolitan prisons. All offenders interviewed had recorded at least one conviction for a burglary offence in the last five years. The focus of this research was to learn about what offenders stole during their most recent burglaries and what they did with these goods afterwards.

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**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.

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## What is Stolen and Traded From Burglaries?

While approximately one-fifth of all item-types (including credit cards, computers, jewellery and cameras) were retained by the respondent for personal use (21.7%), the majority (73%) of goods taken in a burglary were quickly on-sold or traded (the remaining 5.2% of stolen goods reportedly being dumped). Figure 1 (a) displays the types of goods that were stolen and traded following the most recent burglary. As can be seen, jewellery was the most popular item stolen and traded by burglars and accounted for over 17% of all items. Figure 1(b) demonstrates that there was nearly a 50:50 split between receiving money and drugs in exchange for stolen goods.

## Where and When do Burglars Sell/Trade Stolen Goods?

As indicated in Table 1, the most frequent disposal avenues used by burglars were drug dealers (54%), family/friends (18%), fences (13%), and legitimate businesses (8%), where legitimate businesses included pawnshops and businesses dealing in second-hand goods. Trading stolen goods with drug dealers was the most common disposal avenue used by all burglars irrespective of frequency and severity of drug use, age, Indigenous status, and frequency of offending. Research formerly conducted in the ACT found a similar result (Nelson, Collins, & Gant, 2002) and

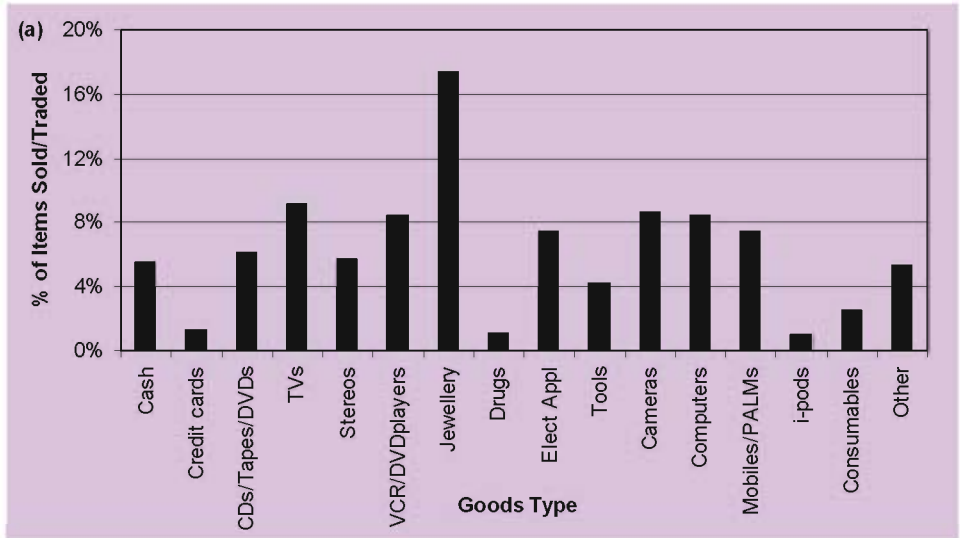


Figure 1. (a) Relative Percentages of Goods Types Sold/Traded with All Avenues for Stolen Goods (N = 522 Transactions).

researchers attributed the reluctance of burglars to use legitimate businesses to the low price of the exchange when trading goods with these outlets relative to other disposal avenues. The regulated nature of the second-hand goods business and the associated higher risk of dealing directly with them might also account for a general disinclination on the part of offenders to deal directly with these outlets in WA.

Drug dealers may be the preferred outlet for disposing of stolen goods because they have become a "one-stop" shop for offenders, the benefit of which outweighs other factors such as the desire to get the best price for the goods. 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.<sup>1</sup>

In addition to demonstrating the relative desirability of the various outlets for stolen goods, Table 1 also displays the times it took for burglars to dispose of stolen goods at each of the alternatives. As can be seen, the average time taken to dispose of goods varied depending on the type of avenue used, with trades with drug dealers occurring, on average, 5.5 hours after the goods were stolen, and disposal to fences taking place within 8.2 hours

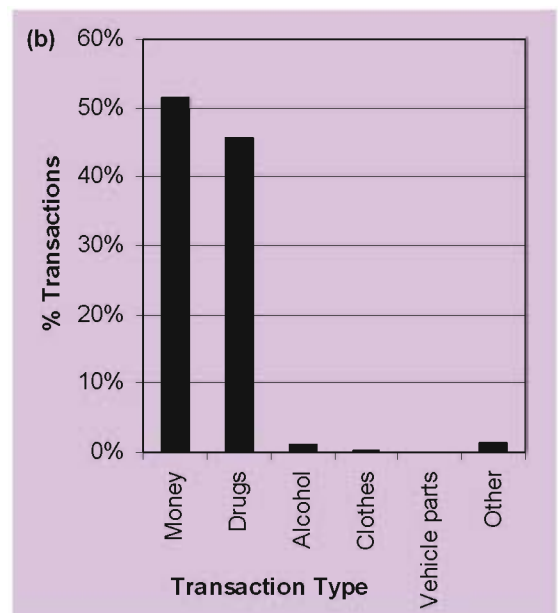


Figure 1. (b) Relative Percentages of Transactions Involved in, Sale/Trade across All Avenues for Stolen Goods (N = 522 Transactions).

(avg.). Disposal of goods to legitimate businesses took the longest time (average of 35.5 hours), suggesting that burglars may consider this avenue to be a last resort. However, in dealing with legitimate businesses, it should be borne in mind that the disposal time for goods will also be affected by the regulation of daily business hours and the restrictions placed on weekend trading.

It took burglars almost twice as long to dispose of goods to family and friends (average of 13.8 hours) than to a drug dealer or fence (if they knew one). Disposal time also varied with the age of the offender. Older offenders (defined as those 21 years or older at the time of their most recent burglary offence) generally took less time to dispose of stolen goods than young offenders. The most likely explanation for this is that older offenders may have a wider and more established network of associates. However, this may also be related to the urgency of their drug use, noting that older offenders were found to have more serious levels of drug use than young offenders.

Disposal avenue	N	% N	Mean goods	Mean time (hrs)
Family/friends	36	17.5%	2.5	13.8
Legitimate businesses	17	8.3%	2.6	35.5
Drug dealers	112	54.4%	2.5	5.5
Fences	27	13.1%	2.5	8.2
Strangers	12	5.8%	2.7*	19.4*
Other sources	2	1.0%	–	–
Total	206	100.0%		

\* Given small cell counts this value has been calculated based on the combined findings for selling to strangers and selling to 'Other' sources.

Table 1. Frequency of Use, Mean Number of Goods Disposed Of, and Mean Time (Hours) Taken to Access the Various Avenues of Disposal for Stolen Goods.

Figure 2(b) displays the relative frequency at which each of the various goods types were reportedly stolen-to-order. As can be seen, TVs were the item most frequently stolen on request (11% of all items stolen). Other frequently stolen item-types were jewellery (9%), computers (9%), and electrical items, VCR/DVD players and mobile phones/PALMS (each accounting for approximately 7.5% of all steal-to-order items).

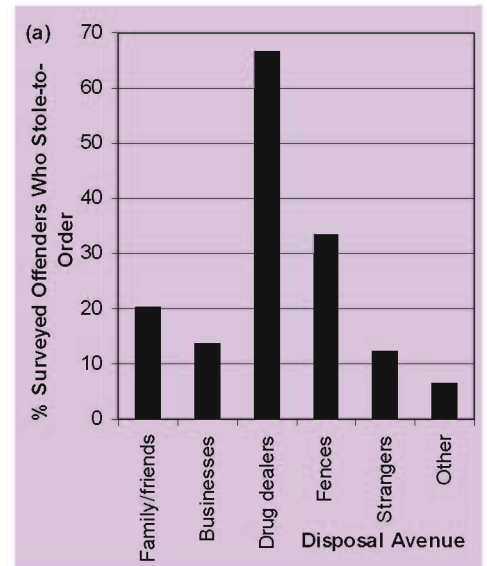


Figure 2. (a) Relative Percentages of Offenders Who "Always" or "Mostly" Stole-to-Order Across Stolen Goods Disposal Avenue (N = 123 Offenders Reported Stealing-to-Order)

### Do Burglars Steal-to-Order?

Approximately 51% of the offenders interviewed reported stealing-to-order at some stage during their burglary careers. Of this group 82% reported 'always', 'mostly', or 'sometimes' stealing-to-order for drug dealers, followed by 58% for fences, 46% for family and friends, and 40% for legitimate businesses (Figure 2 (a)).

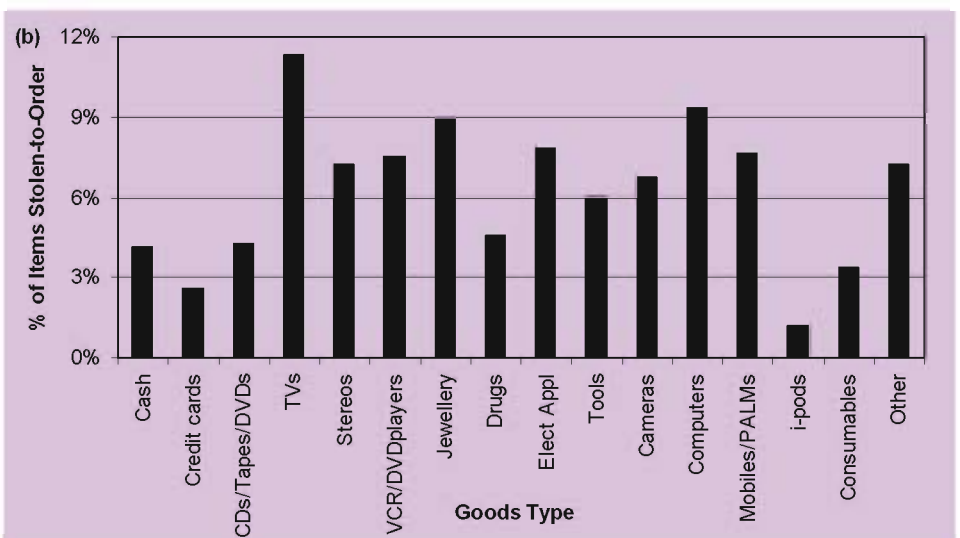


Figure 2. (b) Relative Percentages of Goods Types Stolen-to-Order (N = 652 Item-Types Stolen-to-Order at Some Stage).

## Implications for Crime Prevention

The study offered a number of suggestions for ways in which crime reduction and law enforcement initiatives might affect the stolen goods trade in Western Australia. The most significant of these were:

- Potentially 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.
- Continue efforts to make the public aware that community participation in buying stolen property directly supports the act of burglary. This should act to reduce the involvement of at least some individuals in purchasing stolen property. For this reason, campaigns such as the current 'Don't Buy Crime' initiative should be supported and continued.
- With regards to reducing the involvement of pawnshops and second-hand dealers in the stolen goods trade, it was suggested that all purchases made by these outlets be transacted without cash and only through the use of cheques or direct deposits to bank accounts. This approach offers a number of advantages – it increases identification of sellers, removes the tag of these outlets being 'a quick source of ready cash'; it provides a money/property trail for investigation and auditing purposes; and generally makes the industry visibly cleaner and more accountable.

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<sup>1</sup> It is important to note here that for many offenders and indeed for many burglars involvement in property crime has more to do with supplementing income and is not specifically motivated by funding a drug addiction (Moffatt, Weatherburn & Donnelly, 2005).

*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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