



Hawking markets or street sales are a source for the amateur receiver.

Reducing Crime

A Demand for Reduction Perspective

BY ROSS SWOPE

In 1999 there were over two million reported burglaries, nearly seven million larcenies and over one million motor vehicle thefts in the United States. The estimated total dollar value of the loss was nearly \$15 billion. Thieves steal the property not to possess it but to convert it into something of value, like cash or drugs. The disposal of this stolen property is a major hurdle that must be overcome by the thief.

Fifteen billion dollars of stolen property ends up in circulation: in the hands of a generally law abiding public. A public that is unaware it is supporting and enabling criminal activity; a public that cannot pass up a good deal and is unaware it is committing a crime; a public that buys from what appear to be legitimate businesses.

The traditional police response to property crimes is reactive. A police unit may respond to the scene, take a report and conduct a preliminary investigation. The sheer number of offenses usually far exceeds the capability of most departments'

resources, precluding a detailed investigation. Secondly, these crimes are usually committed in the absence of witnesses and are among the most difficult to close.

On the continuum of severity, these property crimes fall low in priority. So, as long as the police response continues to be reactive, it will always be paddling up stream. This reactive approach by its very nature is a major limitation.

The alternative is a proactive police approach to property crimes: targeting the demand side of the stolen property markets instead of the reactive supply side. This approach increases the thieves' major hurdle of disposal and conversion of stolen property.

A symbiotic relationship exists between the thief and receivers of stolen property. Thieves cannot survive without receivers of stolen property. The ability of the thief to market stolen property determines success of his criminal activities. In the absence of someone to purchase or convert stolen property, the criminal act of stealing becomes a useless endeavor. The receivers of stolen property fill the thief's need.

Law enforcement has neglected the powerful and intimate relationship between the thief and those who sell stolen property. Police have paid more attention to arresting the thieves than investigating and prosecuting those who receive stolen property.

This is not a new phenomenon. The role of receivers in property crime was recognized in the late 18th Century by Patrick Colquhoun in his book *A Treatise on the Police of the Metropolis* in 1795. He wrote "Nothing...can be more just than the old observation, that if there were no receivers there would be no thieves...Deprive a thief of a safe and ready market for his good and he is undone."

Understanding the Market

If law enforcement is going to develop and implement effective proactive tactics and strategies aimed at the demand side of the stolen property equation, it is

essential that they understand how the market works. Police must understand how stolen property passes to new owners.

Receivers of stolen property span a wide spectrum of structures and organizations. They include professional full-time criminals who are linked to organized crime and average middle class full time wage earners. Paul Cromwell, James Olsen and D'Aunn Wester differentiate the groups by the below characteristics: the frequency with which they buy stolen property; the volume of purchases of stolen property; the purpose of the stolen property purchase (for resale or personal use); the level of commitment to purchasing stolen property. Based on the above characteristics they created a typology of receivers of stolen property and delineated three levels of receiver.

Professional Receivers

According to *Breaking and Entering: An Ethnographic Analysis of Burglary* by Cromwell, Olsen and Avary, "Professional receivers are those whose principal enterprise is the

purchase and redistribution of stolen property. Professional receivers may transact for any stolen property, for which there is a resale potential, or may specialize in stolen property compatible with their legitimate stock or legitimate business (jewelry, dry cleaning, appliance sales or service).

"The professional receiver generally makes purchases directly from the thief and almost exclusively for resale. These receivers are proactive in operation, establishing a reliable and persistent flow of merchandise, buying continuously and on a large scale, as well as providing strategic aid and organization for the thief's illicit activities."

A sub-set of the professional receivers is the residential fence. They usually operate out of their own homes. Residential fences may be former thieves who have switched to less risky offending. Residential fences can be distinguished from commercial fencing transactions because they do not sell to consumers through what appears to be a respectable business outlet and rarely conduct business with strangers.

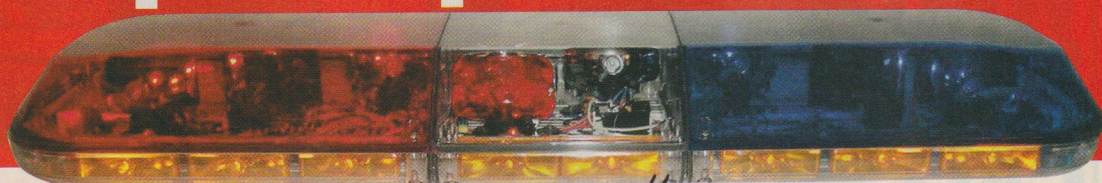
Avocational Receivers

Breaking and Entering also stated, "Avocational receivers purchase stolen property primarily for resale, but do not rely on buying and selling stolen property as their principal means of livelihood. Fencing is a part-time enterprise, secondary to, but usually associated with, their primary business activity."

Avocational receivers include legitimate business owners and employees who buy stolen property that could be integrated into their legitimate stock. Examples include: a laundry and dry cleaning proprietor who purchases new clothing from shoplifters; a truck stop owner who buys tools and tires; a gold and silver exchange employee who buys stolen jewelry and coins; a videotape rental store proprietor who buys VCRs and portable color televisions; a pawnshop clerk who accepts stolen guns; or a liquor store owner who buys bottles of liquor and cartons of cigarettes.

Little is known about the vigor with which owners or employees of second-

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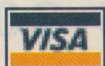
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hand shops, corner stores, pawnbrokers, jewelry stores and junkyards genuinely attempt to establish what they are buying are legitimate and not stolen goods. Interviews with criminals revealed that they thought the businesses knew they were receiving stolen goods, but that they were required to provide a story often based on set questions. This, the criminals felt, was to protect the business from prosecution rather than to determine if the goods were stolen or not.

Both professional and avocational receivers operating from a commercial business can pass brand new goods onto consumers who may not be aware that the goods are stolen. They can store the goods, transport them and have access to an existing customer base. Many customers making purchases from these establishments pay the full retail price for new goods, unaware that they have bought stolen goods. Further, those who buy from second-hand shops and like establishments may be innocent buyers because of the very openness of the

transaction and the accepted legitimacy of the outlet.

Amateur Receivers

Cromwell also talked about amateur receivers: "Amateur receivers may be defined as otherwise honest citizens who buy stolen property on a relatively small scale, primarily, but not exclusively, for personal consumption. Crime is peripheral, rather than central, to their lives. Their major source of livelihood is from their respectable careers and they identify with the dominant values of society.

"Amateur fences are almost always initially solicited as customers and buy merchandise that is seldom specifically represented as stolen, although they may know or suspect that the property was not obtained legally by the seller. The amateur fence is often lured by a compelling low price and a reasonable story to explain the bargain."

Amateur receivers can come into contact with stolen property by way of network sales. These markets are comprised of loosely connected groups of friends, neighbors, colleagues and co-

workers. Sales among friend and family networks nearly always take place in the privacy of people's homes, privately at the workplace or at pre-arranged locations. These network markets can generate more demand by sparking desires among others to obtain a similar bargain.

Hawking markets or street sales is another source for the amateur receiver. This is where thieves sell directly to strangers in certain establishments such as clubs or bars, or by direct contact on the street or workplace. This also includes door-to-door sales in a neighborhood.

Focus on the Receiver

The receiver side of the equation is the demand side. As stated earlier, reactive responses to the supply side has historically been marginally effective at best. Further, the sheer numbers of property crimes preclude effective reactive interventions. By examining the possibility of reducing demand in criminal markets, new methods of crime control can be developed. There can be no doubt that

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markets for stolen goods have considerable influence upon the decision to begin and continue stealing.

Some offenders who fail to sell items they had stolen in their first burglaries never commit more than two or three before giving it up. However, where a burglar's early burglaries resulted in successful conversion of stolen goods into cash, invariably it leads to further burglaries.

The effect of early success or failure to convert stolen goods into cash is important. If theft is a gateway crime to future offending, failure to convert stolen property into something of value can play an important part in whether a person continues to offend. Reducing markets for stolen property might curtail many criminal careers or high volume offending before they take off.

It is recognized that high rates of theft may be driven by the existence of markets for stolen goods, that buyers provide motivation for others to steal, and that demand for stolen goods leads to an increase in theft. The bottom line is based on how easy it is to dispose of

the goods by selling them. The ease of disposal of stolen property is a crime generator.

Perceptions of morality of stealing property might also be influenced by demand. That otherwise seemingly law-abiding individuals buy stolen property may serve to legitimize theft, as it may negate feelings of guilt associated with stealing. This readiness to buy stolen property among the public also appears to serve as an underlying motivation for thieves to take advantage of opportunities that present themselves— occasionally stealing just because the chance presents itself to make money.

The Demand Reduction Approach

Strategies and tactics to reduce the incidence of receiving stolen property might employ one or more of the three broad categories of situational crime prevention: increasing the effort of offending, increasing the risk of offending or reducing the rewards of offending. Situational crime prevention efforts would make it more difficult for thieves to convert property they have

stolen and to increase the real or perceived likelihood they will be reported to the police, arrested or convicted. Situational crime prevention efforts would also reduce rewards by either lowering the price of stolen property or reducing the volume of sales.

Professional receivers are those whose principal enterprise is the purchase and redistribution of stolen property. Intelligence and investigative approaches aimed at identifying this group can be beneficial. Officers or detectives should take the time to interrogate all individuals arrested for theft or burglary concerning the locations where they sell stolen property. Since a large percentage of thefts and burglaries in many jurisdictions are committed by drug addicts to support their habit, they too should be interrogated by police in an effort to identify sites where they dispose of stolen property.

This serves two purposes. One is it can lead to the arrest of the operator and closing of the location, which takes a stolen property disposal site off the market and can make it more difficult to

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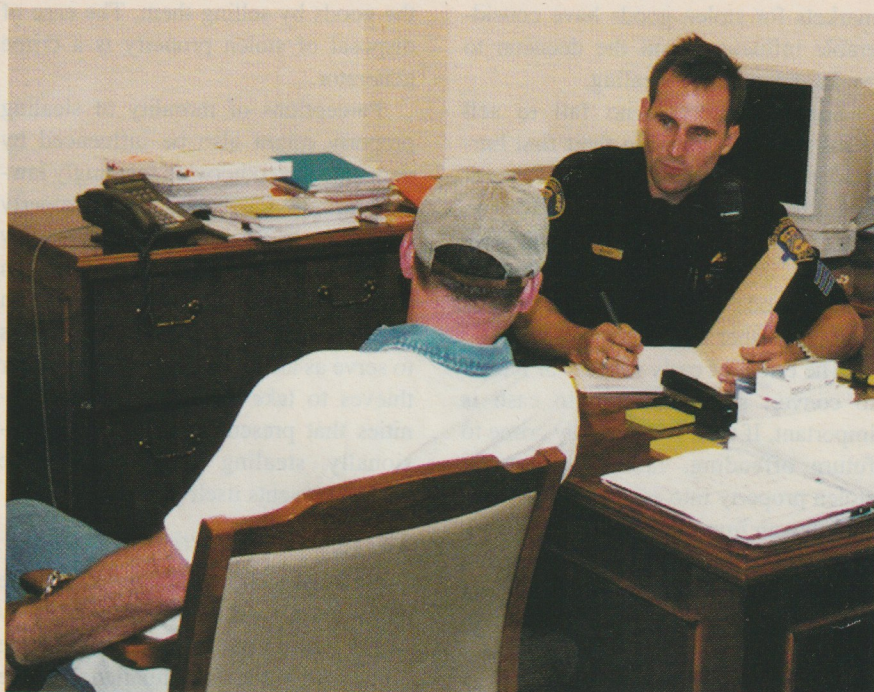


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convert because one less site is available for conversion. It can increase the risk to the offender as he may have to hold the property longer and could reduce the reward.

The second purpose is once the professional receiver hears that the police are interrogating his client base, he may become more selective with whom he does business, thus reducing the amount of conversion or ultimately perceiving the risk has become too great and stopping operations. Here again, the translation is more effort and risk for the offender.

Officers and detectives can develop sources of information who can supply them with information concerning professional receivers. These sources are often immersed in a culture or environment where they hear and see things that are concealed from the police and general public. With an intelligence base developed from sources, an investigation can be generated that can result in the closing down of an operation.

With the increased interaction of the police and the public through community policing, residents should be encouraged to provide information concerning professional receivers. Again, this intelligence base can provide enough information alone or with other

intelligence to generate a successful investigation.

Avocational receivers fence as a part-time enterprise, secondary to but usually associated with their primary business like dry cleaner, pawnshop, second hand dealer, jewelry store, automobile repair garage or convenience store. It is interesting to note that in nearly all cases where stolen goods were sold to legitimate businesses the offenders claimed the business buying the goods knew that they were stolen.

These businessmen who buy stolen goods are portrayed as taking advantage of an opportunity to make a profit from buying at a bargain price. If stricter controls were imposed, both the businesses and the thieves who supply them would need to invest more effort to convert stolen goods into cash. One method is to impose statutory or encourage voluntary obligations on the businesses to conduct transactions with members of the public on camera, or to require that all individuals making sales to the business be photographed. Stricter requirements of proof of ownership should also be considered. The onus should be placed on the business to require a higher degree of proof of ownership.

Taken alone, these two tactics may not have any significant impact, as

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transactions would just become more secretive. However, if they are part of a wider, more coordinated program targeted at demand reduction they could send the message to the receivers and offenders that their activities are under closer scrutiny. This closer scrutiny raises their risk and may reduce or eliminate their activities.

Pawnbrokers or shops dealing in second-hand goods could be encouraged to display signs that state they are enrolled in a crime prevention program aimed at preventing theft and the handling of stolen property. This would also increase the perceived risk of selling to the offender, and could be included as part of a fully engaged community policing program.

Police should become involved in the examination of business records of pawnbrokers and secondhand dealers, who are believed to be important players in the disposal of stolen goods. Increased attention notifies both the business and offender that they are at higher risk. This tactic has the added potential benefit of identifying high volume offenders when they repeatedly come to sell. This approach allows unknown offenders to be identified. Investigations and surveillance can be initiated on the business receiving stolen property or offenders.

Perhaps the biggest opportunity for police to reduce stolen property markets is with amateur receivers. Through community policing the case can be effectively taken to the public. Research into the disposal of stolen property to the public found that offenders viewed direct contact with the public to be superior to other methods of distribution of stolen merchandise. Identifying stolen property is difficult under any circumstance, but sales to the public make identification of both the property and the thief nearly impossible.

Dealing with the public circumvents the need to locate and establish a relationship with a professional fence. There are economic advantages as well. Dealing directly with the consuming public cuts out the middleman (professional fence), resulting in a higher profit margin for the offender.

Even though the public does not purchase with the frequency, volume or

commitment of professional fences, studies indicate that it represents a large market for stolen property, compensating for lack of volume with sheer numbers. It has been estimated that as much as 60–70% of all stolen property passes through the hands of law abiding citizens. These citizens include schoolteachers, social workers, plumbers, attorneys, systems analysts, college professors and students.

The public that buys stolen property tends to disassociate themselves from the crime and, by extension, the victim of the crime. They tend to view purchasing stolen property as a victimless crime, if they see it as a crime at all. As can be imagined, rationalization plays a big part in public consumption of stolen property. While excuses may be an effective way to avoid guilt and neutralize the criminal characteristics of these transactions, it ignores those citizens who purchase stolen property provide the economic impetus for property crimes. The receiving public is creating a low-risk, convenient and readily available source for the conversion of stolen property.

Combating property crimes can be greatly enhanced by concentrating some police efforts on citizens who knowingly purchase stolen property for consumption. One way that can be used to try to reduce property crimes would be a targeted education campaign, aimed at reducing property crimes by making people aware of the consequences of buying stolen property and stigmatizing its purchase. An effective way to achieve this would be to initiate a program that sends the message that receiving stolen property is a criminal offense, and that buying stolen goods rewards offenders for committing crime and encourages them to steal again.

The public needs to be told of the relationship between buying stolen property and property crimes. This message can be presented at community and business meetings, mass mailings, posters, flyers, broadcast on the radio, printed in magazines, on television and in newspapers. A public information campaign could be used to emphasize the deleterious effects of buying stolen property.

Very few residents contact police after being offered stolen goods. If the

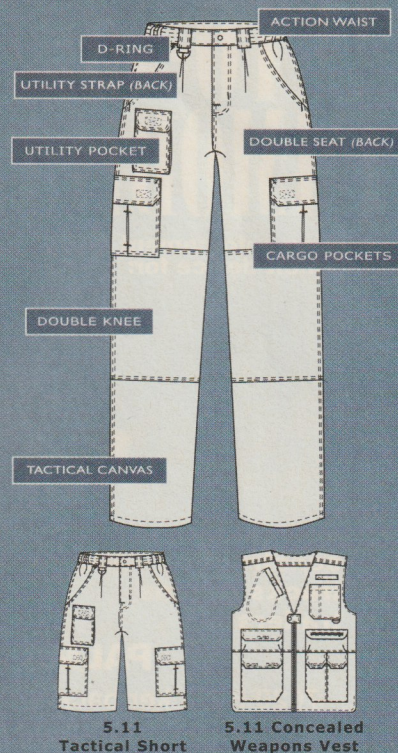
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public was made aware of how useful it can be to report individuals selling suspected stolen property, reporting rates could be increased. As part of community policing, officers regularly meet with residents. One of the goals is involve residents in solving the problems in their community. During these meetings residents can be asked to call the police when they encounter individuals attempting to sell what they believe to be stolen property.

They can be directed to provide the dispatcher with a description of the suspect, his location and a description of his actions. The police could then attempt to locate the suspect and investigate the incident. Results of this action include added risk to the offender, recovery of stolen property, arrests of offenders and reduced public market. This tactic also strengthens the police-community bond, improves satisfaction with police service and reduces levels of fear in the community.

Police should attempt to identify areas or locations where stolen property is sold to the public. Reports from the public, intelligence from sources, post arrest interrogation information, data on arrests and recovery of stolen property may help identify a street corner, bar or other public place where stolen property is sold. Once identified, interventions can be developed to deal with the problem. Special attention, surveillance or undercover operations may prove effective in reducing or eliminating the market.

There can be no doubt that the market for stolen property plays a major role in property offenses. Disrupting markets for stolen property—making it increasingly difficult to convert stolen property and raising the level of risk for the offender and receiver—can prevent crimes. Directing resources at the demand side of property crimes can result in successes. Whether it is a lone community officer, a group of detectives or a whole task force aimed at the receiving stolen property problem, attention to this often neglected aspect of the criminal equation can prove highly effective.

Ross Swope is the Chief of the U.S. Supreme Court Police in Washington, DC.