

Tackling Burglary and Other Theft with the Market Reduction Approach

Mike Sutton and Dave Simmonds argue that understanding how the illicit trade in stolen goods drives theft at the local level offers enormous potential for crime reduction.

Research shows that individual ownership of 'suitable targets' for theft is a poor predictor of burglary risk because many burglars do not know what items a dwelling contains before breaking in. Therefore, in cases where burglars do not know their victim, the reasons why particular houses are selected for burglary – e.g. less risk of detection or apprehension – are not the same as those which influence a burglar's decision to steal particular items from someone's home.

As Clarke (1999) points out, offenders have a hierarchy of goods that they prefer to take. Since most burglars steal because they want money, top of their list is cash, followed by items that can be easily sold for relatively high prices such as jewellery and high-technology home entertainment equipment. Stolen goods markets, then, motivate thieves because most steal goods to sell for cash. Of course, whatever they want to spend that cash on is, arguably, an equal motivator.

Some 29 percent of arrested thieves are heroin or cocaine users. These are the most prolific offenders, probably responsible for more than three-fifths of illegal income generated by thieves selling stolen goods in England and Wales (Bennett *et al.*, 2001). It is not surprising, therefore, that so many crime experts now see drug use as the root of theft. However, in-depth interviews with prolific thieves (Sutton, 1998) also reveal that drug dealers are often reluctant to exchange drugs for stolen goods. Thieves know they can get more drugs if they sell their stolen booty and buy with cash, rather than taking hot goods to their drug dealer where the exchange rate is at best poor and more usually the dealer will 'not want to know'. This means that stolen goods markets play as important a part as regular hard drug use in explaining high theft rates. Therefore these markets represent an important opportunity for crime reduction initiatives (Sutton 2004).

This may be supported by evaluation studies which show that concentrating on the arrest and incarceration of local thieves often makes only short-lived improvements in the local experience of crime. Reductions often do not even last until the remanded or sentenced offenders are released because other offenders take their place. The same is reported in drug treatment programmes. Even though more and more criminally active substance misusers enter and remain in treatment programmes and are reported to reduce their drug intake, there is rarely a corresponding reduction in local crime rates. Does

this point to an 'Archimedes Principle' dynamic at work? Or the equivalent of nature disliking a vacuum? If so what sets the 'water level'? Or what causes the vacuum that sucks in new offenders to take the place of inactive ones? We suggest the demand for stolen goods and the vibrancy of local markets may be a force that stabilises the numbers and activity of local thieves and subsequent crime levels.

A nation of handlers

Rapid changes in technology and the constant advertising and demand for new desirable, but expensive, mass produced consumer goods at less than high street prices drives the trade in stolen goods markets. As Stuart Henry (1977) notes: "...public demand for stolen goods shares some of the responsibility for maintaining the fence. The role of the consumer in a capitalist society requires him, like the businessman, to buy goods at the cheapest possible price. Advertising persuades him of the advantage of the 'bargain'. He needs little if any encouragement when presented with 'cheap' or 'bargain' goods". Henry's work was groundbreaking in taking forward our understanding of dodgy-dealing in society.

Sutton (1998) described professional fencing as operating solely in three out of five market types ('commercial fence supplies', 'commercial sales' and 'residential fence supplies') sometimes in 'network sales' and never in 'hawking' deals. Yet the work of Henry and others has emphasised the role of the consumer rather than the professional middle man as the most important focus of attention regarding 'dodgy dealing'. In this paper we explain how the relationship between thieves, fences and the wider public is a complex and interrelated mechanism for generating theft.

Systematic research of stolen goods markets

The 1994 *British Crime Survey* revealed for the first time the prevalence of stolen goods bought knowingly in England and Wales – 11 percent of those questioned in the *British Crime Survey* admitted that they had knowingly bought stolen goods in the past 5 years, whilst 70 percent thought that at least some of their neighbours had purchased stolen goods for use in their homes (Sutton 1998). So clearly a large proportion of the public are engaging in offending that carries a maximum penalty of 14 years under Section 22 (1) of the *Theft Act 1968*. Interestingly, handling carries

a higher maximum penalty than burglary – the intention of the legislation being to punish those who create the demand for stolen goods even more than the thief. And yet, it is widely accepted practice for offenders caught in possession to plead guilty to handling rather than burglary and to therefore actually receive a lower sentence.

In an attempt to tackle theft by understanding how stolen goods markets operate, and then suggesting ways to reduce them, Sutton's (1998) Home Office publication identified five types of stolen goods market and launched the Market Reduction Approach (MRA). The MRA has since been modified further and has been implemented by police services in a number of areas including the Medway Towns in Kent, Salford, West Mercia and Derby.

The market reduction approach

Sutton (1995), pointed out that both Ron Clarke and Marcus Felson had, in their respective work on situational crime prevention (SCP) and routine activities theory (RAT), 'taken for granted' the existence of motivated offenders. In doing so they had not capitalised on the fact that stolen goods markets could be tackled with a series of strategies to increase the risks and reduce the rewards of selling and buying stolen goods. This is an important point because tackling theft in this way might satisfy the demands of writers and crime prevention practitioners who wish to deal with the underlying causes of criminal motivation as well as the vulnerability of victims' possessions.

Since 1995, both Clarke (1999), in his work on 'hot products', and Felson's last two editions of *Crime and Everyday Life* have considerably emphasised the importance of markets for stolen goods in explaining why people are motivated to steal. Reinforcing the influence of their work on the development of the MRA, Sutton explains in detail in a forthcoming paper (Sutton 2004) how the market reduction approach is root-level situational crime prevention.

In research done in the Derby city area, in-depth interviews were conducted with a sample of 23 (20 males and 3 females), all prolific offenders or recent ex-offenders with a history of burglary or shoplifting. Interviewees were asked about their offending and how they sell or sold stolen goods. All interviewees in this sample were currently using or have in the recent past been users of heroin, crack cocaine or alcohol. The interviewees spoke frankly about their experience of stolen goods markets, their own patterns of disposal of property they had stolen and the economics and timescales involved in these transactions. The research was presented to professionals working in criminal justice, community safety and drug treatment services in the city, who all reported that it resonated with their experience and understanding of the scene in Derby, and that it had identified a notable absence of strategy, policy and activity to reduce markets. As a result of the research Derby Community Safety Partnership is developing a strategy to tackle the markets in stolen goods.

Police enforcement

Handling is being built into the police division's strategic intelligence assessment as a significant threat under the National Intelligence Model (NIM) procedures. This will direct officers and intelligence sources to discover and develop intelligence on fences as well as the thieves and burglars who supply them.

Control strategies to deal with handlers are developed and implemented through the NIM tasking and co-ordination meetings at division and section level. On 'strike days' every effort is made to ensure that local handlers of stolen goods are targeted along with the usual thieves, burglars and drug dealers. There is further work to be done in raising the awareness of operational officers about how minor changes in the ways they patrol, gather intelligence and interview suspects could introduce disruption into apparently stable and secure markets. There appears to be considerable scope for increasing the rigor of financial investigation of suspected fences with a view to confiscation of dishonest gains under the *Proceeds of Crime Act 2002*.

Other activity to build upon the foundation of enforcement measures will include:

- Communicating to the public that buying stolen goods facilitates burglary, theft and fraud and brings crime and drugs into their neighbourhoods. It is hoped that residents can be persuaded to resist offers of stolen goods and to report information about local fences to the police or Crimestoppers.
- Working with the business community to encourage shopkeepers, traders and licensees to resist offers of stolen goods to resell to their customers.
- Encouraging community enterprise and social inclusion activity that might provide more legitimate ways for poorer families to access the type of products which are commonly stolen.
- Raising awareness within the criminal justice system about how stolen goods markets facilitate crime, and how a perceived tolerance of handling and receiving offences by the courts is being exploited by offenders to evade responsibility for crimes such as burglary and robbery.

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