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Fencing/Receiving Stolen Goods

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Overview

The Industrial Revolution, beginning in Britain and gathering momentum in the eighteenth Century, enabled widespread ownership of desirable, mass produced, identical goods. This changed the characteristics of general theft whereby it switched from being motivated predominantly by a desire to take often unique property for personal consumption to stealing to sell standardized goods once more destined for the personal enjoyment of others.

While weight and portability of items is considered by thieves (Felson and Clarke 1998), this most usually happens, at least where prolific thieves are concerned, only if they believe the goods will be saleable once removed (Sutton 1995); at which time, considerations regarding weight and portability, and even danger of removal, will be balanced against prices. Therefore, the issue of demand and supply by theft is important because the most valid predictor of items that most thieves will choose to steal is whether or not they believe they can be sold easily for a good price. For example, the recent meteoric rise in scrap metal theft is fuelled by a global metals shortage caused by the high demand for raw materials that are essential for the expanding industry, cities, and infrastructure of China. High prices motivate thieves to remove heavy lead flashings from the roofs of high buildings or risk electrocution stealing heavy and difficult to remove live copper cable. Globally, scrap metal copper prices have doubled since 2004, followed worldwide by a significant number of electrocution fatalities at substations, railways, oil wells, overhead power lines, industrial buildings, and other places by thieves attempting to steal live copper cable.

Understanding more about the various markets for stolen goods presents a challenge for criminology and the criminal justice system that is relatively overlooked by the conventional tight-focus upon only the thief and the act of theft. Yet, arguably, mankind cannot adequately understand the prevalence and incidence of theft of different goods without understanding how different types of stolen goods markets operate to influence demand and supply, who deals in them and why. Worldwide, societies that actively detect and punish thieves, seek to target harden property, or otherwise increase its capable guardianship all virtually ignore the large number of citizens who purchase stolen goods at bargain process, notwithstanding that all those who buy motivate thieves to supply by theft.

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Background to the Problem

Thieves are seldom found living in, or otherwise owning, an Aladdin's cave of stolen goods. A safe assertion, therefore, is that most prolific thieves seek to raise money by selling whatever they steal. And the type of goods most frequently stolen is determined by the level of demand for them. Prolific thieves are generally very good at gauging this because most sell stolen goods within 30 min of their theft (Sutton 2010).

Most burglars and other thieves steal because they want money, and Clarke (1999) explains that offenders have a hierarchy of goods that they prefer to take. Top of their list is cash, followed by items that can be sold easily for relatively high prices – such as jewelry and desirable high-technology equipment. Stolen goods markets and knowledge of what can be sold in them motivate many thieves. This explains why societies have experienced different crime waves comprising targeted theft of very specific items and commodities.

The prolific and successful thief must complete one or else two objectives while evading detection and apprehension. The first objective is to steal cash or else saleable commodities. If something other than cash is stolen, the second objective is to either sell or else trade the goods stolen. Where goods are stolen, typically, police, prosecutors, and criminologists view this behavior as comprising the two distinct crimes and actions of stealing and then of selling stolen goods. From the thieves' perspective, however, these one or two objectives need to be completed in order to achieve their main aim, which is usually to acquire whatever it is they initially needed or wanted to buy before embarking on the crime.

Criminologists and crime scientists focusing upon the act of theft typically seek to understand the causes of, and find solutions to, the first objective. But the wider aims and objectives of theft from the perspective of the thief include selling, fencing, and receiving stolen goods (the second objective). In effect, the offender is following a crime script that begins before and continues after the act of theft. Seeing this wider picture can help to increase depth of understanding of acquisitive offending and possibly reveal innovative and promising avenues for seeking to tackle it.

Dealers in stolen goods have most probably existed for as long there have been laws against theft and a demand for stolen goods. The fence is a middleman between the thief and the consumer of stolen goods.

Through the act of buying stolen goods as a trusted criminal middleman, the fence allows the thief to avoid the risk of being caught in the act of trying to sell their loot directly to untrusted strangers. Hence, the origin of the word fence is widely believed to stem from the shortening of "defense" during the seventeenth century as a common understanding of the dealer in stolen goods being the thieves' defense from detection.

The role of historical and contemporary fences as protectors of the secret of thieves' identities is perhaps most plainly highlighted by what is known about theft in the time of slavery. For example, Williams' (1963) translation of a letter written by the Archdeacon of Hispaniola to the Council of the Indies in 1542 reveals that trusted fences served as a safe and ready market, thereby protecting numerous slaves from being linked directly to their crimes through selling goods they stole in slower and more risky ways. Money from the fence was then paid by the thief to his "master" in order to buy off his otherwise callously enforced labor. Likewise, slaves who were fences bought their own way out of the same exploitation through trading in stolen goods:

> The Negros are already doing business and trading among themselves to an extent involving great value and cunning, and as a result, big and notable robberies are committed on all the farms in the country... Some steal to pay for the day's work which they have agreed to give their masters... Night and day they rob and steal anything in the country, including gold to be melted. These thefts are concealed with the assistance of two or three hundred Negros called "fences", who go about the city seeking to make profits as I have said...and to pay the daily wage in exchange for each day or month or year, that they are at large and travel about the island. They take away stolen goods for

> sale and carry and conceal all that they are accustomed to conceal. . .

As well as providing protection for thieves, fences are conveniently sited to provide information to assist their arrest and prosecution. Although it has long been suspected that disingenuous police officers might allow fences to continue trading in exchange for intelligence about the thieves who supply them, there is no published evidence that this actually happens. Perhaps the only published evidence of such things happening in the past can be found the case of Jonathan Wild. In the eighteenth century, Wild, the most notorious fence in history, presented himself as a public hero, arresting so many thieves that he earned the title Thief-Taker General. Yet all the while, Wild secretly led a gang of thieves, regularly received stolen goods, manipulated victims to offer a reward for their return, and then pretended to track down the goods he already illegally possessed to claim the reward. Unsurprisingly, the question of the degree of guilty mind of the receiver has, for centuries, occupied legal scholars (e.g., Colquhoun 1796; Hall 1952), but astonishingly few contemporary criminologists are concerned with criminal career ethnographies of successful fences (Steffensmeier 1986) or understanding the wider dynamics of the trade (Sutton 1998).

Stolen Goods Market Types: Guilty Minds and Offending Dynamics

The London magistrate Patrick Colquhoun (1796) was concerned with the guilty knowledge of people buying stolen goods at bargain prices. His threefold typology consists of:

1. Criminal receivers (professional fences who deliberately encourage theft)
2. Careless receivers (have a reckless disregard for the origin of the goods)
3. Innocent purchasers (believe good were legitimately purchased by the seller)

A new typology was created 156 years later by the jurisprudentialist Jerome Hall (1952), who set out to emphasize the role of the professional fence in marketing stolen goods with another threefold typology:

1. The professional receiver (fence who deals in stolen goods)
2. The occasional receiver (buys for resale but does so only infrequency)
3. The lay receiver (buyer and consumer of stolen goods)

Even professional fences operate at different levels, as can be seen in the following three-tier fencing level typology first outlined by Lewis (2006):

- *Level-1 fence*: The thief sells to a level-1 fence (often a storeowner such as a pawnbroker or jeweler), who then sells the goods in his store or else sells them to another fence.
- *Level-2* (wholesale) *fence*: This fence buys from a level-1 fence and then often cleans up and/or repackages the goods to make it look as though they came legitimately from the manufacturer. These are very clandestine operations that are perhaps most likely to be found by police officers working back from an investigation of a level-3 fence operation. Those who operate stolen car rings also fall within this subtype.
- *Level-3 fence*: A level-3 fence takes repackaged goods from a level-2 wholesale fence and diverts them to retailers. At times, major retailers find themselves innocently purchasing the very goods that were stolen from them. Level-3 fences have been known to sell perfume, cosmetics, razor blades, and shoplifted designer goods in this way.

Being human constructs, all typologies tell us as much about those who create them as they do about their subject matter. Hall's typology, for example, was purposely designed to emphasize the role of the professional fence in the marketing of stolen goods, because he sought to bring about a change in US law that would see professional fences treated with greater severity. Lewis's three-tier fence model is concerned only with describing the hierarchy and marketing dynamics of fences dealing in goods stolen in organized retail theft.

Seeking to classify the various ways that the most commonly stolen goods are sold, Sutton's original (1998) fivefold typology of handling dynamics, updated to six to incorporate later knowledge of eSelling (Sutton 2010), describes how thieves sell, dealers deal, and the public buys stolen goods. No one of Sutton's six market types is known to be more serious or important than any other in terms of the role it plays in promoting theft by motivating thieves, fences, and the buying public. Moreover, research suggests that thieves and dealers regularly use more than one type (Sutton 1998):

1. *Commercial Fence Supplies*. Stolen goods are sold by thieves to commercial fences operating out of shops such as jewelers, pawnbrokers, and secondhand dealers.
2. *Commercial Sales*. Commercial fences usually pose as legitimate business owners while secretly selling stolen goods for a profit, either directly to the (innocent) consumer or more rarely to another distributor who thinks the goods can be sold again for additional profit.
3. *Commercially Facilitated Sales* (modified here from eSelling). This market type involves either the thief or a residential or commercial fence knowingly selling stolen goods through classified advertisements in traditional newspapers and magazines, through traditional auctions, or online through classified sales websites such as Craig's List or Preloved.co.uk. They may also sell stolen goods on Internet auction sites such as eBay.
4. *Residential Fence Supplies*. Stolen goods (particularly electrical goods) are sold by thieves to fences, usually at the fence's home. The fence may be drug dealer and may be a prolific dealer in stolen goods or may deal only occasionally.
5. *Network Sales*. Stolen goods are passed on, and each participant adds a little to the price until a consumer is found. This may involve a residential fence or commercial fence selling to other fences. Alternatively, the buyer may be the final consumer or may sell the goods on again through friendship networks.
6. *Hawking*. Thieves, or their friends, sell stolen goods directly to consumers on the street or in places such as bars and pubs or door to door in residential areas (e.g., shoplifters selling cigarettes, toiletries, clothes, or food).

Thieves tend to be flexible and may trade in several different markets depending upon where they are, the time of day, what they have for sale, and how quickly they need to sell it.

Thieves do not simply respond to requests to steal certain types of goods to order, because many *steal to offer* goods to total strangers, which can lead to the thief directly motivating members of the public to become regular customers in *Hawking* markets and tempting previously straight business owners to become fences by way of *commercial fence supplies* (Sutton 1998). Experienced commercial fences, in turn, use their respectable business *fronts* to recruit inexperienced thieves who come in to offer them stolen goods. Commercial fences sometimes mix stolen goods in with their legitimate stock. Somewhat perversely this helps to sell legitimate stock, because some people think they are getting a real bargain if the shop has something of a reputation for selling high-quality goods suspiciously cheaply as opposed to cheaply made legitimate merchandise.

Research suggests that stealing to order is not as common as *stealing to offer* (Sutton 2010). And thieves' knowledge of the "standing demand" for particular types of stolen goods influences the types of goods that are stolen, which can lead to crime waves when thieves target particularly hot products. Past crime waves of this kind have included theft of lead, copper, aluminum, bronze, silver, gold, color television sets, hi-fi equipment, video-cassette recorders (VCRs), motor vehicle radio-cassette players, computer memory chips, mountain bikes, laptop computers, digital versatile disks (DVDs), games consoles, mobile phones, and in-car satellite navigation devices.

The Basic Principles of Fencing

According to the US Senate's comprehensive review of fencing operations, the overwhelming majority of fences in the North America operate legitimate businesses (Sutton 2010). To operate successfully and avoid detection, the criminal dealings of the fence must be much less visible than the offenses and offenders that initially supply stolen goods. To achieve this, the fence must coach thieves to avoid detection, conceal his own trading behind a legitimate front, remain willfully ignorant of the provenance of goods bought from other fences, avoid storing goods to avoid detection but know how to safely store them if necessary, be wary of working with police informants, and limit the number of people who know what he is up to. He must never admit to knowingly trading in stolen goods if questioned by detectives, and he must have money for a good lawyer in case of arrest (Steffensmeier and Ulmer 2005).

Thieves and dealers in the UK and USA at least operate a "two- and three-way split" whereby experienced thieves selling to fences ask for between half the wholesale price and a third of the fences' selling price. This tends to vary though depending upon whether or not items are in high demand as fast-moving consumer goods or high end luxuries. Thieves selling stolen cigarettes, for example, are generally paid between 30 % and 40 % of the retail price. Shoplifters selling stolen clothes, meat, and bottles of alcohol such as vodka, whisky, and brandy directly to consumers tend to receive half the retail price. Other stolen but used items, like electrical goods stolen from house burglaries, are usually sold by the thief for a third of the retail value. If a fence sells directly to someone who knows the goods are stolen, then they sell for half the retail price. If the fence is a businessperson selling stolen goods to innocent customers through a shop, then the goods are usually sold for two-thirds of the retail value. Gold jewelry is different, however, in that it is sold by thieves to jewelry shops for the going rate for scrap gold. Presumably that same rule applies for scrap metals of all kinds. Where other stolen goods are concerned, this two- and three-way split on prices appears to be cast in stone, not least because several writers have documented these pricing practices existing for well over 100 years (Quennell 1958; Steffensmeier 1986, Sutton 1998). Perhaps this is because it is simple to understand and operate by those motivated to make quick but regular profits in illicit markets.

The Seller's Dilemma

Devising and testing creative ways to increase the difficulties and dilemmas faced by those dealing in stolen goods might be a useful approach in designing theft prevention and control strategies. The stolen goods seller's dilemma, whether she is the thief or a dealer (the fence), is that to increase her profit, she has to increase her risks of getting caught. The seller can choose to sell only to people that she knows, which reduces her risks of being ripped off or detected but restricts her sales and buying opportunities. The thief can sell to strangers, which allows her access to more potential customers, but also increases her chances of being arrested or robbed. This dilemma applies to both the thief and the dealer, but the business-owning commercial fence must also simultaneously nurture the confidence of thieves with whom they deal while projecting a legitimate trading image.

These conflicting demands of access and security determine to a large extent the structure of local stolen goods markets. The small size of most fencing operations, uniformity in pricing, and limited profit making from theft should come as no surprise since competitive options are limited by virtue of there being only so many ways of doing things efficiently and effectively in any kind of illicit market. This is because advertising, marketing, warehousing, transportation, and expansion options are necessarily avoided, or else extremely limited, in order to avoid detection and regulation (see Reuter 1985).

Prevalence

Few estimates of the amount of trading in stolen goods markets exist, but an exercise conducted by the British Government to inform the UK National Accounts (1997) claimed that in 1995, thieves selling stolen goods within Britain cleared between £900 million and £1,680 million (net) and that fences cleared between £450 million and £875 million (net) through selling stolen property.

The 1994 British Crime Survey (Sutton 1998) found that over the previous 5-year period, 11 % of the population of England and Wales admitted buying stolen goods, which they knew or believed to be stolen; 70 % thought that at least some of their neighbors had stolen goods in their homes; and 21 % thought a lot of them had the same. Looking back at just the previous year, rather than the last five, the British Offending, Crime and Justice Survey (Sutton et al. 2008) found that 7 % of adults in England and Wales admitted buying stolen goods while 2.7 % admitted selling them. Furthermore, almost half of males aged 16–24 had been offered or else bought stolen goods. Comparing males with females, this research suggests that it is possible that more than twice as many males buy. In the poorest neighborhoods, 40 % of males bought stolen goods compared to 17 % of females. Even in the most affluent neighborhoods, 7 % of people bought stolen goods. Incredible as they are, these figures could be an underestimate if some respondents were reluctant to admit buying stolen goods and others forgot that they did so.

The importance of the stolen goods market problem is further highlighted by Graham and Bowling (1995) who found that handling stolen goods was the most prevalent crime admitted by their respondents, with 49 % of offenders admitting to having done it in the past year.

Responses to Stolen Goods Markets

A consistent theme in the social sciences and the multidisciplinary areas of criminology and criminal justice is the unintended, sometimes ironic, consequences of purposive action. This theme, which is central to Merton's (1949) self-fulfilling prophecy, is reflected in the rationale behind the market reduction approach to theft (Sutton 1998). Specifically, those who buy stolen goods unintentionally support a market supplied by theft for their own future victimization.

Since the existence of "safe" and ready stolen goods markets is a difficult to disentangle, downstream consequence of theft, as well as one causal factor behind the motivation for theft, knowing more about stolen goods markets, in order to seek to reduce them and make it more risky to deal in them with situational crime reduction approaches, might provide one potentially promising avenue. The market reduction approach (MRA) (Sutton 1998; Sutton et al. 2001) is designed to do this. Although it is recommended as promising practice on official websites supported by government agencies in the UK, USA, Australia, and New Zealand, the MRA remains as yet unproven (Hale et al. 2004) avenue for reducing acquisitive crimes.

A comprehensive review of promising policing and multi-agency partnership responses to stolen goods markets, including those known to have limited effectiveness, was commissioned by the US Department of Justice (Sutton 2010). The review examines various crackdowns on stolen goods markets that have been tried out in the UK and USA with various degrees of success. One important conclusion reached is that even the most apparently successful schemes prove difficult to maintain over time with the traditional focus on the theft act taking priority in the allocation of scarce resources (Walsh 1976). Moreover, limited research in this area reveals that what works and does not work in tackling stolen goods markets is complex and at times counterintuitive. Research findings – however limited – are particularly valuable, therefore, in helping police services avoid repeating past mistakes. Clandestine police storefront antifencing sting operations, for example, can have the unintended effect of generating theft in the surrounding area to meet the demand they have unintentionally created

(Langworthy and Lebeau 1992). Furthermore, despite being a favorite crime reduction activity in many police services, property marking has never been proven to reduce theft largely because thieves steal both "invisibly" and clearly marked property and fences and citizens will buy it (Sutton 2010). Therefore, the oftentimes bold assertions made by commercial companies for the success of their expensive property-marking products have never been confirmed by independent academic research (Knutsson 1984; Sutton 1998; Harris et al. 2003; Hale et al. 2004).

Explaining the Relative Importance of Stolen Goods Markets: Why the Market, Not Opportunity, Makes the Thief

Property thieves, particularly prolific ones, are generally perceived to be "bent" offenders whose predation upon "straight society" can be explained by their relative poverty, subculture, wider cultural influences, poor socialization, substance addiction, or individual pathology acting alone as significant causes or else together as a combination of forces that interacts with so-called opportunities for theft. Here, current criminological understanding of the crime act has been shaped by the current criminological notion of "opportunity" that is classically defined in Crime Opportunity Theory as what happens when a relatively more capable and sufficiently motivated "likely" offender succeeds against a target or victim – thereby proving that they were capable offenders against relatively incapable or absent guardianship. However, this crime as "opportunity" explanation does not at the time of writing provide discoverable and measurable quantifiable values that would enable criminologists to predict and test individual or general victim or target vulnerability relative to actual or potential capable offender motivation or guardianship abilities (Clarke 1984). This same limitation applies in the area of repeat victimization and within various types of high crime environment or in crime hot spots. It is a truism therefore that capable and suitably motivated offender components of current notions of "crime opportunity" cannot be discovered and objectively measured in nature or society before a successful crime happens – only afterward. This limitation means that "crime opportunity," as the "almost always, elements of a criminal act" described in the Routine Activity Theory (RAT) crime triangle by Felson and Boba (2010, pp. 28–40), and in the description of crime as opportunity that is classically outlined by Mayhew et al. (1976), is the essential data of a successfully completed crime in commission. In other words, it is always knowable – but only ever after the event – that the crime happened because the offender could successfully commit it or else failed because he could not.

Logically, therefore, "crime opportunity" cannot be a cause of crime because Crime Opportunity Theory merely describes whether or not offenders were in fact more capable than the crime target's guardianship. It follows, therefore, that until a crime is successfully completed or fails in the attempt, the current notion of "crime opportunity" cannot be known by offenders to exist in advance of the crime being completed or failing. This is because no potential thief could know for sure that they would be more capable than any guardian or that guardianship would remain absent. After all, if that was possible, there would be no reason for so many failed criminal attempts.

The RAT "crime opportunity" incorporates the commonsense premise that before stealing, most offenders rationally weigh up what they perceive to be risks versus rewards. However, this explanation of perceptions in the so-called crime opportunity event does not include human guardian perceptions of their own relative capabilities. Offender and guardian perceptions aside, if the current notion of crime opportunity, which combines RAT with the known successful criminal outcome described in the classic crime triangle, could somehow exist in advance of the crime actually being accomplished, then it would logically follow that every successfully completed crime and every offense of attempt would be the cause of itself, which is clearly impossible according to the scientific laws that govern the universe above the subatomic level. Therefore, the widely cited claim that "opportunity makes the thief" (Felson and Clarke 1998) is undoubtedly logically flawed (see also Sutton 2012).

Consequently, this notion of opportunity is neither a rational framework nor model for theory building. Nor is it a stand-alone theory of crime causation (e.g., see Felson and Clarke 1998, p. 9; Tilley and Laycock 2002; Felson and Boba 2010, p. 47) nor any kind of *measure* of differential vulnerability (see Clarke 1984), because it does not quantify levels of vulnerability. What is more, this notion of "crime opportunity" does not even fit common understandings of opportunity because it does not describe any kind of realistic pre-crime situation formed by a juncture of circumstances favorable to crime. Logically, therefore, there is no opportunity in Crime Opportunity Theory.

The current classic RAT and situational crime prevention notion of "crime opportunity" (perhaps ratortunity is a better word for it) is an elegantly precise, perhaps perfect, post hoc description of any successfully completed criminal act, which makes it a veracious, and therefore important, description of what has happened. But descriptions, no matter how elegantly described, cannot explain the reasons for the data. It follows, therefore, that precise descriptions of the components present at every crime act cannot explain the cause of the crime. This is true for all descriptions and the data they describe (Shermer 1991). Just as a fossil embedded in the geological fossil record, no matter how precisely and elegantly described, cannot explain itself without a separate theory – such as Darwin's theory of evolution.

Criminology requires a crime theory to explain why, in all successfully completed crimes, offenders are sufficiently motivated to prevail against protective measures. Simply saying, for example, that successful offenders were sufficiently motivated to overcome levels of guardianship, perhaps even ones that had deterred them in the past, because they rationally reevaluated the risks and rewards (Felson and Clarke 1998) does not explain at what point and why the rewards and risks switched to make a once adequately protected target become sufficiently vulnerable. In order to do that, criminologists need to look for more promising explanations that are separate from the data and descriptions of criminal acts they seek to explain. One potentially promising avenue here is to focus upon precisely how variations in demand for particular stolen goods differentially influence the motivation of thieves and their perceptions of risks versus rewards. This is why the strangely neglected area of stolen goods markets deserves more attention.

In the case of theft, changes in technologies, cultures, consumption patterns, and the economy of a nation state can sometimes act as a spur for new crime motivating markets, leading to increased levels of theft of particular types of property and changes in ways and methods of offending (e.g., Mann and Sutton 1998). Future research in this area will most certainly build upon existing knowledge and seek to understand more about the role that stolen goods markets play in motivating people to begin and continue stealing. One thing waiting to be discovered is information about exactly how and why an increase in demand for particular things can change them from "warm" to "hot products" (Clarke 1999) and hence increase both licit and illicit prices (Sutton 1995). If future research could find and then attach a quantifiable value to the "sufficient motivation switching point" for offending (if indeed there is such a thing) as a sufficient condition for theft, then criminologists would be in a better position to predict acquisitive crime waves. Perhaps one day criminologists will be able to accurately predict the likelihood of the next otherwise unexpected crime wave before it becomes a crime harvest. Forewarned with such knowledge, it would be possible to take preventative action, rather than merely explaining why the crime wave happened and seeking to prevent individual repeat occurrences. Understanding more about the role of stolen goods markets in theft, therefore, offers further promising incremental advances and perhaps, potentially, a monumental breakthrough in criminological knowledge, crime reduction policy making, and policing.

Conclusions and the Way Forward

Little is known about the factors that influence demand for stolen goods, what impact ready markets have on potential and persistent property thieves, and what might be the most promising ways to tackle effectively the crime of knowingly buying stolen goods. One thing is certain though: if more goods are stolen from people on the street or from their houses and cars, then they are normally purchased by other people to enjoy on the street or in their own houses and cars.

Surprisingly little research has been conducted into who buys stolen goods and why. Accordingly, compared with other areas of criminology, such as ethnographic and subcultural analysis of various different types of theft and thieves, the subject of stolen goods markets is a weirdly neglected area. Despite the fact that fences and consumers create much of the demand for stolen goods that is met through supply by theft, policing and crime reduction initiatives remain for the most part heavily focused upon thieves alone. Given the pervasive nature of stolen goods markets and the fact that the stolen goods trade is, when compared with acts of theft, afforded far less resources and attention, a most telling question is whether it is evenhanded or particularly efficient criminal justice policy or policing practice to focus so much attention on property thieves, rather than those who buy from them.

Knowing what research reveals about adults who motivate young thieves to steal by fencing or otherwise criminally receiving stolen goods and considering the number of thieves occupying prison systems throughout the world reveals a telling question, namely, *why do so few receivers of stolen goods share prison time with their regularly incarcerated suppliers*? The answer lies partly in the fact that gathering sufficient evidence to prosecute fences is difficult because they conceal stolen goods trading behind legitimate business fronts. Professional fences are expert at this and can remain undetected for years. In addition, members of the general public who buy directly from thieves for their own consumption do not do so as prolifically as individual thieves tend to steal. Consequently, their risk of detection is lower. Furthermore, public tolerance toward those who deal out of their cars and houses, often using networks of contacts in the community, is high because these dealers are seen by their customers as providing a kind of community service by way of essential or expensive luxury items at bargain prices.

If fences and the general public who buy stolen goods are responsible for creating markets for everyone's potential victimization, then finding effective ways to reduce such markets appears to be a logical and compelling way to reduce theft. Detecting those engaged in handling stolen goods and applying legal sanctions against them ensures that thieves and handlers have less chance of profiting from the misery of victims of burglary and other thefts, which is arguably an important criminal justice end in its own right and perhaps one that criminologists should not lose sight of in pursuit of measurable theft reduction. That said, it is not possible to predict accurately how different populations might respond in the event they were significantly deprived of stolen bargains.

Since theft remains a problem to be solved, criminologists will continue to make progress in the area. The logical impossibility of "crime opportunity" being a cause of crime brings us to a nexus where the next fundamental breakthrough in understanding the causes of theft may possibly be a new hypothesis proposing an explanation for how "demand" for hot products interacts with human actors to cause a "switching point" in offender motivation with the effect that what was previously capable guardianship of valuable products becomes inadequate when their trading value increases to a certain level, which is exactly what happened when electricity first ceased to be a capable guardian of live copper cable when global copper prices rose significantly in 2004 and thereafter. If such a hypothesis is formulated, criminologists and economists will do their best to disprove it through a process of prediction and observable outcome. If disconfirming evidence is not forthcoming, then the issue of fencing and receiving stolen goods may no longer remain so strangely ignored because it might enable criminologists to better forecast crime waves. The theft reduction potential of adopting such a market reduction approach is huge.

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