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Community survey of willingness to receive stolen goods

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There is currently little information on how stolen goods are disposed of, or what proportion of the New South Wales (NSW) population is involved in the stolen goods market. In this study, over 5,000 NSW residents were surveyed to see whether or not they had been offered stolen goods. The results indicated that five per cent of the NSW population had been offered stolen goods in the last year. However, out of those who were offered stolen goods, approximately two-thirds had been offered them more than once in the last year. Looking at the demographics of those offered stolen goods, men were more than twice as likely as women to be offered stolen goods; and the odds of people in their teens or twenties being offered stolen goods were approximately nine times higher than those of people aged 50 or above. A variety of methods which could be used to try to reduce burglary are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Although burglary is one of the most frequently occurring serious offences in NSW, there is only limited information on the way in which stolen goods are disposed of. Police and other crime prevention agencies currently have little objective data on issues such as the proportion of the general public who are offered stolen goods and the groups in the community which are most likely to be offered stolen goods. They also have limited information on the locations where offers to purchase stolen goods are most likely to be made and the factors which would prompt persons offered stolen goods to inform police.

The aim of the present study was to assist the police and other crime prevention agencies in reducing the opportunities for disposing of stolen goods by providing information that could be used in strategic intelligence plans for education programs, crime prevention strategies and surveillance operations. Hopefully, strategic intelligence plans of this nature will lead to an increase in the risks of handling stolen goods for both the burglars and recipients, and a consequent reduction in the incidence of burglary.

BURGLARY IN NSW

Over the last five years, NSW has experienced an upward trend in break-ins, from 4.5 per cent of all households in 1994 to 5.6 per cent in 1999. However, not all break-ins resulted in property being stolen: approximately 4.8 per cent of households would have experienced a break-in with loss of property in 1999.[1] In other words, one in every 21 households (or 112,000 households) in NSW would have been broken into with property stolen from the home, garage or shed during 1999 (Australian Bureau of Statistics 1998, Australian Bureau of Statistics 1999). To put this figure into perspective, the most comparable figures for Australia, the United States (US) and United Kingdom (UK) are also given. In Australia, one out of every 24 households would have been broken into with property stolen from the home, garage or shed during 1998 (Australian Bureau of Statistics 1998).[2] The number of 'completed burglaries' in the US was one out of every 31 households in 1998 (Bureau of Justice Statistics 1999).[3] In the UK, one in every 33 households experienced burglary with loss in 1997 (British Home Office Research 1998).

The Australian burglary rate appears higher than the US and the UK burglary rates, although the definition of 'household' varies in each country. In the US, only the actual home is considered, whilst in the UK a connected garage is also included. Neither of these definitions is as inclusive as the Australian definition which includes all garages and sheds. It is not possible to tell whether the apparent higher rate of burglaries in Australia is real or due to the broader definition of burglary employed in the Australian crime victim surveys.

Whatever the true rate, the sheer number of burglaries makes it very difficult for police to conduct detailed investigations into every one. It is therefore not that surprising that only around five per cent of reported burglaries are actually cleared up by police (Chilvers 1999). What is more disturbing is that many burglars are well aware that they face a very low risk of detection, and those that have been caught do not expect to be caught again (Prenzler & Townsley 1998). For all the burglaries where no-one is caught, little is known about how the goods are disposed of and to whom.

IMPORTANCE OF RECEIVERS

Most burglars steal to raise money and to do so they have to sell or trade their stolen property through the stolen goods market (Sutton 1995). This transaction can be achieved by passing the goods directly from the burglar to the final recipient, or through one or more fences (individuals who buy and sell stolen goods). The various types of fence include legitimate businesses, pawn shops or second hand shops, drug dealers and local neighbourhood fences (e.g. Stevenson & Forsythe 1998).

A recent NSW survey of 250 imprisoned burglars by Stevenson and Forsythe (1998) examined the various methods used to dispose of stolen goods, and the frequency with which these methods were used. The results of this study showed that 63 per cent of burglars had sold or given stolen goods to their family, friends or acquaintances, and 15 per cent of burglars did this most of the time. When asked whether they had sold stolen goods to strangers, 30 per cent indicated that they had done so, and two per cent had sold stolen goods this way most of the time. The other methods used to dispose of stolen goods were trading the goods for drugs with drug dealers, or selling the goods to neighbourhood fences, legitimate businesses or pawn/second hand shops. Each of these last four methods had been used by 70 per cent, 62 per cent, 51 per cent and 49 per cent of burglars respectively; and as the main method used for disposing of stolen goods, these methods were used by 28 per cent, 34 per cent, 17 per cent and 12 per cent of burglars, respectively.

Since most burglaries are committed for money rather than to obtain goods for personal use, stolen goods disposal is a central problem that burglars need to resolve. Sutton (1998) found that people who failed to sell the goods stolen in the first two or three burglaries generally gave up stealing, whilst those who successfully converted stolen property into cash in their first attempts tended to continue. One guaranteed method for selling the goods is stealing to order. Stevenson and Forsythe (1998) found 77 per cent of burglars had stolen to order, and 31 per cent of burglars did so most of the time. Out of the burglars who had had orders placed with them, 59 per cent said family, friends or acquaintances had placed orders with them; 41 per cent said drug dealers had placed orders with them; and 31 per cent said fences had placed orders with them.

Burglars generally have more than one method for disposing of stolen goods. Stevenson and Forsythe (1998) found that burglars used a median of four methods to dispose of stolen goods, with high frequency offenders having the greatest number of disposal methods and being the most likely to dispose of stolen goods by selling them directly to strangers. Sutton (1998) found that the number and type of receivers used to dispose of stolen goods was related to the experience of the burglar. Inexperienced burglars tended to rely on a single residential fence who was usually a relative or neighbour, whilst experienced and prolific burglars were pro-active in finding new buyers and sold to a variety of people. Cromwell et al. (1993) found that novice burglars, juveniles, and drug addicts often found it hard to establish regular business relationships with fences. Many resorted regularly to direct sales to strangers in public places. This behaviour was risky and had a relatively low success rate but those with no other available outlet at that time used it.

An important issue for burglars is the time frame within which they can dispose of the stolen goods. Burglars generally want to convert the stolen goods into cash as soon as possible to minimise the risk of being caught by the police with the goods. If a burglar knows at least one fence willing to purchase all of their stolen goods, disposing of the goods becomes a fast and simple procedure with minimal risk. Well-connected burglars go straight from the break-in to a fence with the stolen goods (Wright & Decker 1994). Stevenson and Forsythe (1998) found 36 per cent of burglars disposed of the stolen goods within one hour of the burglary, and 82 per cent disposed of the stolen goods within 24 hours of the burglary. It is very difficult for the police to catch burglars in possession of stolen goods because of the short time frame involved and the low probability of anyone informing the police of the transaction. This is especially true when goods stolen are sold to a fence.

RATIONALE FOR BUYING STOLEN GOODS

Although some people buy stolen goods unwittingly, many people who purchase stolen goods do so in the knowledge that they may have been stolen, yet choose not to ask questions about their origin. Many people either rationalise purchasing stolen goods or find ways of neutralising their guilt, with comments such as 'it was already stolen, if I didn't buy it someone else would' (Sutton 1995; Henry 1978).

Henry (1978) found the main factors which influenced the decision to purchase stolen goods were the low price of the goods; the ambiguous language used by the sellers, making the status of the goods unknown; the individual's personal level of honesty or dishonesty; the peer pressure involved in being a member of a network where goods are distributed; and the belief that if the goods were stolen it would be from a business which can afford the loss or a wealthy household that's insured, so the crime would be victimless.

PURCHASERS OF STOLEN GOODS

The results of the 1994 British Crime Survey showed 11 per cent of people in England and Wales had been offered stolen goods in the last year (Sutton 1998). In the US, Cromwell and McElrath (1994) found 36 per cent of respondents had been offered stolen goods at some point in their lifetime. Similarly, Sutton (1998) found 11 per cent had bought stolen goods in the last five years, whilst Cromwell and McElrath (1994) found 13 per cent of respondents had bought stolen goods in their lifetime.

The percentage of people offered stolen goods changed, however, according to various factors such as age, gender, personal wealth and housing area. The factors that had the strongest association with being offered stolen goods were gender and age. Sutton (1998) found that more than twice as many males as females were offered stolen goods, and the largest proportion of offers were made to 16 to 24 year olds. Nearly half of the 16 to 24 year old male respondents said they had been offered or bought stolen goods in the previous five years.

Cromwell and McElrath (1994) also found there was a marked difference between males and females, with 49 per cent of males, but only 25 per cent of females saying they had been offered stolen goods in their lifetime; and 20 per cent of males but only 7 per cent of females saying they had bought stolen goods in their lifetime. Age was also an important factor, with young people

(aged 25 or less) being the most likely to have been offered or to have bought stolen goods in their lifetime: 48 per cent and 26 per cent respectively.

In NSW, the existing evidence also suggests that sizeable proportions of young people have received stolen goods. The NSW component of the 1996 Australian School Students' Alcohol and Drugs Survey showed that 15 per cent of high school students had bought, sold or accepted stolen goods in the last year; and 23 per cent had bought, sold or accepted stolen goods in their lifetime (Baker 1998). The survey also showed that a higher percentage of male students than female students had bought, sold or accepted stolen goods.

Sutton (1998) found that two notable factors other than age and gender were associated with buying stolen goods in the UK. These were housing area and personal wealth. Housing indicators related to a higher prevalence of buying stolen goods were living in the least affluent housing areas; drug problems in the neighbourhood; and locals believing that burglaries are committed by other residents. Personal wealth indicators related to a higher prevalence of buying stolen goods were the wage earners' loss of livelihood; not managing on existing income; and not having household contents insurance.

Whilst past surveys in Australia and other countries are indicative of widespread public willingness to accept stolen goods, the present study is the first representative sample survey of the NSW population that asks questions about receiving stolen goods. The advantage of a population representative survey is that it helps to identify exactly how widespread the problem is and which groups in the community are likely to be targeted as purchasers of stolen goods. This information can help both prevention and law enforcement by allowing crime prevention agencies to focus on the people most likely to be offered stolen goods when developing education programs or crime prevention strategies.

METHOD

The survey was conducted on behalf of the NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research by Roy Morgan Research. Over 5,000 people from NSW were interviewed over the telephone. Data were obtained from two samples: the main sample consisted of 4,425 people randomly selected from NSW (*the NSW sample*), and an additional sample consisted of 994 people randomly selected from five local government areas that have high crime rates (*the high crime sample*).[4] All respondents were aged 14 years or above.

The survey took place from May to June of 1999 on both week days and weekends, and across all times of the day (morning, afternoon and evening). The phone numbers for both samples were randomly selected from the electronic white pages. If the phone was not answered, the same number was phoned again later at another time of day. If the phone was answered but it was an inconvenient time, the person was asked if there was another more convenient time or date to do the survey. There were up to four attempts made to get through on each phone number.

If a person was contacted who did not speak English, their language was noted whenever possible. When five or more people who spoke the same language had been contacted, an interviewer fluent in that language called each one back to conduct an interview in that language.

For any given phone call there could be a number of possible outcomes other than holding an interview. These were:

- refusing to take part in the survey, before any questions were asked (4,029 cases),
- terminating the interview in the middle of the survey (1,196 cases),
- unknown/unusual foreign language (118 cases),
- no reply/engaged on each attempt (2,185 cases),
- respondent was under 14 years old and no-one else was available (418 cases),
- unobtainable/unusable number such as a business or fax number (2,596 cases).

Out of the above outcomes only the first three involved contact being made with a person eligible to be surveyed. Of the 10,762 eligible people,[5] 5,419 respondents completed the survey, giving a response rate of 50.4 per cent.

In order to estimate the prevalence of being offered stolen goods in NSW, the data were weighted by age, sex and Statistical Division (i.e. geographical area). These weights were applied to all 5,419 respondents.[6]

THE QUESTIONNAIRE

The survey consisted of demographic questions and questions about stolen goods. The demographic questions asked respondents about age, sex, employment status, educational attainment, household income and language spoken at home. A copy of the questionnaire is provided in *Appendix 1* .

Respondents were asked whether they thought they had been offered goods that may have been stolen, but were not asked if they had bought stolen goods as it was felt this was likely to lead to a low response rate or to respondents not giving truthful answers. If respondents had been offered stolen goods, they were asked further questions including: how many times they were offered stolen goods in the last year; what type of goods they were offered; the location where the goods were offered to them; the age and sex of the person offering them stolen goods; and if applicable, why the incident was not reported to the police.

The data analysis presented in the next section looks at issues such as the proportion of the population offered stolen goods split by various demographic factors such as age and sex. Other techniques used to analyse the data include cross-tabulations, and logistic regression. Logistic regression was used to determine which explanatory variables (such as age, sex etc.) were statistically significant predictors of whether or not someone had been offered stolen goods in the presence of the other explanatory variables.

RESULTS

OVERALL RATE OF BEING OFFERED STOLEN GOODS IN NSW

The results below show estimates of the number of people in NSW who have been offered stolen goods in the year prior to the survey, and how the chance

of being offered stolen goods changes with certain factors, such as age, sex, and area. These estimates are derived by appropriately weighting the data from the 5,419 respondents.[7]

It is estimated that over a quarter of a million people in NSW were offered stolen goods in the last year, which represents five per cent of the population. Similarly, the estimate of NSW residents who have ever been offered stolen goods in their lifetime is nearly 700,000, or 14 per cent or the population.

RATE BY DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS

Age, sex and area

Tables 1 to 7 present estimated percentages of the population offered stolen goods, broken down by age, sex and housing area. Unless otherwise stated, these percentages are based on data from all 5,419 respondents (i.e. from both the NSW and the high crime samples), appropriately weighted for age, sex and area.[8]

Table 1 presents the estimated proportion of the population offered stolen goods in the previous year broken down by age. This table shows that respondents aged between 14 and 29 are the most likely to be offered stolen goods. Looking at the combined age groups 14 to 19 and 20 to 29, 11 per cent of people said they had been offered goods which may have been stolen, in the last year. In comparison, only one per cent of respondents aged 50 or more said they had been offered goods that may have been stolen, in the last year.

Table 2 presents the estimated proportion of the population offered stolen goods, in the last year, broken down by sex. It can be seen that males were more than twice as likely to be offered stolen goods as females, with seven per cent of males being offered stolen goods, compared with three per cent of females.

Table 3 breaks the data down by both age and sex simultaneously, allowing the proportion of young males from NSW who said they were offered stolen goods in the last year to be estimated. The results show that 13 per cent of males aged 14 to 19 and 16 per cent of males aged 20 to 29 said they were offered

Table 1: Estimated percentage of NSW population in each age group offered stolen goods, in the last year

Age (years)	*Offered goods*	*Population*	*Per cent offered*
14-19	52,085	530,880	9.8
20-29	108,229	943,199	11.5
30-39	49,012	983,600	5.0
40-49	40,978	920,299	4.5
50+	17,337	1,803,400	1.0
Total	**267,641**	**5,181,298**	**5.2**

Note: The total number of people estimated to have been offered stolen goods in the last year differs between Tables 1, 2 and 4 due to rounding errors. Estimates of the NSW population were supplied by Roy Morgan Research.

Table 2: Estimated percentage of males and females in NSW population offered stolen goods, in the last year

Sex	*Offered goods*	*Population*	*Per cent offered*
Male	182,632	2,556,300	7.1
Female	85,008	2,624,998	3.2
Total	**267,640**	**5,181,298**	**5.2**

Note: The total number of people estimated to have been offered stolen goods in the last year differs between Tables 1, 2 and 4 due to rounding errors. Estimates of the NSW population were supplied by Roy Morgan Research.

Table 3: Estimated percentage of the NSW population offered stolen goods by age and sex, in the last year

Age (years)	*Male*	*Female*
14-19	12.6	6.7
20-29	16.1	6.9
30-39	7.4	2.5
40-49	5.8	3.2
50+	1.0	0.9
Total	**7.1**	**3.2**

Table 4: Estimated percentage of the NSW population offered stolen goods by area, in the last year

Area	*Offered goods*	*Population*	*Per cent offered*
High crime areas	15,624	175,819	8.9
NSW	252,016	5,005,479	5.0
Total	**267,640**	**5,181,298**	**5.2**

Note: The total number of people estimated to have been offered stolen goods in the last year differs between Tables 1, 2 and 4 due to rounding errors. Estimates of the NSW population were supplied by Roy Morgan Research.

stolen goods in the last year. These percentages for young males are approximately twice those for young females.

Table 4 compares the estimated percentage of the population being offered stolen goods in high crime areas with that of the entire NSW population, in the last year. People who live in an area which is known to have a high crime rate are nearly twice as likely to be offered stolen goods compared with the NSW population.

Given that certain age groups are more likely to be offered stolen goods than others within NSW, the age of people being offered stolen goods in high crime areas was of interest. Table 5 compares the estimated percentage of people offered stolen goods in high crime areas with that for NSW as a whole, broken down by age. The results show that the age distribution of people offered stolen goods in high crime areas was similar to the age distribution for NSW in that young people were still the most likely ones to be offered stolen goods. However, there were some notable differences between the two groups. Five per cent of people aged 50 or more in high crime areas were offered stolen goods compared with one per cent across NSW, and 10 per cent of people in their thirties in high crime areas were offered stolen goods rather than five per cent in NSW as a whole. These differences suggest that in high crime areas there is less discrimination about the age of people offered stolen goods compared with other parts of NSW.

Table 6 investigates the percentage of persons offered stolen goods by sex and area, in the last year. Nearly twice as many males in high crime areas were offered stolen goods compared with males in the general NSW population. Also, males in high crime areas were three times as likely to be offered stolen goods as females in high crime areas. As already noted, in the general NSW population, males are only twice as likely as females to be offered stolen goods (see Table 2).

Table 7 examines the data for the high crime sample by age and sex. This was of interest as relatively more people are offered stolen goods in the high crime areas than in NSW as a whole. The Table shows that for males aged between 14 and 39 in high crime areas, being offered stolen goods was a relatively common occurrence. However, only the females aged 14 to 19 in high crime areas were commonly offered stolen goods. The people most likely to be offered stolen goods were males aged 20 to 29 years in high crime areas, with 22 per cent being offered stolen goods in the last year.

Table 5: Estimated percentage of the NSW population offered stolen goods by age and area, in the last year

Age (years)	*High crime areas*	*NSW*
14-19	14.4	9.7
20-29	13.4	11.4
30-39	9.8	4.8
40-49	4.8	4.4
50+	4.8	0.9
Total	**8.9**	**5.0**

Table 6: Estimated percentage of the NSW population offered stolen goods by sex and area, in the last year

Sex	*High crime areas*	*NSW*
Male	13.0	6.9
Female	4.2	3.2
Total	**8.9**	**5.0**

Table 7: Estimated percentage of the high crime population in NSW offered stolen goods by age and sex, in the last year

Age (years)	*Male*	*Female*
14-19	15.5	13.2
20-29	21.7	4.2
30-39	13.7	4.6
40-49	8.2	1.1
50+	6.3	3.1
Total	**13.0**	**4.2**

Income, employment and education

Given that people from socially disadvantaged backgrounds tend to be more likely to become involved in crime than other sections of society, it was thought that certain demographic factors such as unemployment and low income might be related to being offered stolen goods. However there was no substantiated evidence of these relationships.

In fact, many of the relationships appeared to be the opposite of what was expected until confounding variables such as age were taken into account. When the bi-variate relationships between socio-economic factors and being offered stolen goods were considered, the results showed that the respondents least likely to be offered stolen goods had salaries under $20,000; did not have any qualifications above school certificate; and/or were not actively seeking work (e.g. home-maker or retired). One of the main confounding

Table 8: Predictors of being offered stolen goods, in the last year

Predictor	*Odds ratio*	*95% confidence interval*
Age:		
14-19 versus 50+	8.5	5.2 - 14.2
20-29 versus 50+	9.5	6.0 - 14.9
30-39 versus 50+	4.1	2.5 - 6.7
40-49 versus 50+	2.9	1.0 - 4.9
Sex:		
male versus female	2.7	2.1 - 3.5
Area:		
high crime versus NSW	1.6	1.2 - 2.1

issues was the large number of retired people who are rarely offered stolen goods but have low incomes and did not spend a lot of time in education.

PREDICTORS OF BEING OFFERED STOLEN GOODS

In the previous section, it was shown that being offered stolen goods was related to various factors such as age and sex. To test whether these relationships were still significant in the presence of other variables, multivariate analysis was used. Specifically, a logistic regression model was used to see if age, sex, area, household income, employment status and highest level of education were significant predictors of being offered stolen goods in the presence of the other factors. The results are given in Table 8 and in more detail in Table 9 in *Appendix 2*. Table 8 gives the odds ratios for the significant predictors of being offered stolen goods, along with their associated confidence intervals. The results show that age, sex and area were significant predictors of being offered stolen goods, but household income, employment status and highest level of education attained were not significant in the presence of the other factors.

The results show that the odds of someone aged 14 to 19 being offered stolen goods are 8.5 times greater than those of someone aged 50 or more. Similarly, 20 to 29 year olds had 9.5 times the odds of being offered stolen goods compared with people aged 50 or more. People aged 30 to 39 and 40 to 49 had 4.1 and 2.9 times greater odds of being offered stolen goods than people over 50, respectively.

The odds of males being offered stolen goods were 2.7 times greater than those of females. Similarly, the odds of people in high crime areas being offered stolen goods were 1.6 times greater than those of people from NSW as a whole.

Figures 1a and 1b show the probability of people with various different characteristics being offered stolen goods, in a 12-month period.[9] It can be seen that the likelihood of being offered stolen goods varies considerably according to the number of risk characteristics an individual has. For a woman aged 50 or more who has been randomly selected from NSW, the estimated probability of being offered stolen goods is 0.01. For a male aged 20 to 29 randomly selected from NSW, the estimated probability of being offered stolen goods is 0.15. However, a male aged 20 to 29 from a high crime area has an estimated probability of 0.22 of being offered stolen goods.

DETAILS ABOUT THE INCIDENTS WHERE STOLEN GOODS WERE OFFERED

Five per cent, or 275 out of the 5,419 respondents surveyed said that they had been offered goods that may have been stolen in the last 12 months.[10] The following statistics in Figures 2 to 9 are based on the responses received from these 275 respondents.

Figure 2 shows the number of times people who were offered stolen goods in the last 12 months received such an offer. Out of the respondents who had been offered stolen goods, 62 per cent were offered them on more than one occasion, and 16 per cent had been offered them five or more times. Since a large portion of the respondents who were offered stolen goods were offered them more than once in the same year, it is possible that individuals with certain characteristics are targeted as likely buyers. One of these characteristics may be type of occupation. One respondent, who ran a shop in Kings Cross, said she was regularly offered

Figure 1a: Probability of males being offered stolen goods in a 12-month period, for different ages and areas

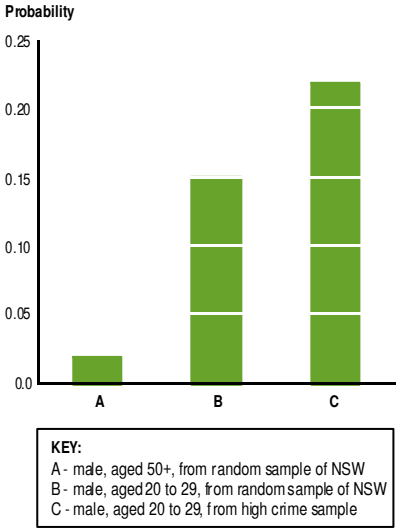
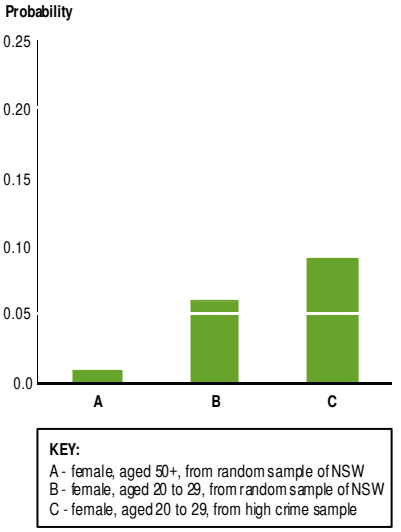


Figure 1b: Probability of females being offered stolen goods in a 12-month period, for different ages and areas



stolen goods. Other possible explanations for respondents being offered stolen goods on multiple occasions include respondents being members of established networks where stolen goods are traded or respondents placing orders for the goods they require with a burglar or thief.

The number of times a respondent was offered stolen goods was cross-tabulated against age, sex and area to see if these factors affected the likelihood of being offered goods more than once. The results showed no clear differences between the number of times a male respondent was offered goods and the number of times a female respondent was offered stolen goods. Similarly there was no clear relationship between the number of times a respondent was offered stolen goods and their age or area.

Figures 3 to 9 all refer to the last incident where goods which may have been stolen were offered to the respondent. Figure 3 shows the places where stolen goods were offered to the respondents. There were only a few types of location where stolen goods were frequently offered, with 84 per cent of the offers being made in just four types of location. These locations were on the street (25 per cent), at a pub/club (22 per cent), at someone's home (22 per cent) or at work (17 per cent).

Figure 4 shows the main types of goods offered to respondents. Electrical goods were offered in more than half of the incidents, with clothes, jewellery/ watches, and tools being the main items from the remaining goods on offer.

Figure 5 looks at the proportion of people who knew the person who last offered them stolen goods. This figure shows that 59 per cent of the respondents in this study said they did not know the person offering them goods.

Figure 6 shows the percentage of respondents who reported the last incident where they thought they had been offered stolen goods to the police. Only seven per cent of respondents said they reported the incident.

Figure 7 looks at the reasons why many respondents did not report incidents of being offered stolen goods. The main reasons given by the 255 respondents who did not report the last incident to the police were 'it would not have served a useful purpose' (23 per cent), 'I was not

Figure 2: Number of times stolen goods were offered to you in the last 12 months (*n* = 272)

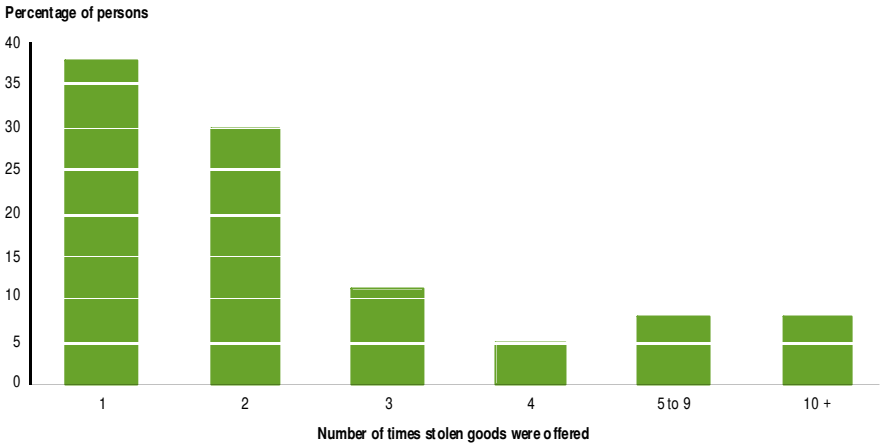


Figure 3: Location where stolen goods were offered to you (*n* = 269)

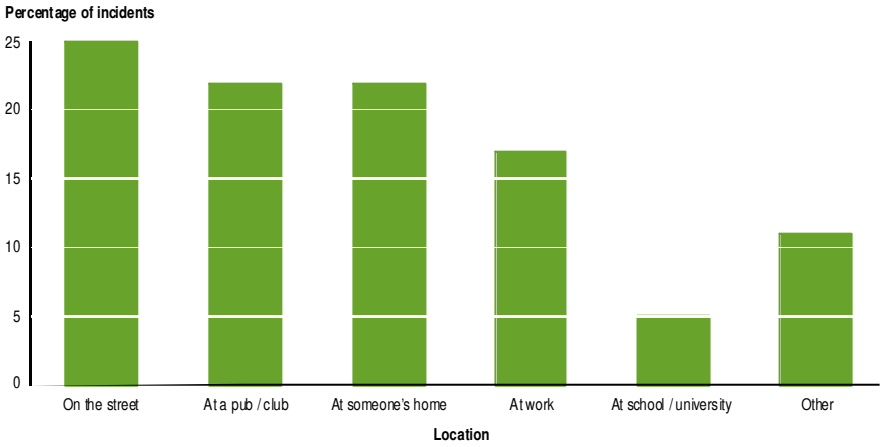
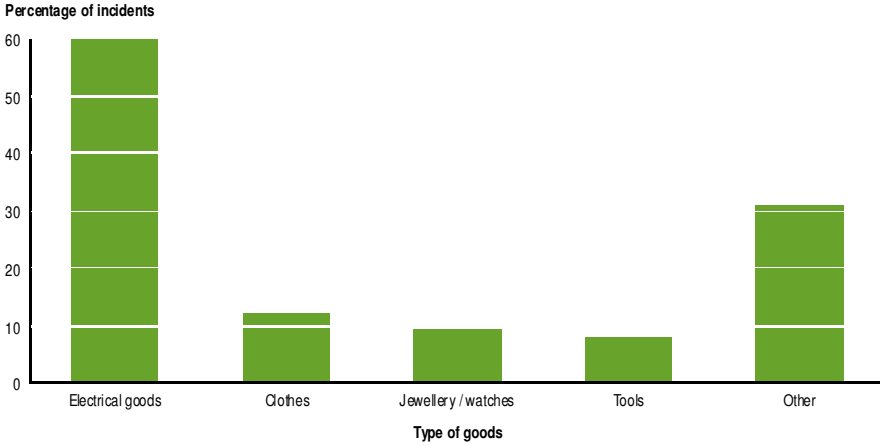


Figure 4: Type of goods offered to you (*n* = 328)



Note: The total number of types of goods offered is greater than 275 because some respondents were offered more than one type of stolen goods the last time they were offered stolen goods. Therefore, the percentages given in Figure 4 do not add to 100.

Figure 5: Did you know the person who offered you the goods? (*n* = 268)[11]

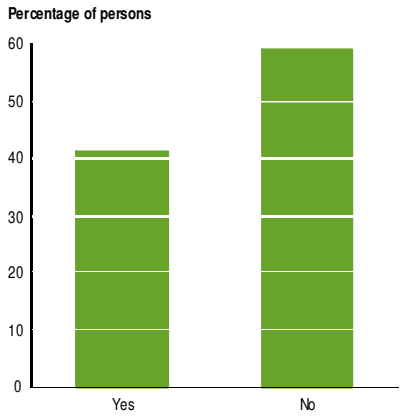
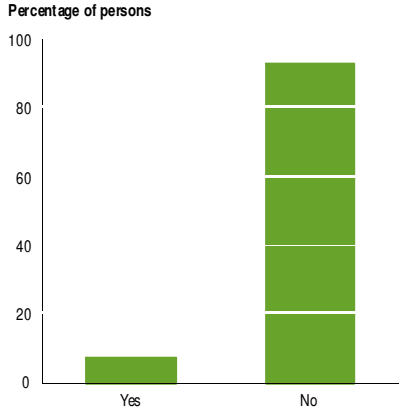


Figure 6: Did you report the incident to the police? (*n* = 273)



certain the goods were stolen' (22 per cent), 'I couldn't be bothered' (18 per cent) and 'the person was my friend' (16 per cent).[12]

Figure 8 shows the gender of the people offering the stolen goods, and whether they were alone or in a group.

In the majority of cases (84 per cent of incidents), stolen goods were offered by a male who was alone. In a further 8 per cent of incidents, the goods were offered by a female who was alone; while in the remaining 8 per cent of incidents the goods were offered by a group of people.

Information on the age of people offering stolen goods was also gathered from the respondents, and is shown in Figure 9.[13] It can be seen that it was generally young people offering the stolen goods, with 50 per cent in their 20s; and 90 per cent aged between 13 and 39 years old.

DISCUSSION

The present study was the first large-scale, representative sample survey to attempt to estimate the size of the stolen goods market in NSW. Ideally, measuring the size of the stolen goods market would entail measuring both the number of people *selling* stolen goods and the number of people *receiving* stolen goods. Unfortunately, obtaining such measures would mean asking people to admit to criminal behaviour. As a result, the present study obtained estimates of the number of people who thought they had been *offered* stolen goods, a behaviour which, of itself, is not criminal. It was estimated that over a quarter of a million people in NSW are offered stolen goods in a one-year period.

It is difficult to judge the accuracy of this measure. For example, the figure could be an underestimate as although being offered stolen goods is not criminal, some respondents may still have been loath to admit to being offered stolen goods in case they were suspected of actually accepting the goods. Nonetheless the present study indicates that attempts to sell stolen goods are widespread in NSW.

The only other NSW study on stolen goods that is based on a large, representative sample is of high school students. Baker (1998) found that 15 per cent of high school students had actually bought, sold or accepted stolen goods in the last year, whilst the present study found only 10 per cent of 14 to 19 year olds had been offered stolen goods in the last year. Again, the reason for Baker's (1998) estimate being higher is unclear. However, it should be remembered that the studies differed in a number of ways that could influence the estimates: samples (school student only versus general NSW population), survey method (written questionnaire versus telephone survey), and the questions asked about stolen goods (bought, sold or accepted stolen goods versus offered stolen goods).

The prevalence rate from the present study is lower than that from the British and American studies discussed earlier. Sutton (1998) found that 11 per cent of the UK population had been offered stolen goods in the last year, compared with five per cent in this study. In the US, Cromwell and McElrath (1994) found 36 per cent of respondents had been offered stolen goods in their lifetime, compared with 14 per cent in this study.

One possible explanation for the different prevalence estimates is that the rate of receiving stolen goods in NSW may actually be lower than that in Britain or America. Another explanation is that, although the rates of receiving stolen goods are similar, a larger proportion of goods stolen in Australia may be channelled through fences (e.g. pawn shops, legitimate businesses) than in other countries. Indeed, according to Stevenson and Forsythe (1998), within Australia, substantially more goods are disposed of through fences than directly to the general public or passed on through networks of relatives or friends.

Figure 7: Reason for not reporting the incident (*n* = 250)

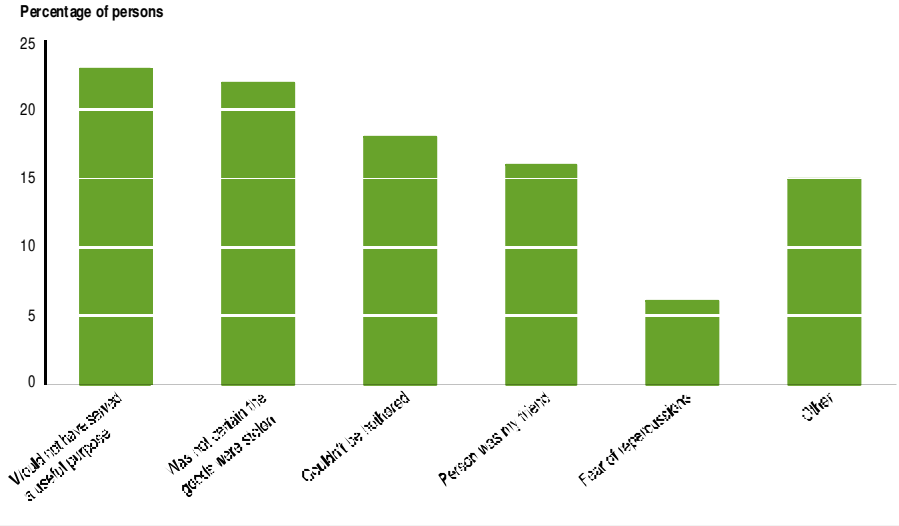
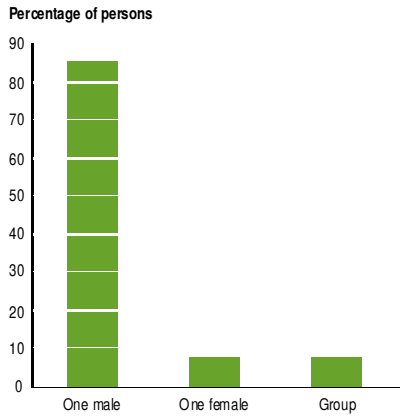


Figure 8: Sex of person/s offering the goods (*n* = 275)



An interesting finding from the present study is that although only five per cent of respondents thought they had been offered stolen goods in the last 12 months, about two-thirds of these respondents were offered them more than once in the last 12 months. Although some of these respondents may be part of an established network of customers, it is unlikely that this explanation accounts for all those offered goods more than once. (Nearly 60 per cent of those offered stolen goods said they did not know the person offering the goods.) The fact that so many of the respondents who were offered stolen goods were offered them more than once, when only five per cent of the population were offered stolen goods, suggests that there may be certain characteristics that burglars are looking for in the people they offer stolen goods to, beyond just age, sex, and housing area. Wright and Decker (1994) were told by thieves that people were chosen on the basis of their age, their sex, whether they were likely to be carrying enough money to buy the stolen goods, and whether or not they looked 'game to buy something'. Their age and sex were used to give an indication of what they were likely to be interested in buying. For instance, teenagers were usually interested in stereos, people in their 20s and 30s usually bought stereos, televisions (TVs), and video cassette recorders (VCRs), and women bought microwaves.

After considering a number of factors that may have been predictors of who is offered stolen goods, only age, sex and crime rate of the local housing area affected the likelihood of being offered stolen goods. Combining these factors showed that men in their twenties living in high crime areas were the most likely people to be offered stolen goods. Twenty-two per cent of the men in this category said they thought they had been offered goods that may have been stolen in the last year.

There are reasons both for and against the expectation of a relationship between socio-economic status and willingness to purchase stolen goods. On the one hand, there are no socio-economic barriers to buying stolen goods as everyone is interested in a bargain, and wealthier people are more likely to have the money to purchase the goods. On the other hand, people from lower socio-economic groups may purchase stolen goods in order to get by, whilst wealthier people do not need to risk the possibility of being caught with stolen goods.

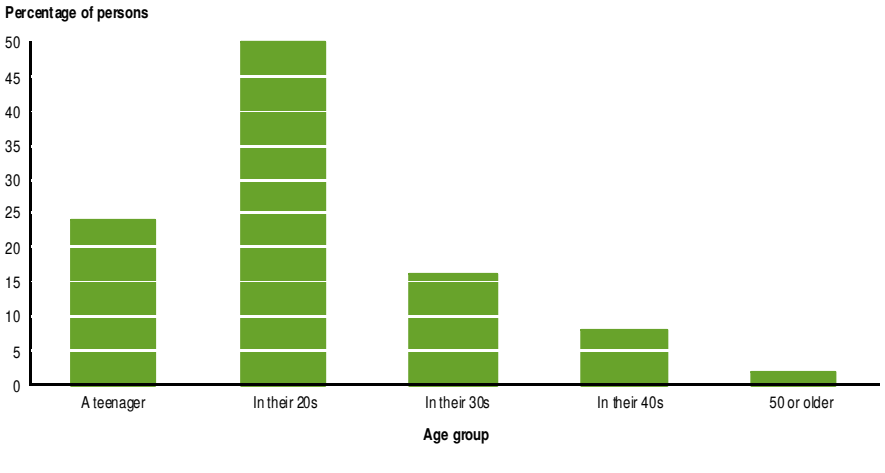
Supporting the first concept Henry (1976) suggests the consumer's belief that he or she is getting a bargain is a strong buying motive and the desire for bargains is virtually universal, without occupational or socio-economic boundaries. This theory is supported by the present study which found that socio-economic factors did not appear to affect the likelihood of being offered stolen goods. Although household income, employment status and highest level of education attained were all examined as measures of socio-economic status, none was related to being offered stolen goods.

On the other hand, Gaughan and Ferman (1987) found a number of case studies showing low-income communities rely on the informal economy of illegally gained resources to survive. Similarly, Steffensmeier (1986) suggests that some legitimate businesses occasionally deal in stolen property, but only during difficult times in order to stay afloat.

An unexpected result from this survey was that only 41 per cent of the respondents said they knew the person offering them goods. According to previous literature (Cromwell, Olson & Avery 1993; Stevenson & Forsythe 1998; and Wright & Decker 1994), burglars generally offer stolen goods to known people such as fences or friends or relatives who they know will be interested in buying the property, rather than trying to sell the goods to strangers. According to Cromwell (1993), approaching strangers in public places is a risky behaviour with a relatively low success rate. It is looked upon with contempt by almost all burglars, and practised only by those with no other available outlets for their stolen goods, mainly juveniles and drug addicts.

One possible reason for less than half of the respondents saying they knew the person offering them goods is that those who are offered goods by people they know either declined to answer the survey, did not complete the survey or have not given honest replies to the survey. Another explanation is that people in known networks are only offered goods that they are likely to accept, whilst a large number of strangers have to be offered the goods before someone is found who wants to buy them. A third explanation is that many of the respondents offered stolen goods by a known person do not realise that the goods they are being offered are stolen.

Figure 9: Age of person offering the goods (*n* = 270)



POSSIBLE METHODS FOR REDUCING BURGLARY

Since the present study has shown that only five per cent of respondents thought they had been offered stolen goods yet two-thirds of these respondents were offered goods more than once in the last 12 months, this suggests that any methods used for reducing burglary should be strongly focused on the groups within the community which are most likely to be offered stolen goods.

One method that can be used to try to reduce burglary would be a targeted education campaign, aimed at reducing burglary by making people aware of the consequences of buying stolen property and stigmatising its purchase. The most effective way to achieve this would be to launch a campaign designed to target those most likely to be offered stolen goods: young people, particularly males and those living in high crime areas. Such a campaign could put across the messages that receiving stolen goods is a criminal offence and that buying stolen goods rewards burglars for committing crime and encourages them to steal again. A possible method of focusing a campaign on the target audience would be to use radio stations and magazines with a young audience. The message could be further reinforced in high crime areas though the use of posters that included the 'crime-stoppers' phone number.

An alternate angle is to focus on locations which are frequently used for selling stolen property. The most common places respondents said they were offered goods were on the street, at a pub/club, at someone's home, or at work. Clearly, it is difficult for police to catch people selling or receiving stolen goods if the transaction takes place within someone's home or work place. However, if police were given regular reports about transactions taking place within certain pubs or clubs or on particular streets, they could pay special attention to those areas.

Pubs and clubs can be targeted by increasing pressure on them to comply with the law concerning crime on their premises, or by getting them to act as informants if they suspect someone is using their premises to sell stolen property. Police can then mount undercover surveillance operations designed to apprehend those they reasonably suspect of selling stolen goods.

In the case of information about people being offered stolen goods on a particular street, that information could lead to a police surveillance operation being launched in that area.

Another approach would be for police to obtain more intelligence about who is offering stolen goods and where. This could be done by approaching residents in high crime areas and asking them if they or someone they know has been offered stolen goods, or if they have seen suspicious people hawking goods. One of the respondents made the following statement about the goods they were offered: 'the kids steal it [goods] from the big department stores then come to the housing commission areas to sell it. Most of them are drug users, junkies'. This statement ties in with Cromwell, Olson and Avery's (1993) findings that drug users often sell stolen goods directly to the general public because they find it hard to find fences willing to do business with them. Given the propensity of thieves to repeatedly offer goods to certain people, police may find it worthwhile cultivating 'informers' from amongst the residents repeatedly offered stolen goods.

Very few respondents contacted the police after being offered stolen goods. Most respondents seemed to feel there wasn't much point in reporting the incident, as doing so was unlikely to achieve anything. Two-thirds of the respondents gave one of the following replies when asked why they had not contacted the police: 'it would not have served a useful purpose', 'I couldn't be bothered', or 'I was not certain that the goods were stolen'. One respondent said that they had been offered stolen goods so many times that it was not a shocking enough thing to be worth telling the police. Other reasons given for not contacting the police included 'the person was my friend' and 'fear of repercussions'.

If the public were made aware of how reports of people being offered stolen goods could be used by the police, this would probably lead to more people actually making the effort to report incidents. Again, education campaigns aimed at increasing reporting rates might be beneficial.

Another method police could use to obtain information on stolen goods would be to press repeat offenders who are on charges of 'goods in custody' or 'drug dealing' for information on sources of stolen goods. Although police cannot offer informants a reduction in their sentence in exchange for any information, cooperation with the police is likely to be viewed positively by the Director of Public Prosecutions.

Police are currently attempting to try to focus on repeat victims, offenders, and locations where events take place. This report supports the approach being taken by police and helps identify some of the potential repeat offenders and locations for receiving stolen goods.

SUMMARY

Five per cent of respondents said they had been offered stolen goods in the last year. This finding suggests that over a quarter of a million people in NSW maybe involved in receiving stolen goods, with about two-thirds of those offered stolen goods being offered them more than once in the last year.

The factors which were found to affect whether or not someone was offered stolen goods were age, sex and area, with men in their twenties living in a high crime area being the most likely people to be offered stolen goods. Twenty-two per cent of respondents in this category said they had been offered stolen goods in the last year. A more surprising outcome was that socio-economic factors had little effect on whether or not someone was offered stolen goods.

There were just four types of locations where respondents were commonly offered stolen goods, with 47 per cent of offers being made on the street, or at a pub/club; and 39 per cent of offers being made at someone's home or at work.

Only seven per cent of incidents were reported to the police. Most respondents who didn't report the incident lacked motivation to do so as they felt very little would be achieved by reporting the incident. Frequent comments were 'it would not have served a useful purpose', 'I couldn't be bothered' and 'I was not certain that the goods were stolen'.

NOTES

1 In 1998, 86 per cent of break-ins in NSW resulted in loss of property.

2 In 1998, 83 per cent of break-ins in Australia resulted in loss of property.

3 The term 'completed burglaries' is not defined within the Bureau of Justice Statistics 1999 publication. However, the completed burglaries category consisted of 'forcible entry' and 'unlawful entry without force'. The category excluded 'attempted forcible entry'.

4 The high crime areas were defined as the five local government areas which most frequently had one of the 10 highest crime rates in NSW during 1998, for various different types of property crime. The crimes used in this calculation were: break and enter dwelling, break and enter non-dwelling, motor vehicle theft, steal from motor vehicle, robbery and steal from person. The five local government areas with the highest property crime rates were: South Sydney, Marrickville, Leichhardt, Bourke and Moree Plains.

5 Of the people contacted, those who were counted as eligible to take part in the survey consisted of the individuals who: refused to take part before any questions were asked; terminated the interview in the middle of the survey; spoke an unknown or unusual foreign language; or actually took part in the survey.

6 The weights were determined by breaking the data down into a series of cells, where each cell contained one age group, one sex, and one Statistical Division/Sub-Division. (As a large portion of the NSW population resides in Sydney, Sydney Statistical Division was broken down into its Statistical Sub-Divisions.) For example, one cell might represent 20-29 year old males in the North-Western NSW Statistical Division. The weight for each cell is the number of NSW residents that fall into that cell divided by the number of respondents that fall within the same cell. Consequently, the weight for the above example would be the number of 20-29 year old male residents who live in the North-Western NSW Statistical Division divided by the number of 20-29 year old males who live in the North-Western Statistical Division and who completed the survey. To estimate the prevalence of being offered stolen goods within NSW from the results of the survey, the number of respondents in each cell who thought they'd been offered stolen goods were multiplied by the appropriate weight for their cell.

7 See note 6 for an explanation of the weighting method.

8 Out of the 5,419 respondents, there were 45 people who said they 'can't say' whether or not they were ever offered stolen goods, and one case of 'can't say' for the last 12 months. These cases were treated as not being offered stolen goods as there is no further information on them.

9 The probability of an individual being offered stolen goods can be estimated by replacing each of the significant predictor variables in the model with the appropriate values of that individual.

10 The 5,419 respondents consist of both the 4,425 respondents from the random NSW sample and the 994 respondents from the high crime sample.

11 Seven respondents were excluded from the graph. Three of these respondents said they were offered the goods by 'a friend of a friend', two said that they had 'seen the person around' who had offered them the goods, whilst the other two did not reply.

12 Although 255 respondents said they did not report the last incident, only 250 are included in Figure 7 because five respondents did not give a reason for not reporting the incident.

13 If the goods were offered by a group, the respondent was asked about the age of the person who 'actually' offered the goods.

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APPENDIX 1

Stolen Goods Survey

Good morning/afternoon. My name is (SAY NAME) from Roy Morgan Research, the people who conduct the Morgan Gallup Poll. We are conducting a short survey on behalf of the NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research. The survey will only last a few minutes and your answers will remain completely confidential.

Can I now ask you a few questions?

IF UNSURE IF PERSON IS 14 YEARS OR OVER,
***ASK*:**
Can I now speak to a person who lives in this household aged 14 years or older?

IF NEW RESPONDENT,
REPEAT INTRODUCTION

IF NOT AVAILABLE NOW,
ASK IF AN APPOINTMENT CAN BE MADE TO CALL BACK.

First of all, I'm going to ask you a few questions about yourself.

1. Can you tell me which age group you are in? Are you:
(Read options)

less than 14 years old	1
14 to 19	2
20 to 29	3
30 to 39	4
40 to 49	5
50 or older	6
can't say *(Do not read)*	7

IF RESPONDENT IS LESS THAN 14 YEARS OLD,
***ASK*:**

Can I now speak to a person who lives in this household aged 14 years or older?

IF NEW RESPONDENT,
REPEAT INTRODUCTION

2. What languages do you speak at home or with any other relatives?

RECORD ALL MENTIONED.

IF INTERVIEWING IN ENGLISH,
HIGHLIGHT ENGLISH

IF ENGLISH CODED
ASK:
Do you speak any other languages?

IF OTHER,
HIGHLIGHT OTHER AND TYPE IN RESPONSE

English	1
Arabic	2
Italian	3
Greek	4
Cantonese	5
Spanish	6
Mandarin	7
Other Oriental / Chinese languages (eg Japanese/ Vietnamese/Phillipino/ Tagalog/Malaysian/Thai etc)	8
Indian Languages (eg Bengali/Urdu/ Hindi/Sri Lankan/Sinhalese/Punjabi etc)	9
German	10
French	11
Other European languages (eg Hungarian/ Dutch/ Danish/Swedish/Portuguese/Latvian/Estonian etc)	12
Yugoslavian/Macedonian/Serbian/Croatian	13
Other Slavic languages (eg Russian/Polish/ Czech/Ukranian/Bulgarian etc)	14
Other Middle Eastern languages (eg Lebanese/ Turkish/Maltese/Persian/Hebrew/Armenian etc)	15
Other *(specify)*	97
Can't say	98

Now I'm going to ask you a few questions about whether anyone has stolen goods from you.

3. Have you ever had anything stolen from you?

Yes	1
No	2
Can't say	3

IF EVER HAD ANYTHING STOLEN,
ASK QUESTION 4

4. Have you had anything stolen from you in the last 12 months?

Yes	1
No	2
Can't say	3

Next I will ask you whether you have been offered stolen goods, but I want to reassure you that I won't be asking whether you have ever bought or accepted any stolen goods.

5. Has anyone offered you goods which you think may have been stolen?

Yes	1
No	2
Can't say	3

IF RESPONDENT HAS EVER BEEN OFFERED STOLEN GOODS,
ASK:

5a. Has this happened to you in the last 12 months?

Yes	1
No	2
Can't say	3

IF RESPONDENT HAS BEEN OFFERED STOLEN GOODS IN THE LAST 12 MONTHS, ***ASK:***

6. How many times has this happened in the last 12 months? .....

7. (The last time this happened/what) kind of goods were you offered?

.....

.....

Anything else?

.....

.....

RECORD ALL MENTIONED

PROMPT IF NECESSARY

IF OTHER,
HIGHLIGHT OTHER AND TYPE IN RESPONSE

tools	1
electrical goods eg VCR, stereo, TV	2
jewellery/watches	3
clothes	4
vehicle	5
vehicle parts	6
car equipment (eg stereo/cassette player/speakers etc)	7
a camera	8
mobile phone	9
CDs	10
sporting goods (eg golf clubs etc)	11
bikes/bicycle	12
alcohol	13
cosmetics (perfume/shampoo etc)	14
sunglasses	15
books	16
other *(specify)*	97
can't say	98

8. Where were you (the last time / when) someone offered you goods which you thought may have been stolen?

READ OUT

IF OTHER,
HIGHLIGHT OTHER AND TYPE IN RESPONSE

at a pub/club	1
at a garage sale	2
at someone's home	3
at work	4
in a car park	5
on the street	6
at a building site	7
in a jewellery shop	8
in a second-hand shop or pawn shop	9
in a shopping centre	10
at a train station	11
at my home	12
at school/university	13
at a restaurant	14
some other place (specify)	97
can't say	98

9. Was the person or people who offered you the goods male or female?

male	1
female	2
male only group	3
female only group	4
mixed group	5
can't say	6

IF OFFERED BY A GROUP,
***ASK*:**

9a. How many people were in the group? .....

10. Approximately how old was the person who (actually) offered you the goods?

PROMPT IF NECESSARY AND ENCOURAGE BEST GUESS

12 years or younger	1
a teenager	2
in their 20s	3
in their 30s	4
in their 40s	5
50 or older	6
can't say	7

11. Did you know the (actual) person who offered the goods to you?

IF OTHER,
HIGHLIGHT OTHER AND TYPE IN RESPONSE

yes	1
no	2
they're a friend of a friend	3
don't really know them but see them around	4
other *(specify)*	97
can't say	98

ASK EVERYONE:
And now just a few more questions about yourself.

12. What is the postcode of the area where you live? .....

13. Which of the following best describes your current employment status:

READ OUT

employed full time (35hrs+)	1
employed part time	2
unemployed	3
a student	4
not looking for work eg. home maker, retired	5
self employed	6
other *(specify)*	97
can't say	98

14. What is the highest level of education you have reached?

PROMPT IF NECESSARY

university degree or higher	1
some university/now at university	2
trade/commercial/TAFE certificate/diploma	3
higher school certificate/year 12	4
school certificate/year 10	5
some secondary school	6
primary school	7
not yet finished school	8
can't say	9

15. Would you mind telling me your HOUSEHOLD'S TOTAL ANNUAL INCOME before tax?

PROMPT IF NECESSARY

PROBE TO ENSURE RESPONDENT HAS GIVEN HOUSEHOLD'S ANNUAL PRE-TAX INCOME – NOT WEEKLY, MONTHLY, INDIVIDUAL OR TAXED AMOUNTS.

up to $10,000	1
$10,001 to $20,000	2
$20,001 to $30,000	3
$30,001 to $40,000	4
$40,001 to $60,000	5
$60,001 to $80,000	6
$80,001 or more	7
on the pension/unemployment benefit *(no amount given)*	8
other reply eg weekly wage *(specify)*	97
can't say	98
refused	99

IF HAVE BEEN OFFERED STOLEN GOODS IN THE LAST 12 MONTHS,
SAY:

16. Finally, (the last time / when) you were offered stolen goods, did you report the incident to the police?

yes	1
no	2
can't say	3

IF RESPONDENT DID NOT REPORT STOLEN GOODS TO THE POLICE,
ASK:

17. What was your main reason for not reporting the incident to the police?

PROMPT IF NECESSARY

IF OTHER,
HIGHLIGHT OTHER AND TYPE IN RESPONSE

the person was my friend/relative	1
the police might have thought I was involved	2
I wanted to buy and keep the goods	3
it would not have served any useful purpose	4
I was not certain the goods being offered were stolen	5
couldn't be bothered/didn't care	6
fear or repercussions from person offering goods	7
didn't want to get involved/ prefer to mind my own business	8
it didn't occur to me to do that/ never though to do it	9
I was too busy/in a hurry	10
I didn't get a chance to because person drove off/I was driving etc	11
we just told them not to come back	12
other (specify)	97
can't say	98

SAY TO EVERYONE:

I would like to reassure you once again that any information you have provided will remain completely confidential. Thank you very much for your time and assistance. Your answers will help the government in trying to reduce the number of burglaries in NSW.

QQ.Record sex of respondent

male	1
female	2

Q. Record your name for a true and honest interview.

.....

APPENDIX 2

Table 9: Predictors of being offered stolen goods

Predictor	*b*	*s.e.*	*Odds ratio*	*95% confidence interval*	*Wald*	*p value*
Age:						
14-19 versus 50+	2.14	0.26	8.5	5.2 -14.2	68.9	<0.001
20-29 versus 50+	2.25	0.23	9.5	6.0 -14.9	95.5	<0.001
30-39 versus 50+	1.41	0.25	4.1	2.5 - 6.7	32.2	<0.001
40-49 versus 50+	1.06	0.27	2.9	1.0 - 4.9	15.6	<0.001
Sex:						
male versus female	1.00	0.13	2.7	2.1 - 3.5	56.4	<0.001
Areas:						
high crime versus NSW	0.45	0.14	1.6	1.2 - 2.1	9.7	0.002

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