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# **Buying Stolen Goods: The Ambiguity in Trading Consumer-to-Consumer**

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## **Abstract**

This study investigates the buying of stolen goods in Denmark. The study consists of a self-report survey based on a representative sample of the general Danish population (n=2311) and six focus group interviews consisting of both informants experienced with buying stolen goods and of informants with no experience (n=37). The survey showed that 4.8 percent had bought stolen goods, while 15.7 percent were uncertain whether they had bought stolen goods. Young people, males, and unemployed were more likely to purchase stolen goods. No clear correlation between income and buying stolen goods was found. Focus groups suggest the buyers of stolen goods did not buy stolen goods because they could not afford legitimate products. We recommend targeting consumers not interested in buying stolen goods with information about how to avoid such activity.

## **Introduction**

Relative to the number of inhabitants, Denmark had the second highest number of reports of domestic burglary in 2012, compared to the other European countries (Lerche, 2013) (1). Sutton (1995; 1998) has argued that the main drivers behind theft and burglary rates are consumers who buy stolen goods. Thieves and burglars mainly steal to sell their loot and the rate of theft is highly driven by the demand for cheap, stolen products. Accordingly, it is highly relevant to consider the end consumers of stolen goods. Thus, we have investigated the purchase of stolen goods in Denmark.

In Denmark, the handling of stolen goods, including purchase, receipt, sale, transportation, and storage, is a felony punishable by law with a maximum penalty of two years in prison. However, specifically in severe cases, the handling of stolen goods is punishable by up to six years in prison (Article 290, Danish Penal Code). As the purchase of stolen goods often takes the form of a voluntary exchange, there is often no victim to report the incident. Consequently, the number of incidents reported to the police reveals little about the prevalence of this type of crime.

Self-report surveys are often used to account for the 'dark figure of crime'. By asking a representative sample of the population whether they have committed various types of criminal offences, we can gain information about crimes that are not often recorded in official crime statistics. In Denmark, self-report studies on experiences with buying stolen goods by the general population have been conducted on two occasions: once in 2000 and again in 2010 (Danish Ministry of Justice, 2011). In these studies, the proportion of respondents who admitted to having bought stolen goods was five percent.

Outside of Denmark studies on the issue of buying stolen goods have been carried out in the UK and the US. Based on the British Crime Survey, Sutton (1998) found that in 1994 in the UK, 11 percent of the population admitted to having bought stolen goods in the past five years. A later study in the UK, based on data from 2003, found that seven percent of the population admitted to having bought what they knew (or believed to be) stolen goods in the past 12 months (Sutton et al., 2008). In a 1994 study based on data collected in Texas, 17 percent of the respondents admitted to having bought stolen goods (Cromwell & McElrath, 1994).

However, it is possible to buy stolen goods without knowing the goods had been stolen. The opportunities of selling stolen goods anonymously to unknowing buyers on various websites dedicated to consumer-to-consumer trading today are pervasive.

Therefore, a considerable portion of the stolen goods may be offered to the end-consumer with no information of the illicit nature of the offered good. This kind of trading has largely been neglected by self-report studies. Previous surveys on the issue do not include the possibility of respondents stating whether they have doubted they bought stolen goods. By only asking yes or no questions, studies risk presenting the issue of having bought stolen goods as more clear-cut than it actually is.

In the existing qualitative research, special attention has been given to the thieves and sellers of the stolen goods market. Comprehensive ethnographic research and interview studies on the strategies and motivations of burglars (Cromwell, Olsen & Avary, 1991; Wright & Decker, 1994; Niras, 2014) and on the professional middle-men and ‘fences’ in the stolen goods market have been conducted (Klockars, 1974). However, the attitudes and experiences of the end-consumer and the general public towards the buying of stolen goods are studied to a lesser extent (but see Patel, 2013 for a study on UK buyers).

This study aims to address the gap in the existing literature on the buyers of stolen goods. In doing this, we use a mixed-methods approach and combine survey data with qualitative data to address the following three questions: 1) How widespread is it to buy stolen goods in Denmark? 2) What background characteristics do the buyers of stolen goods share? and 3) In what ways does uncertainty of the legal status of an item influence consumer-to-consumer trading.

## **Methods and data**

This study is based on two sources of data. Firstly, it is based on a large-scale self-report survey (n=2311). Secondly, the study is based on six in-depth focus group interviews (n=37). The market research institute, Megafon™, originally conducted the

survey study for the Danish Crime Prevention Council. Megafon™ is a private organisation specialising in survey research. Our research group was later granted access to the raw data from this survey for further analysis. The focus group data was collected entirely by our own research group.

For the survey study, a random sample of the Danish population of 18 years and above was sought. Respondents were contacted by phone and, if consent was given, they were invited to complete a web-survey. The web-survey was open for completion from November 17, 2015 to January 5, 2016. A random sample of 14,000 telephone numbers was compiled resulting in a sample of 11,475 respondents when unused telephone numbers were discarded. Of these, 2,960 refused to participate and 3,811 did not answer (the same telephone numbers were called up to six times). A sample of 4,603 respondents received a link to the web survey that 2,210 completed. An additional 101 respondents preferred to be interviewed by phone, resulting in a final sample of 2,311 respondents.

A post-stratification weight was used to correct for discrepancies between the sample and the population in terms of age and gender (Statistics Denmark, 2014). Goodman and Kruskal's gamma (Goodman & Kruskal, 1954) was used to determine the association between buying stolen goods and the following background factors: sex, age, income, whether the respondent had been a victim of theft themselves and self-reported unemployment (not including students or the retired).

It should be noted that the response rate was relatively low. The fact that some respondents refused to participate or did not complete the survey suggests the sample could be affected by self-selection bias. This means those who wished to participate in the survey could differ from those who did not wish to participate. This could limit the

sample's representativeness. However, this is a common problem for social survey research in general.

As a part of the survey, the respondents were asked whether they would like to be contacted by a researcher for a follow-up interview. Of the 2311 respondents, 349 agreed to be contacted. Based on this sample, we assembled six focus groups consisting of 5-8 participants. We compensated all interviewees with a gift certificate of 400 DKK.

A focus group's composition is crucial to the interactions it produces. Consequently, we composed two different types of focus groups: a group consisting of non-buyers and one consisting of buyers of stolen goods. We decided to split the interviewees into groups based on their experience with buying stolen goods on ethical, methodological, and analytical considerations. Ethically, we did not want to put buyers of stolen goods at risk of being morally blamed by the other participants. Methodologically, we aimed to avoid the influence of 'social desirability' on the material produced in the focus groups by having the buyers 'clamp down' in the presence of non-buyers. Analytically, the choice to separate the groups into buyers and non-buyers enabled us to compare differences between the discussions in the two types of groups.

The group of non-buyers is sampled based on their answers in the survey. To the question of having bought stolen goods, they all stated: "I am sure or almost sure that *I have never* bought stolen goods". However, it was also prioritised that the interviewees had some experience with consumer-to-consumer trading. Consequently, we selected respondents who reported not being sure if they ever had been *offered* stolen goods. We conducted four focus group interviews with these interviewees.

In addition to these focus group interviews, two interviews with buyers of stolen goods were completed. We chose these interviewees from the respondents who stated in

the survey that: 'I have been in a situation where *I was sure or almost sure* that the item I was buying was stolen'. Of the respondents who wished to participate in an interview, only 11 stated they were sure they bought stolen goods. Based on this, and considering the sensitive nature of the subject, we chose to deploy a snowball-sampling approach (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981; Zeller, 1993). When we contacted the respondents from the survey, we encouraged them to invite friends or acquaintances, preferably some with either experience with buying stolen goods or being offered stolen goods, to participate in the focus group interviews. Thus, the groups consisted of both interviewees who had experience of buying stolen goods and those who did not have. The interviewees were all males aged between 25 and 40. This matches the general characteristics of the typical buyer of stolen goods found in our survey data.

In this paper, we will focus on the quantitative data and present these results as our main findings. However, we will use the qualitative data from the focus groups to help explain the results of the survey.

## **Findings**

Most respondents stated they were 'sure or almost sure' they had 'never bought stolen goods'. This group accounts for 77.6 percent (n=1793) of the sample. We refer to these respondents as 'non-buyers'. A substantial number of the respondents have been in a situation in which they have 'been in doubt' if the item they were buying was stolen. This group accounts for 15.7 percent (n=362) of the respondents. We refer to these respondents as 'uncertain buyers'. A few respondents stated they were 'sure or almost sure' or that they had 'well-founded suspicion' they had bought a stolen item. This group accounts for 4.8 percent (n=112) of the respondents. We refer to these as 'certain buyers'.

**Table 1: HERE**

Next, we investigated the differences between ‘non-buyers’, ‘uncertain buyers’, and ‘certain buyers’. The proportion of men was greater in the two groups of buyers compared to the non-buyers. Compared to the non-buyers, the buyers also tended to be younger and more often unemployed than the general population and the findings suggest that respondents who have been victims of theft are more likely to buy stolen items than those who have not been victims of theft.

No significant correlation between the respondents’ income group and experience with buying stolen goods could be found in this study. The proportion of respondents reporting having bought stolen goods fluctuates considerably between the different income groups and a substantial number of respondents with high incomes had experiences with buying stolen goods.

**Table 2: HERE****Discussion**

Earlier Danish survey studies on experiences with buying stolen goods found that five percent of the population had bought stolen goods, which they knew or believed to be stolen (Danish Ministry of Justice, 2011). Our results mirror these earlier studies, with 4.8 percent of the respondents answering that they were ‘sure or almost sure’ or had a ‘well-founded suspicion’ they had bought stolen goods.

We expanded on the earlier studies by not posing the question of having bought stolen goods as a yes or no question. We received additional information about the experiences of the population concerning their experiences with buying stolen goods, as

you both can buy stolen goods knowingly or, more or less, unwittingly. Indeed, a considerable proportion of 15.7 percent of the respondents in our survey admitted having been in a situation where they were in doubt whether the item they were buying was stolen.

Our findings point to the fact that if we want to understand how dealings with stolen goods take place, we also have to consider ambiguous transactions where it is unclear whether the offered items are stolen. If we do not present the option for an ‘uncertain’ response in self-report studies, we will possibly underestimate how many people might be buying stolen goods, more or less inadvertently.

For background factors, our results suggest that young people, males, and the unemployed are more likely to buy stolen goods. The purchase of stolen goods then reflects a pattern of most other crimes with an overrepresentation of young, unemployed men as perpetrators. Further, the results suggest that respondents who have themselves been victims of theft are more likely to buy stolen items than those who have not been victims of theft. This indicates that experiences of being a victim of theft are not an effective deterrent in relation to buying stolen goods (Patel, 2013 also points to this). However, we do not know if the respondents had been victims of theft before or after they bought stolen items. However, this seems to confirm a well-known criminological finding known as the victim-offender overlap, which states that victims and offenders often resemble each other (Von Henting, 1948; Jennings et al., 2012).

However, the findings indicate that, in Denmark, the practice of buying stolen goods is not limited to those having a low income. Thus, this is not a crime limited to the poor and marginalised. The likelihood of affluent individuals and poor people buying stolen good was the same. This points to a considerable proportion of people using illegitimate means of obtaining certain goods for reasons other than not being able

to afford them legally. Using Merton's (1949/1968) terminology, you could say these people do *not* experience strain, that is, a feeling of not being able to achieve socially accepted goals, like owning a certain item. Rather, they have the means of obtaining these items through legitimate channels but choose not to. This suggests a profoundly rational agent of accepting an offer 'too good to refuse'.

The interviews with those who had prior experience on buying stolen goods seem to support this interpretation. When they had bought stolen goods, it was not because they could not afford the item. Instead, the purchase was typically just 'a really good deal' and nothing was holding them back from completing the transaction, as the risk of being prosecuted for this type of crime was perceived as minimal.

The interviews with non-buyers indicated that they did not refrain from buying stolen goods for purely economic rational reasons; these interviewees did not buy stolen goods because of the perceived social and moral costs involved in committing criminal activities.

Compared to the work of Patel (2013), the Danish buyers of stolen goods interviewed in the present study did not seem as dependent on the possibility of buying cheap, stolen products as their British counterparts. Patel (2013) reports that buyers of stolen goods relied on this possibility to 'survive financially', especially during particularly expensive times such as Christmas (Patel, 2013: 506). The Danish buyers we interviewed did not express this perception of the practice of buying stolen goods as an almost inevitable means of survival. Here, the practice of buying stolen products was typically perceived as a means of making a favourable deal.

### **Recommendations for crime prevention policies**

In addition to being a question of how best to measure the scope of buying stolen goods, attention to those who buy stolen goods inadvertently is also important for constructing

an effective crime prevention policy. Considering the results of the self-report survey, which show that only a relatively small proportion of the Danish population knowingly have bought stolen goods in the past, crime reduction measures could benefit from focusing on the larger proportion of the population who report being in doubt about having bought stolen goods.

Supposing those who do not know whether they have bought stolen goods are not interested in doing so, the task is to 1) enhance awareness about stolen goods being offered as legitimate wares, and 2) make it easier to distinguish between legitimate and stolen goods. These ends could be achieved through campaigns aimed at raising awareness and giving specific advice on how to avoid buying stolen goods.

In sum, focusing on the comparatively larger group of those who are uncertain if they have bought stolen goods, could lead to greater success in reducing the demand for stolen products, than to focus on the relatively small amount of those who buy stolen goods knowingly. Thereby, chances might also be better for reducing the frequency of theft and robbery.

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1. Greece had the most reports of domestic burglary and the rate of domestic burglary has been declining since 2009 in Denmark. In 2015, the level of reports of domestic burglary was below the level of 2007 (Statistics Denmark, 2017).

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**Table 1: Experience with buying stolen goods (n=2311).**

Questions in the survey	N	Percent
I have been in a situation where <i>I was sure or almost sure</i> the item I was buying was stolen	51	2.2%
I have been in a situation where <i>I had well-founded suspicion</i> the item I was buying was stolen	61	2.6%
I have been in a situation where <i>I was in doubt</i> whether the item I was buying was stolen	362	15.7%
I am sure or almost sure that <i>I have never</i> bought stolen goods	1793	77.6%
I do not know/I do not want to answer	44	1.9 %
<b>Total</b>	<b>2311</b>	<b>100%</b>

**Table 2: Characteristics of the buyers of stolen goods compared to the general Danish population.**

	Non-buyers n=1793	Uncertain buyers n=362	Certain buyers n=112	P-value	Gamma value
Male	44.5% (797)	66.0% (239)	72.3% (81)	<.001	.433
Age 18-39	31.4% (563)	39.7% (144)	44.6% (50)	<.001	.198
Unemployment	3.5% (62)	5.5% (20)	7.1% (8)	.033	.265
Victim of theft, ever	63.5% (1138)	71.5% (259)	79.5% (89)	<.001	.227
Income less than 300.000 DKK	23.3% (418)	24.2% (88)	25.9% (29)	.531	.037