STOLEN GOODS

Mapping Illicit Markets and Identifying Opportunities for Disruption

2026

FOREWORD

Theft has a profound impact on victims, businesses and communities. Whether it is a tradesperson losing the tools they rely on to earn a living, a retailer facing repeated theft, or an individual targeted for their mobile phone, the consequences extend far beyond the value of the property stolen. These offences undermine confidence, damage livelihoods and contribute to a wider sense of insecurity in our communities.

That is why tackling crime that affects town centres, high streets and neighbourhoods remains a priority. This important report shines a light on illicit markets. By bringing together insights from policing, retailers, industry, enforcement agencies, online platforms and offenders themselves, it explores a question that has received too little attention: where do stolen goods go?

The findings demonstrate that stolen goods markets are diverse, adaptive and increasingly complex. They operate through a combination of physical and online channels, ranging from local informal networks to sophisticated organised criminal enterprises. They exploit gaps in intelligence, traceability and accountability, creating opportunities for offenders to profit while reducing the likelihood of detection.

Importantly, the report challenges us to think differently about prevention. It highlights the need not only to tackle offenders, but also to disrupt the markets that sustain them. Strengthening intelligence sharing, improving traceability, increasing accountability across physical and online marketplaces, and embracing technological solutions that make stolen goods harder to sell or use all have a role to play.

The report also reflects the importance of partnership. No single organisation can address this challenge alone. Success will depend on continued collaboration between law enforcement, retailers, manufacturers, online platforms, regulators, local authorities and government. By working together, we can make stolen goods easier to identify, harder to move and less profitable to sell.

I welcome this contribution and all those who have supported the research. It provides valuable evidence, practical recommendations and a strong foundation for future action. Most importantly, it reminds us that reducing theft requires more than catching thieves; it requires disrupting the markets that make theft worthwhile in the first place.

Superintendent Lisa Maslen
National Business Crime Centre
2026

Handling stolen goods.

(1) A person handles stolen goods if (otherwise than in the course of the stealing) knowing or believing them to be stolen goods he dishonestly receives the goods, or dishonestly undertakes or assists in their retention, removal, disposal or realisation by or for the benefit of another person, or if he arranges to do so.

(2) A person guilty of handling stolen goods shall on conviction on indictment be liable to imprisonment for a term not exceeding fourteen years

-The Theft Act 1968 (Section 22)

TABLE OF CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The illicit trade in stolen goods represents one of the most consequential yet under-addressed dimensions of acquisitive crime in England and Wales. Recent years have seen the spotlight shone on several types of theft (e.g. mobile phone snatches, shop theft and tool theft) but intelligence and enforcement action on the illicit markets through which they are sold on has been largely absent.

This report presents findings from a research project commissioned by the National Business Crime Centre (NBCC) to explore and map the disposal routes for stolen goods. To better understand the illicit markets that facilitate and support the onward sale of stolen property, the project applied a mixed methodology comprising stakeholder and offender interviews, the collation of case studies and scrutiny of the existing policy and legislative framework (full details of which can be found in Appendix A).

Three Key Strategic Findings

1 Stolen goods markets drive theft and facilitate further crime.

We must flip the perceived relationship between theft and stolen goods. Stolen goods markets are a driver of theft – not a consequence of. By understanding the scale, profitability, speed, adaptability and harms associated with these markets (captured in the Six Vs Framework), policymakers, law enforcement agencies and retailers can develop more effective strategies to disrupt the economic incentives that make theft worthwhile in the first place.

Offenders repeatedly describe established buyers, repeat customers, online resale channels and businesses willing to purchase stolen goods. In many cases, the existence of reliable disposal routes is as important as the theft opportunity itself. Disposal routes exist along a spectrum ranging from hyper-local exchanges to sophisticated national and international distribution networks. At one end, stolen goods may be sold within minutes to established buyers operating from shops, pubs, market stalls or residential properties. At the other, online platforms and organised networks enable goods to be distributed nationally and internationally at scale.
Irrespective of the context in which theft occurs, it is rarely in isolation - stolen goods markets are often just one element of a wider criminal ecosystem alongside drug supply, exploitation, money laundering, tax evasion, and other serious organised crimes.

2 Intelligence on disposal routes is the critical gap.

While police and retailers often know who is stealing and where offences are occurring, far less is known about the disposal routes and end markets that sustain acquisitive crime. Many of the actors sustaining stolen goods markets are neither thieves nor direct members of organised crime groups. Instead, they operate as intermediaries, handlers, repeat buyers, market landlords, storage providers, online resellers and businesses willing to purchase, store, distribute or facilitate the sale of stolen goods. These actors often sit within what policing intelligence agencies have described as the "missing middle" between prolific offenders and organised crime networks and represent a significant opportunity for disruption.

Existing intelligence is fragmented across retailers, BCRPs, BIDs, Trading Standards and policing, with few mechanisms for bringing these insights together. The newly established High Street Organised Crime Unit presents a significant opportunity, but its success will depend on creating systematic pathways through which local intelligence can be aggregated, shared and acted upon at a national level.

3 Traceability and accountability offer the biggest opportunities for disruption.

The ability to establish provenance remains one of the greatest weaknesses in efforts to disrupt stolen goods markets. Manufacturers, retailers and policymakers should work towards a more comprehensive provenance ecosystem, combining forensic marking, upstream product identification at the point of manufacture, default opt-out product registration and warranty schemes, and interoperable ownership databases. While many of these mechanisms already exist, adoption remains inconsistent and systems such as Tobacco Track and Trace remain significantly underutilised. Enhancing traceability is also the foundation of the development of risk-based accountability frameworks for both physical markets (e.g. car boots sales) and online platforms by enhancing transparency and removing plausible deniability.

For too long, acquisitive crime strategies have focused primarily on thieves and theft events. This report argues that equal attention must now be paid to the markets that enable stolen goods to be monetised. If stolen goods become harder to sell, less profitable to handle and easier to trace, the economic incentives that drive theft begin to collapse.

The recommendations that follow are grounded in a market reduction approach. Rather than focusing exclusively on thieves, they seek to increase the risks, costs and barriers associated with handling, distributing and monetising stolen property.

Recommendations at a Glance

1. Create a National Stolen Goods Intelligence Framework.

A national intelligence framework focused specifically on stolen goods markets, should systematically bring together intelligence from policing, retailers, Business Crime Reduction Partnerships (BCRPs), Business Improvement Districts (BIDs), online platforms, Trading Standards, and other relevant stakeholders. The newly established High Street Organised Crime Unit presents a significant opportunity to coordinate intelligence working alongside OPAL, the National Crime Agency (NCA), Regional Organised Crime Units (ROCUs) and local police forces.

2. Reduce Demand for Stolen Goods.

The cultural normalisation of purchasing goods with suspect origins sustains demand and undermines enforcement. Tackling demand - not just supply - is a necessary component of any effective strategy. To achieve this, the development of educational public campaigns to highlight the multiple harms that underpin the stolen goods trade should be explored.

3. Improve the Visibility of Stolen Goods Markets.

The Home Office should increase the strategic visibility of stolen goods markets by enhancing the way handling stolen goods offences are analysed, reported and monitored. While the current classification of handling stolen goods as a non-victim-based offence is operationally appropriate, it should be recognised as a key indicator of the markets that sustain acquisitive crime. A dedicated annual statistical bulletin should bring together handling stolen goods data, enforcement activity, crime outcomes, intelligence on disposal routes and emerging trends. This would support more effective strategic analysis, intelligence-led policing and performance management, while reinforcing the role of handlers and facilitators as active enablers within the wider theft ecosystem.

4. Risk-Based Accountability Framework for Physical Markets.

High-risk secondary markets such as some car boot sales illustrate how stolen goods markets persist not because they are invisible, but because they sit at the intersection of fragmented regulation, limited traceability and constrained enforcement resources. Rather than new legislation, Government should explore whether the principles underpinning the Know Your Customer requirements and Scrap Metal Dealers Act 2013 - traceability, seller identification, record keeping and market accountability - could be adapted for higher-risk secondary markets.

5. Risk-Based Accountability Framework for Online Platforms.

The UK does not lack a regulatory framework capable of addressing illicit online trading. Rather, the challenge lies in ensuring that existing obligations are effectively aligned with the realities of stolen goods markets. There are four pillars of accountability that can be enhanced for online platforms without requiring new or extended legislation:

- improved seller transparency,
- enhanced high-risk product scrutiny and requiring images that clearly show the serial number for relevant items ,
- trusted notifier schemes (formal, structured partnerships between online platforms, law enforcement, retailers and brand owners), and;
- routine and AI-assisted behavioural indicator analysis to flag suspicious activity.

6. **Expand Provenance, Traceability and Benefit Denial Applications Across High-Risk Product Categories.**

Government should work with manufacturers and retailers to expand traceability and benefit denial measures across high-risk product categories to include kill switches, immobilisers, tracking and traceability, default (opt-out) product registration and warranty schemes, as well as removing the barriers that prevent existing traceability mechanisms such as Tobacco Track and Trace from fulfilling their potential.

7. **Improve the disposal of recovered property.**

Recovered property that cannot be reunited with its rightful owner is often sold through public police auctions. While this enables police forces to recover value from unclaimed items, current disposal processes may have unintended consequences for efforts to disrupt stolen goods markets. Non-itemised or insufficiently detailed auction receipts can be exploited to create an appearance of legitimate ownership, while the recirculation of unmarked and unregistered high-risk goods perpetuates the provenance problems that make stolen property difficult to identify. Police forces should strengthen disposal processes by requiring high-risk items e.g. power tools to be forensically marked and/or registered before disposal, issuing detailed and verifiable itemised receipts, and maintaining digital records that preserve provenance. Where practical, high-risk recovered property should be diverted to charities, training providers or community organisations, or, where provenance cannot be reliably maintained, considered for secure destruction rather than re-entering anonymous commercial markets.

1. INTRODUCTION:

THE SIX Vs OF STOLEN GOODS MARKETS

The illicit trade in stolen goods remains a persistent yet often poorly understood component of the acquisitive crime landscape. While established localised methods of disposal - such as selling stolen property face-to-face in licensed premises and through independent businesses - continue to operate, the emergence of new digital marketplaces and encrypted instant messaging has significantly transformed the resale ecosystem. In particular, the widespread adoption of peer-to-peer e-commerce platforms has expanded opportunities for both opportunistic offenders and organised criminal groups to distribute stolen goods with greater speed, reach, and anonymity. The use of encrypted mobile messaging applications further facilitates these activities by enabling discreet communication, coordination of transactions, and the rapid movement of illicit goods between sellers and buyers.

At the same time, organised crime groups are increasingly exploiting international illicit markets. A range of geopolitical, economic, and regulatory factors - including import restrictions, supply shortages, trade disruptions, and consumer concerns regarding product authenticity and safety - can create significant demand for goods outside legitimate supply chains. As a result, products that would otherwise be considered commonplace can become highly profitable commodities within illicit markets, generating substantial opportunities for criminal exploitation.

A central theme emerging from this report is the increasingly diffuse and interconnected nature of illicit markets, which now operate across multiple scales - from highly localised informal networks to sophisticated international supply chains. Understanding and mapping these markets is essential to informing a coordinated and effective response from businesses, law enforcement agencies, and government. Yet intelligence on what happens to stolen goods after the point of theft is critically weak, with police describing it as the "biggest intelligence gap" in relation to acquisitive crime.

"We know who's stealing. We know where they're stealing from. But we have really, really limited intelligence in terms of what happens to the goods next. I think that's the biggest intelligence gap there is out there."
- Policing

Much of the discussion surrounding theft focuses on the act itself: who stole what, from where, and at what cost. While these questions are important, they tell only part of the story. Theft is rarely an end in itself. The economic value of stolen goods lies in their ability to be moved, exchanged, and converted into financial profit. Understanding stolen goods markets therefore requires a shift in focus from theft as an event to theft as a process embedded within far wider illicit economies that are simultaneously involved in activities such as illegal drug supply, counterfeit goods, immigration offences, weapon offences, amongst many others - the true scale and depth of which are only just beginning to surface.

To better understand how these markets function, this report introduces the Six Vs of Stolen Goods Markets: Volume, Value, Velocity, Volatility, Visibility and Violence. Together, these dimensions provide a framework for understanding the characteristics, drivers and harms associated with the trade in stolen goods.

Volume

Volume refers to the scale of stolen goods circulating through illicit markets. While individual theft incidents may appear relatively minor, collectively they can generate substantial quantities of merchandise entering informal and illicit supply chains. The volume of goods available for resale influences market opportunities, offender participation, and the capacity of illicit networks to operate profitably.

High-volume stolen goods markets are typically associated with fast-moving consumer goods (FMCGs) such as food, alcohol, toiletries, and household products. While individual items may hold relatively little value, they benefit from consistent demand, broad consumer appeal and rapid turnover. Understanding volume is therefore essential to understanding the cumulative impact of theft and the extent to which stolen goods have become embedded within local, national and increasingly global resale networks.

The challenge for investigators is that many of these products are difficult to trace back to a specific theft. Unlike luxury goods, mobile phones or power tools, FMCGs rarely possess unique identifiers that enable straightforward proof of ownership. Yet the very characteristics that make them difficult to trace also create opportunities for scrutiny. Low-value products must typically be sold in significant quantities to generate meaningful profits for thieves, handlers and fences. As a result, the volume of goods entering secondary markets can itself become a useful indicator of illicit activity.

Where large quantities of everyday consumer products are offered for sale through informal markets, social media platforms, car boot sales or businesses with little visible supply chain documentation, legitimate questions arise regarding their provenance. Additional indicators -including damaged or torn packaging, security tags still attached, unusual product mixes, repeated low-volume listings of identical items, and pricing significantly below market value - can further strengthen suspicions that goods may have been acquired unlawfully.

Several jurisdictions have sought to address this challenge by introducing seller verification requirements and transaction thresholds that trigger additional scrutiny. The principle is straightforward: while it may be difficult to establish the provenance of an individual bottle of shampoo or packet of coffee, the repeated sale of large quantities of such products without a credible explanation of ownership or supply should attract greater regulatory and enforcement attention.

Value

Value refers to the economic worth of stolen goods, and their potential profitability once resold. Not all stolen goods are equally attractive to offenders. The relationship between risk and reward plays a significant role in determining which products are targeted and by whom.

Some goods command high resale prices because of their scarcity, desirability or ease of movement. Others generate profit through repeated theft and resale of relatively low-value items as outlined above e.g. chocolate, toothpaste, or coffee. An important finding in this report is that stealing to order fulfilment not only creates less risk for thieves (i.e. less time in possession of the goods, less uncertainly about converting into cash) but also commands a higher financial return. As such, establishing a network of buyers and fences becomes a crucial aspect of a professional or prolific thieves operating model.

Velocity

Velocity refers to the speed at which stolen goods can be converted into money or exchanged for other commodities. In many cases, the attractiveness of a product is determined not solely by its value but by how quickly it can be sold.
The emergence of online marketplaces, social media platforms and informal digital trading networks has dramatically increased the velocity of stolen goods markets. Goods can now be advertised, sold and distributed within hours of being stolen, reducing the likelihood of recovery and increasing the efficiency of illicit trade. For offenders, rapid resale minimises risk and maximises return. For retailers and law enforcement agencies, high-velocity markets present significant challenges for detection, intervention and recovery.

Volatility

Volatility refers to the dynamic and adaptive nature of stolen goods markets. Demand for particular products can fluctuate rapidly in response to economic conditions, seasonal trends, shortages, supply chain disruption, and changes in consumer behaviour.

Products that are relatively unattractive to offenders at one point in time may become highly desirable when market conditions shift. Previous examples have included baby formula during periods of shortage, premium alcohol during festive periods, and consumer electronics linked to overseas demand. Stolen goods markets are therefore not static; they respond quickly to changing opportunities and incentives. Understanding volatility is essential for anticipating emerging threats and identifying future areas of risk. By way of illustration, Spotlight 1 provides greater explanation of three ‘hot products’.

[1] BBC News (2020) One iPhone led police to gang suspected of sending up to 40,000 stolen UK phones to China. Available at: https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c20vlpwrzwdo.

Spotlight 1. How International Market Volatility Interplays with Hot Products

Baby Formula

Baby formula has repeatedly become a "hot product" during periods of shortage and heightened consumer demand. Following contamination scandals involving domestic formula in China, demand for trusted Western brands surged, creating lucrative export markets and encouraging organised theft. Concerns about counterfeit products, purchasing restrictions and supply shortages further increased resale values. What appears to be an everyday household item can quickly become a highly profitable commodity when scarcity and consumer trust collide.

Cheese

The 2024 Neal's Yard Dairy fraud, in which more than 22 tonnes of artisan cheddar worth around £300,000 were stolen, demonstrated how market conditions can transform an unlikely product into a lucrative criminal target. Premium cheeses command high prices, have strong demand and can be moved through legitimate supply chains with little suspicion. The scale and sophistication of the operation suggested that the offenders already had a destination market in mind rather than simply stealing opportunistically. Industry speculation suggested the cheese may have been destined for overseas markets where premium Western food products are scarce or highly sought after. Whether true or not, the case highlights how organised criminals respond to changing demand and identify profitable opportunities in unexpected places.

Mobile Phones

Mobile phones remain one of the world's most stolen consumer products because they combine high value with exceptional resale potential. Devices can be resold, exported, stripped for parts or repurposed through secondary markets. Demand is influenced by international price differences, import restrictions and access to affordable technology, meaning local theft patterns are often driven by global market forces. For example, the Metropolitan Police estimate that one criminal gang were responsible for smuggling up to 40,000 stolen mobile phones from the UK to China in one year where they can be sold for up to £4,000 each if they are internet-enabled and can bypass censorship.[2] The popularity of smartphones among organised criminal groups reflects not only their value, but the speed and ease with which they can be monetised.

Visibility

The fifth element of the framework is Visibility. It refers to the extent to which stolen goods markets and the actors who facilitate them remain hidden from scrutiny. Unlike many other forms of crime, stolen goods markets often operate in ways that render

[2] BBC News (2025) One iPhone led police to gang suspected of sending up to 40,000 stolen UK phones to China. Available at: https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c20vlpwrzwdo.

them difficult to identify, measure and regulate. This invisibility is not simply a function of criminal behaviour; it is also shaped by the systems used to record, categorise and respond to offending. For example, handling stolen goods is frequently classified as a "non-victim-based" offence, a designation that risks obscuring its direct relationship to theft and the harms experienced by victims. Furthermore, in government reporting tables it is classified as 'Miscellaneous crimes against society'.[3]

Similarly, large-scale acquisitive crimes can become hidden within broader offence categories. The theft of £70,000 worth of tobacco from a vehicle may be recorded simply as "theft from a vehicle", concealing the organised criminality and downstream illicit markets associated with the offence.

Persistent narratives that frame theft primarily as a consequence of poverty or the cost-of-living crisis, often implying that stolen goods are acquired for personal use also serve to obscure the true driving mechanisms. While such offending undoubtedly exists, a significant proportion of theft is linked to established resale markets, organised disposal routes and repeat buyers. Focusing exclusively on the act of theft risks obscuring the wider economic ecosystem that enables stolen goods to be converted into profit.

Visibility is further reduced by the absence of provenance indicators. Many high-volume stolen goods, particularly fast-moving consumer goods (FMCGs), lack serial numbers, ownership records or other means of establishing provenance. Limited adoption of forensic marking, inconsistent product traceability and the absence of manufacturer-led tracking systems all contribute to a landscape in which stolen goods can move through markets with little risk of detection.

Yet stolen goods markets are not necessarily hidden; they are often hiding in plain sight. Goods are openly sold through online marketplaces, independent shops, market stalls and car boot sales. The challenge is not always one of discovering these markets, but of recognising them, connecting intelligence and making visible the networks, facilitators and disposal routes that sustain them. Increasing visibility - through intelligence-sharing, traceability, regulation and public awareness - may therefore be one of the most effective means of disrupting stolen goods markets.

Violence

Violence refers to the human and social harms associated with stolen goods markets. While theft is often viewed primarily as an acquisitive offence, the markets that sustain it can generate significant harms for workers, businesses, communities and individuals.

At the most visible level, violence may manifest in assaults, threats and intimidation directed towards retail workers and security personnel.[4] However, the harms extend

[3] For example, see: Gov.UK Crime Outcomes Data, https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/crime-outcomes-in-england-and-wales-2024-to-2025/crime-outcomes-in-england-and-wales-2024-to-2025#section1-3
[4] See for example: Taylor, E. (2019) It's Not Part of the Job: Violence and Verbal Abuse Towards Shopworkers, the Co-op. Available at: https://assets.ctfassets.net/5ywmq66472jr/22QfMejeWYbimJ9ykX9W9h/0e99f15c0ed24c16ab74d38b42d5129a/It_s_not_part_of_the_job_report.pdf; Usdaw's Campaign To End Violence And Abuse Against Retail Workers, Available at: https://usdawlive.b-cdn.net/live/media/bzjmwbbt/fff-survey-report-2025.pdf

beyond physical violence. Stolen goods markets can contribute to wider forms of social and economic harm, including fear of crime, community decline, exploitation, modern slavery, and the strengthening of organised criminal networks. In this sense, violence represents not only the immediate harms associated with theft, but also the broader damage inflicted upon individuals, businesses and communities by the illicit economies that enable and profit from stolen goods.

Taken together, the Six Vs highlight that stolen goods markets are not merely a consequence of theft; they are a key driver of it. By understanding the scale, profitability, speed, adaptability and harms associated with these markets, policymakers, law enforcement agencies and retailers can develop more effective strategies to disrupt the economic incentives that make theft worthwhile in the first place.

From Displacement to Disruption: Tackling the Markets that Drive Theft

The existence of stolen goods markets and the relatively little attention they have received in recent years (from law enforcement, legislators and regulators) not only allows crime to flourish but it also undermines legitimate businesses who struggle to compete with the lower prices of stolen (and counterfeit) goods that are widely available. But there is another reason why tackling demand is so important and that's because of displacement. Most people are familiar with spatial displacement: you introduce an intervention that reduces crime in one location, but it simply moves somewhere else. But we talk far less about other forms of displacement. It can take a variety of forms, including:

- **Spatial/Geographical Displacement:** the same crime is moved from one location to another
- **Temporal Displacement:** the same crime in the same area but committed at a different time
- **Tactical Displacement:** the offender uses new methods (modus operandi) to commit the same offence. E.g. purse snatches shift to distraction thefts
- **Target Displacement:** offenders choose a different victim within the same area e.g. moving from one store to another
- **Functional Displacement:** offenders change from one type of crime to another, .g. theft from the person shifting to store robberies or out-of-hours break-ins
- **Perpetrator Displacement:** occurs where a crime opportunity remains compelling but the offender is no longer available / able to take advantage e.g. an offender is incarcerated so another steps in to continue to exploit the opportunity.

This is important to understand because it helps explain why theft can persist even when enforcement intensifies. Police may focus on hotspot locations and invest in operations and tactics to tackle a specific spike in theft. While those efforts can and do have impact, invariably the crime just evolves and adapts. There is only so much that law enforcement can achieve if the underlying incentive remains unchanged. So long as goods (mobile phones, power tools, bikes, jewellery, clothes, etc.) retain value in criminal markets, offenders will continue to target them. In other words, the efficacy of any strategy to reduce acquisitive crime hinges on its ability to deny benefit from committing the theft; making stolen goods harder to sell, less lucrative, and riskier, is likely to have a meaningful impact on levels of acquisitive crime.

Handling Stolen Goods: Increasing Visibility

While the current classification of handling stolen goods as a "non-victim-based offence" is operationally appropriate, it should be recognised as a key indicator of the markets that sustain acquisitive crime. In publications it is often grouped with other offences rather than reported separately. This risks obscuring the very real harms experienced by victims of theft and underestimating the role that handlers play within the wider theft ecosystem. It is recommended that the Home Office should seek to increase the visibility of stolen goods markets by enhancing the way handling stolen goods offences are analysed, reported and monitored. A dedicated annual statistical bulletin should bring together handling stolen goods data, enforcement activity, crime outcomes, intelligence on disposal routes and emerging trends. This would support more effective strategic analysis, intelligence-led policing and performance management, while reinforcing the role of handlers and facilitators as active enablers within the wider theft ecosystem.

Unlike offences where harm is more diffuse, handling stolen goods is inextricably linked to an underlying acquisitive crime. Every stolen item that is purchased, received, transported, stored or resold originates from a theft that has already caused financial loss, inconvenience, emotional distress or, in some cases, violence.

Moreover, the relationship between theft and handling is not always sequential. The traditional view positions handlers as passive actors who become involved only after a theft has taken place. In reality, handlers often play a much more active role. By creating reliable outlets for stolen property, they help generate the demand that makes theft profitable in the first place. Some offenders interviewed for this study described stealing to order, targeting specific products for known buyers, while others relied on established networks of fences, traders and informal resellers who could rapidly convert stolen goods into cash. In such cases, handling is not simply a consequence of theft; it is a key facilitator of it.

"All day I get people ringing me saying, 'Get me this, get me that and I'll give you money." - (Ex)-offender

[3] The study compared the results of a 2011 study of 2,000 adults, with a 2023 study of 1,000 adults to explore how attitudes towards certain 'deviant acts' have changed over time. In 2011 approximately 70% of respondents believed that buying stolen goods was "never justified" - falling to around 60% in 2023.
Shepherd, D., Button, M., and Hawkins, (2024) 'The dishonest disposition and everyday economic criminality of the British public', Journal of Economic Criminality. Vol 5. Available at: https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2949791424000423

This distinction is important because it shifts attention from individual acts of theft to the markets that sustain them. Stolen goods do not retain their value because they have been stolen; they retain their value because there are individuals and businesses willing to acquire, distribute and resell them. As the market reduction approach has long recognised, disrupting these disposal routes can be as important as preventing theft itself.

Evidence suggests public tolerance of purchasing stolen goods may be increasing. A recent study found that more people now view buying stolen property as justifiable compared to a decade ago.[5] There is a whole range of complex factors that are potentially driving this from the cost of living crisis to a sense of 'everybody's doing it' (amplified by the huge amount of media focusing on shop theft in recent years), from a lack of perceived consequence and a general mistrust and lack of confidence in societal institutions. Understanding these broad socioeconomic and political actors that underscore the occurrence of acquisitive crime are beyond the remit of this report. Instead, we focus squarely on understanding different types of theft, the goods stolen, and the markets that they are commonly sold into. Having highlighted some of the trends we seek to identify realistic, actionable and proportionate policy avenues to assist in dismantling and disrupting common routes for the onward sale of stolen goods.

Research Aims and Objectives

This research seeks to explore the evolving nature of illicit stolen goods markets in England and Wales, with a focus on both traditional and emerging resale methods.

Drawing on interviews with a diverse range of stakeholders, the study maps key actors, platforms, locations and dynamics involved in the distribution and resale of stolen goods. The methodology is outlined in Appendix A. The following section explores the types of goods that are stolen and, importantly how they are monetised.

Spotlight 2. A Note on Definitions: Property Crime, Acquisitive Crime and Handling Stolen Goods

Property crime is a broad category that includes any unlawful act committed against someone's property, whether or not the offender intended to gain financially. Examples include arson, vandalism, trespassing, and property destruction.

Acquisitive crime is a narrower, specific subset of property crime where the offender's primary motive is to illegally acquire material or financial gain. Acquisitive crime is defined by the offender's intent to derive a material, physical, or financial benefit by illegally taking possession of someone else's assets. All acquisitive crimes are property crimes, but not all property crimes are acquisitive.

This report focuses on acquisitive crime and predominantly on those crimes that result in physical goods being stolen (this could be through theft, robbery or burglary).

- ***Theft*** is categorized as taking property without the use of force or the threat of violence (e.g., picking a pocket or shoplifting). It can happen anywhere (theft from a vehicle, theft from a person, theft from a shop, etc.)
- ***Robbery*** occurs when force or a threat is used to take the property, the offence escalates to robbery.
- ***Burglary*** specifically involves trespassing into a building or structure with the intent to steal, damage, or commit another crime.

Within these broad categories there are multiple different techniques and modus operandi used by offenders. Sometimes these can be obscured by broader trends or recording practices.

Handling Stolen Goods is classified within policing and criminal justice systems as a "non-victim-based" offence. Other offence types in this category include public disorder, drug offences, possession of weapons and other items.

2. MAPPING THE MARKET:

HOW GOODS ARE STOLEN, SOLD AND MONETISED

Acquisitive crime encompasses a broad range of offences, including theft from the person, residential and commercial burglary, shop theft, and theft from vehicles. Within these categories, several notable trends have emerged in recent years, including the theft of tools from tradespeople, mobile phone snatches, rising levels of shop theft, and the targeted theft of high-value personal items such as luxury watches and jewellery.

While these offences differ in their methods, locations, and victims, they share a common underlying driver: the existence of a market for stolen goods. Whether operating through local networks, online platforms, organised criminal enterprises, or international distribution channels, these markets provide offenders with the means to convert stolen property into profit. Understanding how such markets function - and, critically, identifying effective mechanisms for their disruption - is therefore central to reducing acquisitive crime.

Historically, enforcement efforts have focused predominantly on the act of theft itself rather than on the markets that incentivise and sustain offending. While apprehending thieves remains important, a more holistic approach requires greater attention to the demand, distribution networks, and enabling infrastructures that underpin the illicit trade in stolen goods. Addressing these factors offers the potential not only to disrupt criminal profits but also to reduce the incentives that drive acquisitive offending in the first place.

Who Steals, What, From Where and Why

Measuring Acquisitive Crime

The Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW) is considered to be the most reliable measure for assessing long-term trends in common acquisitive crimes, including theft, experienced by the public.[6] However, an important limitation of the CSEW for understanding some types of acquisitive crime is that it excludes businesses. Historically, the Commercial Victimisation Survey (CVS)[7] provided a complementary source of data on crimes affecting businesses, but this survey has not been conducted in recent years. As a result, there is currently no equivalent

[6] The Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW) is a face-to-face victimisation survey that asks thousands of randomly selected residents about their personal experiences of crime over the previous 12 months. Conducted by the Office for National Statistics (ONS), it is the primary tool used to measure long-term crime trends. Unlike police recorded crime, the CSEW includes crimes that are not reported to or recorded by the police and is therefore considered to be a more reliable estimate of crime.

[7] The Commercial Victimisation Survey (CVS) was a survey of businesses in England and Wales. The CVS was previously run in 1994, 2002 and then annually from 2012 to 2024 (although it did not run in 2019 and 2020 while it was paused to review user needs and further delayed due to the COVID-19 pandemic). Previous surveys and results can be found at: https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/crime-against-businesses

national victimisation survey capable of providing comprehensive estimates of acquisitive crimes experienced by the retail sector and other commercial entities. This creates a significant evidence gap, particularly given the growth in retail crime and longstanding concerns regarding the under-reporting of shop theft.[8]

Consequently, offences committed against businesses - including shop theft, commercial burglary, and other forms of retail crime - are not captured within its estimates. Instead, this data is drawn from police recorded crime data from the 43 police forces in England and Wales and combined with the CSEW to produce annual estimates of crime and victimisation.

Overall Declines in Acquisitive Crime and Hidden Trends

The CSEW for the year ending (YE) December 2025 estimated that there were 2.6 million theft incidents, representing an 11% decrease compared with the previous year (2.9 million incidents). This figure was 35% lower than that recorded in the YE March 2015 survey (4.0 million incidents) and 78% below the peak recorded in the YE December 1995 survey (11.6 million incidents). The overall reduction in theft was driven primarily by declines in domestic burglary and vehicle-related theft. Domestic burglary fell by 22%, from approximately 422,000 incidents in the YE December 2024 survey to around 327,000 incidents in the YE December 2025 survey. Vehicle-related theft also declined by 14%, falling from approximately 695,000 to 596,000 incidents over the same period. These reductions continue a broader downward trend observed across many traditional forms of theft over the past three decades.

2.6 mn

estimated theft incidents for Dec 2025

↓ 22%

decline of domestic burglary

↓ 14%

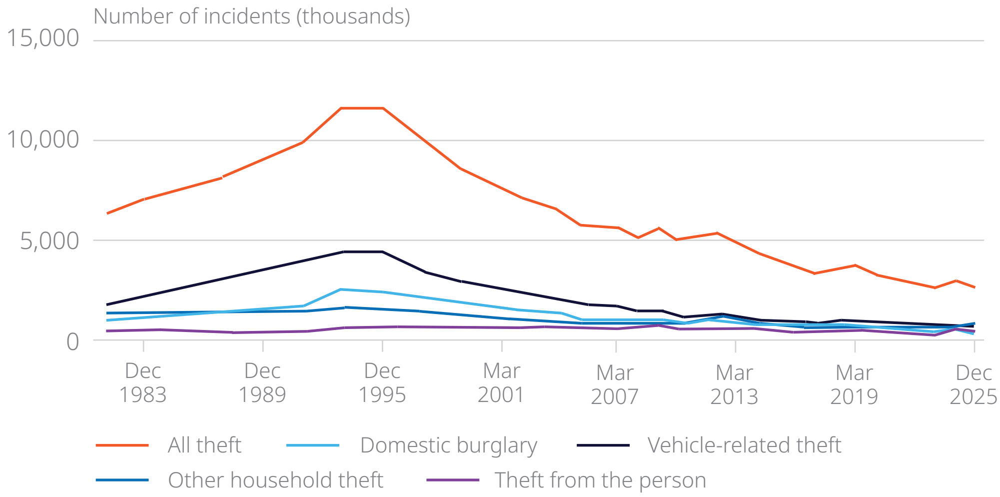
decline of vehicle-related theft

However, aggregate trends can obscure significant variation between offence types. While some categories of theft have fallen substantially, others have increased, evolved, or emerged in new forms. Recent examples include the theft of tools from tradespeople, mobile phone snatches, and the sustained growth in shop theft. Importantly, these developments are not always adequately reflected in headline crime statistics, particularly if the victim is a commercial entity.

Between April 2024 and March 2025, police recorded 530,643 shoplifting offences representing a 19.5% increase on the previous year and a 55% rise compared to 2022/23. As

[8] See Taylor, E., Taylor, J., and Unsworth, J. (2024) 'The Politics and Pitfalls of Policing High-Volume Crime: Responding to the Shoplifting Epidemic', The Political Quarterly. Vol 95: 3. Available at: https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/1467-923X.13432

the ONS notes, shoplifting offences have seen a sharp rise since the pandemic and now stand at their highest level since 2002/03. Yet many retailers claim that the true figure is far higher as the vast majority of incidents are not reported to the police for a number of reasons (including lack of time, belief nothing will be done, fear of reprisal, concern about the impact on licensing[9]). Some estimates suggest that as few as 3% of shop theft incidents are reported to the police. If accurate, this would imply that the true volume of shop theft alone could exceed 20 million incidents annually.[10]



Source: Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW) from the Office for National Statistics

Figure 1. Annual Estimates, England and Wales 1983 - 2025

Stolen Goods Crime Data: A Paradox

Police recorded offences for handling stolen goods have fallen substantially over the past two decades, declining from almost 19,000 offences in 2002/03 to fewer than 4,000 by 2025. While this could indicate a genuine reduction in offending, such an interpretation sits uneasily alongside evidence presented throughout this report of resilient and evolving stolen goods markets.

An alternative explanation is that handling offences have become increasingly difficult to detect and investigate, reflecting evidential challenges around provenance, changing disposal routes, the growth of online resale, and the limited investigative capacity available to pursue what are often complex offences. The data should therefore be interpreted with caution; declining recorded offences may reflect reduced visibility and enforcement as much as any reduction in the underlying activity.

[9] As currently structured, licensed premises that report high crime volumes face potential licence review, even when crime is wholly unrelated to alcohol sales. This creates a perverse incentive: retailers with alcohol licences are deterred from reporting theft (and other criminal / ASB issues), because doing so increases their risk of regulatory action. Retailers argue that the focus should shift from penalising compliant businesses to addressing offender behaviour - and with licensing legislation currently under review, this was identified as an opportunity for reform.
[10] Taylor, E., Taylor, J., and Unsworth, J. (2024) 'The Politics and Pitfalls of Policing High-Volume Crime: Responding to the Shoplifting Epidemic', The Political Quarterly. Vol 95: 3. Available at: https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/1467-923X.13432

As handling stolen goods has become less visible within both crime recording and policing activity, attention has increasingly focused on theft itself rather than the markets that sustain it. The result is a paradox: recorded handling offences have declined at precisely the time that many stakeholders describe stolen goods markets as becoming more sophisticated, geographically dispersed and digitally enabled.

Outcomes Data for Handling Stolen Goods: April to December 2025

Outcomes	Number	%
Charged/Summonsed	1,181	43.2%
Evidential difficulties (suspect identified; victim supports action)	648	23.7%
Evidential difficulties (victim does not support action)	110	4.0%
Further investigation to support formal action not in the public interest – police decision	21	0.8%
Investigation complete – no suspect identified	100	3.7%
Out-of-court (formal)	45	1.6%
Out-of-court (informal)	108	3.9%
Prosecution prevented or not in the public interest	33	1.2%
Responsibility for further investigation transferred to another body	11	0.4%
Taken into consideration	8	0.3%
Diversionary, educational or intervention activity, resulting from the crime report, has been undertaken and it is not in the public interest to take any further action.	7	0.3%
Not yet assigned an outcome	464	17.0%
Grand Total	**2,736**	**100%**

Although police recorded handling stolen goods offences have fallen substantially over the past two decades, those offences that are recorded have a comparatively high charge rate. This should not be interpreted as evidence that handling stolen goods is routinely detected and prosecuted. Rather, it reflects the way in which the offence is recorded. Unlike victim-based offences, handling stolen goods is generally only recorded once investigators have already established sufficient evidence that the offence has occurred. Consequently, recorded offences represent a relatively small subset of all suspected handling activity - those cases where evidential thresholds have already largely been met. The statistics therefore point to a potential visibility problem rather than a detection success.

A Spectrum of Offending

The (ex) offenders who participated in this study were diverse in terms of age, background, motivation and offending behaviour. Their trajectories into offending are equally varied. Some described entering acquisitive crime because of substance dependency, homelessness or financial hardship, while others were introduced to offending through family members, peers or established criminal networks. Several interviewees spoke of being exploited by more experienced offenders or handlers, whereas others described theft primarily in economic terms, motivated by profit, status or lifestyle. These motivations are neither fixed nor mutually exclusive; they often overlap and evolve over time as offenders become more embedded within criminal markets and networks. Some offenders specialise in particular forms of theft, such as shoplifting, burglary, vehicle crime or theft from the person, while others move between offence types as opportunities emerge. Over time, many offenders develop specialist knowledge, refining their methods to maximise reward while minimising effort and risk.

While it is difficult to construct a single profile of a "typical" thief, the evidence gathered for this study suggests that offenders can be understood along a spectrum according to both the scale of their activity and their relationship to stolen goods markets.

At one end of this spectrum are **opportunistic offenders** (see Table 1). These individuals steal infrequently and often in response to immediate circumstances. The goods taken may be for personal use or occasional resale, and offending is typically sporadic rather than systematic. Motivations vary and may include financial pressure, peer influence, thrill-seeking or situational opportunity.

Table 1. Typology of Acquisitive Criminals

Offending Type	Main characteristic	Typical Disposal Route
Opportunistic	Steals occasionally	None (other than sharing stolen goods with friends and family).
Local Prolific	Steals frequently as a life-style/income source or to fund a drug addiction	Physical markets – will sell to an intermediary e.g. nearby businesses, second-hand retailers or commu-nity members (who might then sell online)
Market-driven entrepreneur	Steals in response to demand and resale opportunities	Online platforms
Organised criminal network	Operates within structured criminal enterprises	Online platforms, car boot sales, international sales.

A second group comprises **prolific offenders**, many of whom described theft as their primary means of generating income. Substance dependency features prominently within this group, with several interviewees describing theft as a means of funding drug use, avoiding withdrawal symptoms or meeting immediate financial needs. However, not all prolific offenders were motivated by addiction. Some viewed theft as an occupation or business model, targeting products with known resale value and developing extensive networks of buyers and handlers over time.

The interviews also revealed a distinct category of **market-driven offenders**. Rather than stealing opportunistically, these individuals respond to known demand. They often have established buyers, handlers or disposal routes and may steal specific products to order. Unlike traditional or opportunistic thieves, these individuals run organised, business-like operations by targeting niche items that turn a quick profit, such as premium confectionary, designer toys (e.g., Jellycats).[11] For these offenders, the ability to sell stolen goods is often as important as the ability to steal them.

At the far end of the spectrum sit **organised criminal networks**. These groups operate at greater scale, often across multiple locations and offence types. They may coordinate theft, transportation, storage and resale activities through established networks and are frequently linked to other forms of criminality, including fraud, drug supply, money laundering and the distribution of counterfeit goods. In some cases, organised networks were reported to exploit vulnerable adults and children to undertake theft on their behalf.

[11] For example, see BBC News (2025) The new breed of 'shoplifting entrepreneurs' fuelling the UK's petty crime problem. Available at: https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/videos/c4g32wn030qo

Importantly, these categories are not fixed. Offenders may move between them over time as circumstances, opportunities and market conditions change. Nevertheless, the typology highlights a central finding of this report: the key distinction between many offenders is not simply what they steal, but how connected they are to the markets that enable stolen goods to be converted into profit.

"It's been very clear now for numerous years that these people are stealing to order." - Retailer

Although motivations matter, they do not fully explain patterns of theft. Regardless of whether offenders are driven by addiction, necessity, greed or exploitation, their offending depends largely on the existence of markets capable of translating what they steal into cash.

Hot products

Not all goods are equally attractive to offenders. Even within the same product category, some items are targeted far more frequently than others. Certain vehicle models are stolen disproportionately, particular brands of clothing command higher resale prices, and even everyday household items such as toothpaste, baby formula, laundry detergent and razors can become highly sought-after commodities within illicit markets. For every form of acquisitive crime, there are products that consistently emerge as preferred targets, reflecting the fact that offenders make rational assessments about what is worth stealing and, crucially, what is worth selling.

Products that become established within stolen goods markets typically possess a combination of characteristics that make them easy to steal, transport and resell. High-demand items with stable resale values, broad consumer appeal and limited traceability are especially attractive, enabling offenders to convert stolen goods into cash quickly and with relatively little effort. The criminologist Ronald Clarke captured many of these attributes through the well-known CRAVED framework, arguing that "hot products" tend to be Concealable, Removable, Available, Valuable, Enjoyable and Disposable.[12]

While CRAVED remains highly influential, the contemporary landscape of theft and stolen goods markets suggests that some refinement is necessary. Much of today's high-volume acquisitive crime involves products that are neither particularly concealable nor especially enjoyable. Brazen shoplifters routinely leave stores carrying large quantities of laundry detergent, coffee, alcohol, meat, over-the-counter medicines and other everyday consumables in full view of staff and customers. Similarly, what matters is not necessarily whether an item can be concealed or enjoyed, but whether it can be monetised quickly and reliably.

[12] Clarke, R.V. (1991) Hot Products: Understanding, Anticipating, and Reducing Demand for Stolen Goods, Police Research Series: Paper 112. Available at: https://popcenter.asu.edu/sites/g/files/litvpz3631/files/hot_products_understanding_anticipating_and_reducing_demand_for_stolen_goods_clarke_1999.pdf.

This shift reflects the increasing importance of downstream resale markets in shaping offender behaviour. The products targeted by thieves are determined not simply by opportunities for theft, but by the characteristics of the markets into which those goods will eventually be sold. As outlined in the Six Vs framework, product selection is heavily influenced by value, velocity and volatility: how much profit can be generated, how quickly goods can be converted into cash, and how demand fluctuates in response to changing economic and market conditions.

The distinction between theft driven by demand and theft driven by opportunity was particularly evident among offenders fulfilling "steal-to-order" requests. These individuals reported typically receiving around half of the recommended retail price (RRP) for goods that had already been requested by a buyer. By contrast, offenders who stole goods first and then searched for a purchaser generally reported receiving closer to one-third of the RRP, sometimes less. Extrapolated out across days and weeks, the difference is significant. It demonstrates how profitability is shaped not just by the product, but by the certainty of demand and the speed with which goods can be moved. In this sense, stolen goods markets operate according to many of the same principles as legitimate markets: products that are in demand can be sold quickly and generate the greatest returns.

Despite shifts in trends, and brand specificity, certain product categories consistently emerge as high-risk across multiple retail sectors. These include:

- **Health, beauty and personal care products** (including fragrance, skincare, cosmetics, vitamins, oral care, grooming, pregnancy tests and razors);
- **Cleaning and laundry products**
- **Alcohol, particularly wines, spirits and premium beers;**
- **Meat and premium food products;**
- **Baby items** (including formula milk, medicines, nappies and clothing);
- **Tobacco products;**
- **Designer fashion brands;**
- **Power tools and hand tools;**
- **Collectibles, gaming products and toys** (including products such as Lego and Jellycat toys).

These products are particularly attractive because they combine strong brand recognition with steady consumer demand and can often be resold with little scrutiny regarding their provenance. As such, they should invite additional scrutiny when offered for sale at below market prices, online or off.

Offenders described avoiding own brand items because not only were they harder to sell, they attracted a far lower price (although it should be noted that several retailer interviewees in this study stated that they had personally seen the sale of their own branded goods for sale in independent bricks and mortar stores). One offender explained that the goods sometimes would be sold on to other shops for a profit, changing hands multiple times (see Spotlight 3).

Spotlight 3. Stolen Spirits: "There's Days Where I've Took 60 Bottles to Him"

Beginning in his early teens, one offender developed a highly organised operation centred on the theft and resale of spirits. Rather than stealing opportunistically, he had established disposal routes and trusted buyers already in place. Premium alcohol was a particular target because it was easy to transport, generated reliable returns and was in constant demand.

As he explained: *"It's a lot easier to sell spirits. Most backstreet shops are taking it."*

Using foil-lined bags and commercial de-tagging devices, he would routinely steal bottles of spirits from supermarkets before transporting them to retailers willing to purchase the goods. A bottle of Jack Daniels, Smirnoff or Bacardi would typically sell for £10. The scale of offending was considerable. On a typical day he would steal around 40 bottles, generating approximately £400 in cash.

"There's days where I've took 60 bottles to him."

The relationship between offender and buyer was built through intermediaries. Initially, he sold through other offenders before establishing direct contact with shop owners, allowing him to bypass middlemen and increase his profits, as he explained:

"I got tired of it because they were creaming some off the top. I wanted to sell direct to the shop where there's always cash waiting. So, I'd just keep going back and forwards to him. He would never sell it on in his own shop just in case the police came looking - he'd sell on to another shop maybe 10 miles away for £12 a bottle."

£54.3 bn

estimated loss in tax revenue due to illegal sale of cigarettes since 2000 in the UK

Tobacco is such a valuable commodity its sometimes considered a form of currency. It is therefore not surprising that it attracts large numbers of organised criminals seeking to gain from its illicit trade. Tobacco related crime presents huge financial losses to the public purse. Since 2000, HM Revenue & Customs (HMRC) estimate that £54.3 billion in tax revenue has been lost due to the illegal sale of cigarettes and hand rolling tobacco products in the UK.[1] Furthermore, it is widely acknowledged that the profits generated are used to fund further illicit activities. A recent policy paper, Stubbing out the Problem, co-published by the UK Border Force and HM Revenue and Customs, outlines that the proceeds of tobacco crime are used to fund 'the smuggling of weapons, drugs, and even human beings across the globe.'[2] On a more local level, the pervasiveness of illegal tobacco products impacts on the livelihoods of law-abiding business owners and their staff; their ability to operate profitably is impeded when other businesses in the same vicinity trade illegally. Experienced criminals know that if they refrain from the use of violence when stealing tobacco then, irrespective of the value, the likelihood is that the punishment (if they are identified and prosecuted) will be relatively minor.[13] In other words, the financial rewards of stealing tobacco far outweigh the risk of being caught and then any likely punishment.

There is an intelligence gap relating to the onward sale of tobacco. Anecdotally, key industry stakeholders and representatives believe that a large proportion of it quickly re-enters the market and is sold in independent convenience stores that are either not permitted to sell tobacco (i.e. they do not have an EOID[14]) or they sell it alongside legitimate tobacco products at a higher profit margin. Test purchasing exercises and GPS tag trials that were given as examples in a recent research report appear to support this assertion.[15]

Tobacco Track and Trace (TT&T), introduced in the UK in 2019, could potentially be the 'golden thread' for illuminating stolen goods and the networks that facilitate their trade yet the TT&T technology is chronically underutilised and is severely restricted by the limited agencies that can access it - TT&T legislation specifies that only HM Revenue and Customs (HMRC) have access to the database, although National Trading Standards can now access the 'app' following the enactment of The Finance Act 2022) (this is explored further later in the report).

Beyond retail, **tool theft** represents one of the clearest examples of a highly profitable stolen goods market. In 2025, there were 26,724 reports of tool theft made to police across the UK, equating to approximately one offence every 20 minutes. Around three-quarters (approximately 76%) of incidents involved thefts from work vans, and the average loss per incident exceeded £3,000. While tool theft from work vans highlights the volume of this theft type, other targets highlight the value and links with organised crime. As a police officer explained:

26,724

reports of tool theft made to police across the UK in 2025

> *"We soon realised that it wasn't just your tradesman getting his drill stolen, it was going right the way up and affecting national infrastructure projects – equipment worth £50, £60,000 pounds. It opened our eyes and we realised just how big the issue was then." (Policing)*

The scale and persistence of tool theft reflect both the high resale value of professional-grade equipment and the relative ease with which such items can be sold online, at car boot sales, and second-hand trading platforms.

> *"The people that are stealing the tools [and specialist equipment] have got multiple disposal routes; they've got the car boot sale route, they've got people [intermediaries] they can distribute to who then sell online, and then they've got the international route where they're selling it overseas." (Policing)*

[13] The current Home Office classification codes used to record tobacco-related crimes are broad. It can fall under 'Theft from a Motor Vehicle' (for cargo crime), 'Theft from Shops' (for kiosk breaches), 'Commercial Burglary' or 'Other Theft'. This means that the true scale of these offences, their seriousness, the level of organisation involved, and the links between individual offences are often obscured.

[14] An EOID is an Economic Operator Identifier code. In the UK, it is a specific reference number required by businesses and operators involved in the tobacco supply chain to comply with Tobacco Track and Trace regulations.

[12] Taylor, E. (2024) Lighting Up: How Tobacco Track and Trace Could Help Illuminate Stolen Goods Markets and Other Serious Crimes, National Business Crime Centre. Available at: https://nbcc.police.uk/images/2024/NEWS%2024/Lighting%20Up_FINAL%202024.pdf

At the time of writing, the government is consulting on extending the Equipment Theft (Prevention) Act 2023 to introduce mandatory forensic marking requirements for power tools, reflecting growing recognition of the role that traceability can play in disrupting secondary markets.

At the time of writing, the government is consulting on extending the Equipment Theft (Prevention) Act 2023 to introduce mandatory forensic marking requirements for power tools, reflecting growing recognition of the role that traceability can play in disrupting secondary markets.

Mobile phones provide another illustration of how product characteristics influence offender behaviour. In the year ending (YE) December 2025, approximately 83,900 mobile phone thefts were recorded across the UK, remaining close to record levels, with most incidents occurring in London. The appeal of smartphones lies not only in their value but also in their liquidity: devices can be resold domestically, exported overseas, dismantled for parts, or repurposed within informal markets. The estimated value of phones stolen in London alone exceeded £50 million in 2025. In response, law enforcement agencies have increasingly called on manufacturers to strengthen device security measures and expand the use of technologies capable of rendering stolen phones unusable – and therefore worthless.

83,900
mobile phone thefts recorded in 2025

Importantly, the products most frequently targeted by offenders are not static. Stolen goods markets are highly responsive to changing economic conditions, supply shortages, consumer trends and enforcement activity. During periods of scarcity, products that would ordinarily be regarded as mundane can rapidly acquire significant resale value (see Spotlight 1 for an overview of how cheese, baby formula and mobile phones have acquired 'hot product' status).

Ultimately, so-called "hot products" are not simply those that are easy to steal. They are products for which efficient, profitable and adaptable resale markets exist. Understanding what makes certain products attractive to offenders therefore provides important insights into the wider market dynamics that sustain theft and shape contemporary stolen goods economies.

"If stolen phones cannot be reactivated, their value collapses, and so does the incentive to steal them," - - Met Police Commissioner Sir Mark Rowley[16]

[16] BBC News (2026) Make stolen phones unusable, Met Police urges tech giants. Available at: https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/ckg4dey905yo

Spotlight 4. An Offender's Insights from Three Decades Trading Stolen Goods

Craig (pseudonym) grew up around stolen goods markets. His father acted as a fence, buying stolen property from shoplifters and burglars before reselling it or returning items to retailers for fraudulent refunds. By his own account, theft and resale were normalised from an early age. As a teenager, he stole toiletries, medicines, batteries, clothing and food, often targeting products he already knew he could sell through market traders, pubs, independent retailers and other contacts. Over time, he built a network of trusted buyers and specialist outlets for different goods. As he explained:

"I would go out with that in mind; you know, steal this, and I know I can sell it to that person."

His account highlights the importance of Value and Velocity within stolen goods markets. Premium brands were prioritised because they generated better returns and sold more quickly. Own-brand products could be sold, but they were generally less attractive.

"If somebody's buying stolen stuff, they want the top stuff. That's how they're saving their money."

The speed of disposal was equally important. Holding stolen goods increased the risk of detection, meaning successful offenders focused on converting products into cash as quickly as possible.

"I didn't want to hold on to goods. I wanted to get rid of it as soon as I got it."

His account further illustrates how stolen goods markets have adapted over time. Whereas market traders and public houses once provided common outlets for stolen property, Craig believes that social media and online marketplaces have increasingly assumed this role, sometimes acting as an entry point for previously non-criminal actors (see the market-driven entrepreneurs profile above) and other times being the outlet for more organised groups.

"All this online stuff has just made it a lot easier for people that perhaps wouldn't necessarily have been involved in crime to get involved and make easy money."

Scratching Beneath the Surface: Established Links Between Theft, Handling and Wider Criminality

Multiple policing stakeholders emphasised that retail theft and stolen goods markets rarely exist in isolation. Local stolen goods networks were consistently described as embedded within wider ecosystems of harm - linked to drug supply, exploitation, and in some cases county lines. Addiction-driven shoplifters often operate as the retail-facing end of organised supply chains: stealing goods, converting them to cash, and spending the proceeds within the same local criminal economy.

> *"Every time we scratched below the surface we kept finding more patterns of really harmful behaviour. What would have been once considered "just a shoplifter" is now what I'd describe as a whole ecosystem of crime linked to prolific offenders stealing from shops."* - Policing

Independent retailers and Business Crime Reduction Partnerships (BCRPs) observed this most directly, describing resale locations that functioned simultaneously as cash conversion points for addicted offenders and informal suppliers to local drug markets. This has been further evidenced in recent policing operations. For example, Operation Zoridon focused on disrupting venues handling stolen goods but in doing so uncovered multiple areas of criminality including possession of weapons, modern slavery, counterfeit tobacco, etc. This intersection of criminality means that disrupting stolen goods markets can yield disproportionate benefits for community safety beyond the direct reduction in retail crime.

Disposal Routes: From Hyper-Local to International Trade

Disposal routes for stolen goods exist along a spectrum that ranges from highly localised informal exchanges to sophisticated national and international distribution networks. At the most immediate end of this spectrum, stolen goods are often moved through local physical markets. Offenders, retailers and law enforcement described goods being walked directly from supermarkets and retail premises to nearby independent shops, pubs, market stalls and known buyers, sometimes within minutes of the theft occurring.[17]

This early stage of the disposal process is particularly important. The Director of Operational Standards at the College of Policing highlighted that stolen goods are often most vulnerable to disruption during the first two to four days after a theft, when they remain within local physical networks and have yet to pass through multiple handlers. Once goods move beyond this initial phase, opportunities for recovery diminish significantly as they are dispersed, repackaged, blended with legitimate stock or moved into more complex resale channels. This "golden window" for intervention has important implications for both intelligence gathering and enforcement activity.

[17] This has previously been documented. See, Taylor, E. (2024) Stealing with Impunity: The Policing of Prolific Local Offenders and the Impact on Our Shops and Communities. Available at: https://assets.ctfassets.net/5ywmq66472jr/3Re0b6dWQGHGCd1KW5iMDo/00caf6bc62f8b4062aa92663cd5b11b4/20240206_-_STEALING_WITH_IMPUNITY.pdf

Beyond these hyper-local markets, disposal routes increasingly extend into online and regional networks. Offenders, fences and other stakeholders consistently identified C2C (consumer to consumer) and B2C (Business-to-Consumer) platforms as having transformed the speed, scale and reach of stolen goods markets. However, interviews with prolific and former offenders revealed that those stealing the goods were often not the individuals selling them online. Instead, specialist buyers, handlers and intermediaries frequently acted as the bridge between theft and resale, purchasing goods in bulk before listing them through established online accounts and marketplace profiles.

Several interviewees also described the use of residential properties as part of these handling chains. Some homes functioned as informal "Aladdin's Cave" showrooms, where stolen goods were displayed and sold directly to trusted buyers. Others operated as storage hubs or "warehouses" for stolen property, including tools, clothing, consumer electronics and parcels stolen from residential doorsteps. These locations served multiple purposes: consolidating goods from different thefts, facilitating online sales, and preparing stock for onward transportation elsewhere in the UK or overseas.

At the most organised end of the spectrum, stolen goods become part of wider criminal supply chains. Here, products may be consolidated from multiple sources, distributed nationally through networks of handlers and resellers, or exported to international markets where provenance is difficult to trace and demand remains strong. The journey from theft to resale is therefore rarely linear. Instead, stolen goods often move through a series of interconnected physical and digital markets, becoming progressively harder to identify and recover at each stage of the process.

Physical disposal markets

The most consistently identified disposal routes in the immediate aftermath of theft are physical: independent retail shops, market stalls, indoor markets, and pubs. These routes share common characteristics: face-to-face transactions, immediate cash exchange and minimal oversight or record-keeping. Unlike online marketplaces, where sellers may leave a digital footprint, physical disposal markets offer anonymity, immediacy and convenience. For offenders seeking to rapidly convert stolen goods into cash, these attributes are highly attractive.

Offender interviews suggest that physical disposal routes remain deeply embedded within local stolen goods economies. Several described having established buyers and disposal networks long before entering a store to steal. Rather than stealing opportunistically and searching for a purchaser afterwards, many offenders already knew who would buy particular products and how much they would receive.

Independent "dodgy" shops

Independent stores such as vape shops were widely cited as primary receivers of stolen food, tobacco, alcohol and household goods. Several interviewees - including offenders - described shopkeepers providing lists of products they wished to purchase, indicating established and organised arrangements rather than ad hoc transactions. These "shopping lists" could be communicated verbally, written down or sent via text message.

The products most frequently mentioned included alcohol, tobacco, energy drinks, coffee, chocolate, laundry products, toiletries and health and beauty products – all categories characterised by strong consumer demand, rapid turnover and relatively low traceability. Where established relationships existed, transactions could be completed within minutes of the theft occurring ensuring minimal time that the thief was in possession of the stolen items.[18]

The significance of these physical disposal routes lies not only in the volume of goods they absorb but also in their role as trusted local marketplaces for thieves. As one offender observed, "Everybody knew where to take stuff." Such comments suggest that, in some communities, disposal routes may become normalised and embedded within local economies, creating enduring markets for stolen property.

"I watched someone leave our store with a bag of stolen goods, walk to the shop next door, hand them over, get cash, and receive a list of what to bring next time." - Retailer

Second-Hand Retailers: Not a Homogenous Group

Several offenders identified second-hand retailers and pawnbrokers as disposal routes, particularly for stolen items such as jewellery, games, toys, electronics and bicycles. These businesses were viewed as attractive because they offered immediate cash, required less effort than finding private buyers, and provided a seemingly legitimate outlet for goods. Some offenders questioned the level of provenance checks undertaken, although others acknowledged that identification requirements, serial number checks and scrutiny of certain products had increased in recent years.

Cash Converters[19] and CeX[20] participated in this study and highlighted the extent to which some formal second-hand retailers have invested in systems designed to prevent the handling

[18] The Retail Crime Uncovered podcast episode, 'Smoke and Mirrors', provides stories direct from shopworkers about the onward sale of goods stolen from their stores. Available here: https://open.spotify.com/episode/6kZwhYawDwAGDN2ZKassJW?si=OItyfRa2ShCCOKdl7rJq8A

[19] Cash Converters has over 190 stores across the UK. The store network consists of a mix of corporate owned stores and stores that are operated by franchise firms, trading as Cash Converters. They buy a wide range of second-hand items, including electronics, jewellery, gaming consoles, collectibles and musical instruments. They are also one of the UK's biggest pawnbrokers. https://www.cashconverters.co.uk

[20] CeX operates nearly 400 stores in the UK and are described as 'the UK's biggest second-hand electronics and entertainment specialist' on their website. They buy and trade mobile phones, games consoles, laptops and tablets, and other electronics including digital cameras, smart watches, Apple Watches & Fitbits. https://uk.webuy.com

of stolen goods. The representative from Cash Converters described the business as operating within a highly regulated environment, subject to anti-money laundering requirements, consumer credit regulation and extensive internal compliance procedures. Individuals wishing to sell goods are required to provide identification, photographs are recorded, transaction details are retained, and item information, including serial numbers where available, are checked against a range of databases and verification systems, such as Recipero[21], to identify stolen or finance-linked property. In addition, their system tracks an individual's transaction volume by value and volume along with identifying when attempts are made to sell items across multiple locations. These factors were described as 'extremely useful intelligence', but the challenge was finding a way to consistently share it with enforcement agencies/bodies.

> *"Anything that has a serial number must be checked. That is our hard and fast rule; if we can't check it, we won't buy it." (CeX)*

> *"You'd have to be really stupid to think, 'I'm going to come in and sell you something stolen,' because we're going to send all of that detail to the police." (Cash Converters)*

CeX highlighted a significant traceability challenge within the second-hand electronics market. According to the interviewee, only around a quarter of the items purchased by the company carry serial numbers that can be checked against police and property databases, leaving approximately three-quarters of goods without a readily verifiable identifier. This represents a substantial gap in the ability to establish provenance and identify stolen property, reinforcing the case for greater traceability across high-risk product categories, particularly consumer electronics.

However, the interview also revealed that traceability is not solely dependent on serial numbers. CeX described the volume and pattern of transactions as important indicators of risk. While an individual selling a single electronic device may not attract attention, attempts to sell multiple identical items can trigger further scrutiny and investigation. As discussed throughout this report, the volume of goods entering secondary markets can itself become a useful indicator of illicit activity. In the second-hand retail and pawnbroking sector, the attempted sale of as few as two identical products may be sufficient to raise concerns regarding provenance and ownership.

This finding has wider relevance beyond the second-hand electronics market. While individual low-value goods may be difficult to trace, the repeated sale of identical products, unusually large quantities of stock, or commercial-scale activity conducted through ostensibly private seller accounts can all serve as indicators of potential illicit trading. The challenge is therefore not simply identifying stolen goods but recognising suspicious patterns of supply that may indicate the existence of a stolen goods market.

[21] Recipero's services are used by individuals, traders, retailers, and recyclers to check the background history or status of a device or other personal possession prior to its sale or purchase. Their ecosystem includes systems like CheckMEND, Immobilise, and the NMPR, which work together to identify and address theft and fraud related to mobile devices and other items. They hold over 150 billion records of information including serial number identification, ownership, theft, loss, contract, insurance, and warranty information. https://www.recipero.com

Both interviewees also highlighted concerns about inconsistencies across the wider second-hand economy. While supporting greater information sharing with police and stronger regulation of secondary markets, they argued that levels of due diligence vary considerably between operators. Formal second-hand retailers have invested heavily in compliance systems, provenance checks and police partnerships, but not all businesses operating within the secondary market are subject to the same standards. This creates uneven levels of accountability and potentially allows stolen goods to migrate towards markets where scrutiny is weakest.

> *"The problem is a lot of our competitors out there don't do any of the checks and balances that we're talking about." (Cash Converters)*

> *"[You will always get] the people that walk out of one shop and walk into ours with their stock. They want to see cash hard and fast. We've changed how we pay people to try and push bank payments as much as possible which deters a certain cohort. If we identify a thief, we ban their account instantly. But if they can't get the cash from us, they might try Cash Converters. If they can't get it from them, they're going to an independent that will buy it without asking any questions. (CeX)*

Taken together, the offender and retailer interviews suggest that the second-hand sector cannot be viewed as a single, homogeneous market. While some operators have invested heavily in traceability, compliance and information sharing, standards vary considerably across the wider resale ecosystem. The findings point towards the importance of strengthening provenance checks, improving access to property databases, encouraging greater information sharing between retailers and law enforcement, and considering whether minimum traceability standards should apply more consistently across both physical and online secondary markets. The challenge for policymakers is therefore not simply preventing stolen goods from entering the second-hand economy but ensuring that all participants in that economy are subject to comparable levels of accountability and scrutiny.

Markets and Car Boot Sales

Car boot sales were consistently identified by retailers, offenders and police as one of the most significant and challenging disposal routes for stolen goods. Their combination of cash transactions, limited seller verification, absence of licensing requirements, lack of fixed premises and minimal enforcement presence makes them particularly attractive to offenders seeking to convert stolen goods into cash quickly and with little risk of detection.

While often perceived as informal low key community events, intelligence from policing and retail stakeholders suggests that some car boot sales operate as key sites within wider stolen goods markets. Rather than simply providing opportunities for casual ad hoc sellers, evidence indicates that goods stolen from multiple locations across large geographic areas may be consolidated and transported to specific sites for resale, suggesting higher levels of organisation than is commonly assumed. In some cases, car boot sales appear to function as distribution hubs connecting theft, handling and onward resale.

A Metropolitan Police Sergeant with extensive experience investigating **tool theft** described car boot sales as the single largest and fastest-moving disposal route for stolen tools, surpassing online marketplaces in both volume and speed. While online platforms remain significant, they create digital records and transaction histories that can support investigations. By contrast, car boot sales allow large quantities of stolen goods to be moved rapidly with limited traceability.

The scale and sophistication of some operations was demonstrated by the Metropolitan Police's recovery of approximately £2 million worth of stolen tools and equipment in what was reported as the largest recovery of stolen tools in UK history.[22] The investigation began when officers tracked a GPS-enabled piece of stolen construction equipment from Essex to a warehouse in Ilford. Subsequent searches uncovered an estimated ten lorry loads of stolen tools and machinery linked to an organised network involving car boot sales, online marketplaces, freight theft and suspected international disposal routes. The investigation also revealed specialist equipment stolen years earlier, illustrating how stolen goods can remain hidden within criminal supply chains for extended periods before re-entering the market.

Despite widespread awareness of the role that some car boot sales play in the disposal of stolen goods, enforcement remains extremely challenging. Responsibility is fragmented between police, local authorities and Trading Standards, with no single agency possessing either the powers or resources to tackle the problem alone. Large-scale enforcement operations are resource intensive, with one police officer estimating that a single operation may require 50–70 officers and generate crime scenes requiring management for more than a week. Such demands make sustained enforcement difficult and often result in only the most prolific offenders being targeted.

Car boot sales operate in what several interviewees described as a legislative vacuum. There is no modern legislation specifically governing car boot trading. Police rely on outdated market laws (some dating to the nineteenth century), fraud legislation requiring seller knowledge, and closure powers under the Anti-Social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act - the last of which requires linking activity to "disorder", a threshold that is often legally complex to establish in the context of commercial trading. The Real Deal have produced 'A National Charter for Safe, Fair Markets'[23] which outlines a code of practice for marketplaces particularly in relation to counterfeit goods rather than stolen but they outlined that the two practices often go hand in hand.

[22] Met Engage (2026) £2 million worth of stolen tools recovered in police operation. Available at: https://www.metengage.co.uk/Alerts/A/388653/2-million-worth-of-stolen-tools-recovered-in-police-operation#:~:text=Neighbourhood%20officers%20were%20the%20first,ever%20discovered%20in%20the%20UK.
[23] The Charter can be accessed via the Real Deal website here: www.realdealmarkets.co.uk.

"The charter is a very simple set of procedures, so that the market operator can show due diligence; that means that they will know who their traders are, what their traders are selling, take ID details for traders, etcetera. It's a very simple but very robust set of procedures." (Real Deal)

Interviewees consistently called for minimum due-diligence standards for car boot sales - vendor registration, ID checks, and record-keeping requirements - arguing that car boot operators should face the same kind of regulatory obligations as other secondary market traders.

The Director of Operational Standards, College of Policing highlighted the existing regime for scrap metal dealers, captured in the **Scrap Metal Dealers Act 2013**[24], as a template, noting that legislation in this area had successfully addressed a problem with similar traits: a physical secondary market with minimal oversight that was facilitating significant volumes of theft. The Act introduced a robust framework for the scrap metal industry in England and Wales, including:

- Mandatory licensing of scrap metal dealers by local authorities.
- A ban on cash payments for scrap metal.
- Requirements to verify and record the identity of sellers.
- Record-keeping obligations for transactions.
- Powers for police and local authorities to inspect premises and close unlicensed operators.

The central objective was to improve traceability and make it more difficult for offenders to dispose of stolen metal anonymously. The post-implementation evidence suggests that it has had a substantial impact on disrupting the market; a Home Office review found that reported metal theft fell dramatically, by approximately 71% following the introduction of the Act.[25] The Scrap Metal Dealers Act 2013 offers one of the clearest examples in the UK of market regulation being used to reduce acquisitive crime by targeting disposal routes rather than thieves themselves.

Property marking emerged as a particularly important theme in relation to tool theft. According to the Metropolitan Police, proving that goods are stolen depends upon the ability to identify an owner. Without traceability, goods become increasingly difficult to link to an offence or victim. The Ilford operation highlighted this challenge: despite recovering thousands of tools, only a small proportion had been marked, making owner identification and reunification difficult.

Car boot sales therefore illustrate a broader challenge identified throughout this report: stolen goods markets persist not because they are invisible, but because they sit at the intersection of fragmented regulation, limited traceability and constrained enforcement resources. Their continued attractiveness lies not simply in their ability to absorb stolen goods, but in their ability to do so quickly, anonymously and at scale.

[24] Home Office (2022) Review of the Scrap Metal Dealers Act, Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/review-of-the-scrap-metal-dealers-act-2013

[25] Home Office (2022) Review of the Scrap Metal Dealers Act, Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/review-of-the-scrap-metal-dealers-act-2013

Police auctions of recovered goods were highlighted as an issue (see Spotlight X) as were goods marketed as 'liquidation' or 'bankruptcy stock'. Genuine insolvency sales are subject to established legal processes, with Insolvency Practitioners required to maintain records of assets and sales, meaning legitimate stock should ordinarily be capable of being traced through documented provenance. However, the use of terms such as liquidation stock or bankruptcy clearance can also create a perception of legitimacy that discourages further scrutiny. While many such sales are entirely lawful, where large quantities of desirable goods are offered for sale with little evidence of provenance, these claims should not be accepted at face value. They may provide an opportunity for proportionate, intelligence-led enquiries, particularly where other indicators of illicit trading are present.

Spotlight 5. Are Police Auctions Unintentionally Fuelling the Stolen Goods Market?

One of the more surprising findings from this research concerns the disposal of unclaimed stolen property by police forces.

According to a serving police officer with extensive experience investigating tool theft, recovered tools that cannot be reunited with their owners are often sold at public auction. While this process is intended to recover value from unclaimed property, it may have unintended consequences for efforts to tackle stolen goods markets.

The concern is straightforward: once auctioned, tools are frequently sold without any form of forensic marking or ownership identification. If those tools subsequently re-enter illicit markets, they become difficult to distinguish from legitimately owned property. In some cases, offenders may even purchase tools from police auctions, obtaining a legitimate receipt that can later be used to explain possession or support a subsequent resale.

As the officer observed, the result is that stolen property can effectively be recycled back into the same markets from which it originated.

This issue highlights the importance of traceability throughout the entire lifecycle of recovered property. While considerable effort is invested in recovering stolen goods, less attention has been paid to what happens when owners cannot be identified or located.

Potential policy responses include:

- Forensically marking all high risk goods prior to disposal and encouraging change of owner updates if selling on.
- Recording identifying details and linking them to auction records.
- Requiring detailed and verifiable itemised and digital receipts.
- Diverting certain categories of recovered property to charities, training providers or community organisations, e.g. tool banks.
- Scrapping high-risk items where provenance cannot be reliably maintained.
- Establishing national guidance on the disposal of recovered tools and equipment.

Online platforms

Online platforms[26], including social commerce and C2C (consumer-to-consumer) marketplaces, have transformed the stolen goods landscape as access to vast consumer markets is an attractive proposition for offenders, handlers and organised criminal networks.[27] Several offenders interviewed for this study identified platforms such as Facebook Marketplace, Vinted, eBay, Instagram and Snapchat as routes for the disposal of stolen property. These platforms can facilitate direct communication between buyers and sellers, enable localised and nationwide transactions, and significantly reduce the effort required to find purchasers.

The availability of ready and reliable markets lowers the risks associated with theft and increases the potential rewards, making online platforms a potential driver of acquisitive crime. Interviews with offenders revealed, however, that those stealing goods were often not the individuals selling them online. Instead, specialist buyers, handlers and intermediaries frequently acted as the bridge between theft and resale, purchasing goods in bulk before listing them through established online accounts and marketplace profiles.

Several brand owners argued that online platforms continue to underestimate the scale of stolen goods activity occurring on their platforms and highlighted notable differences between different sites. Social commerce platforms that are akin to digital classified ads, such as Facebook Marketplace, were repeatedly identified as particularly problematic due to the ease with which goods could be listed and sold locally. Interviewees described listings openly displaying damaged packaging, removed security devices and, in some cases, active security

[26] eBay are the only exclusively online platform that participated openly in this project and therefore are directly referenced in places.
[27] Approximately 28% of retail sales in Great Britain are made online; one of the highest digital commerce adoption rates in the world and far exceeding that of European neighbours. Office for National Statistics (ONS), Retail Sales, Great Britain, April 2026 released 22 May 2026, ONS website, statistical bulletin. Available at: https://www.ons.gov.uk/businessindustryandtrade/retailindustry/bulletins/retailsales/april2026

tags. The issue is amplified since they don't process payments and so fell outside of some financial regulatory scope that other platforms had to adhere to (further outlined below). Amazon was highlighted by several brand owners as a platform where sellers of stolen goods could compete directly with legitimate retailers by undercutting prices by only a few pence, thereby securing visibility through the platform's "buy box" mechanism. Furthermore, sanctions were often perceived as product-listing level rather than account-level, allowing sellers to migrate to adjacent products and continue trading.

eBay was generally viewed as more responsive to reports of illicit goods, although brand owners and retailers noted that meaningful intervention often required the submission of crime reference numbers and supporting evidence, placing the burden of detection on retailers and brand owners. However, eBay highlighted that they cannot act on suspicion alone.

In 2007, eBay launched the Partnering with Retailers Offensively Against Crime and Theft (PROACT) programme in North America, which encourages retailers and law enforcement to work together to identify, remove and prosecute sellers of stolen products. This was extended to the UK shortly after than in 2010. Meanwhile, their Law Enforcement Portal is accessible by law enforcement in all the major markets in which they operate and trusted retail partners to begin investigations on suspicious listings and/or sellers.

Overall, we found varying levels of due diligence amongst online platforms. Reflecting the views of the second-hand retailers above, it would appear that some have structural designs that make the onward sale of stolen (or counterfeit) goods less challenging. As one participant stated, offenders will take "the path of least resistance"; a core principle of Situational Crime Prevention.

Spotlight 5. The Illicit Network: Multiple Thieves Serving One Buyer for Online Resale

One (ex) offender interviewee described a well-established buyer who had built a business model around the purchase and resale of stolen goods through online marketplaces. Rather than stealing goods himself, the buyer relied on a network of individuals, typically stealing to fund their drug addiction, who regularly supplied him with stock, creating a steady flow of products for onward sale.

As the interviewee explained:

"We had a buyer that was quite established online."

The buyer would purchase a wide range of products, including Lego, electric toothbrushes, shavers, premium alcohol and health and beauty products. According to the interviewee, he was not particularly selective about what was stolen because he already had established routes for resale.

"Whatever they got, he could sell."

The goods were typically purchased for around one-third of their retail value before being sold online at a significant profit. Multiple offenders supplied the same individual, creating what was effectively a decentralised supply chain.

"He had about five or six people that worked for him."

The interviewee believed that much of the stock was ultimately sold through an established online account. The individual thieves were therefore insulated from the risks associated with trying to find buyers for the goods they had stolen because they knew they could take them straight to him, while the buyer benefited from a constant supply of heavily discounted goods and the appearance of legitimacy afforded by an established online presence.

The arrangement allowed offenders to rapidly convert stolen goods into cash. At the height of her offending, the interviewee estimated generating £300 - £400 per day through theft, often making several trips each day to replenish stock and meet demand.

The case illustrates how contemporary stolen goods markets increasingly mirror legitimate retail supply chains. Rather than relying on ad hoc sales through pubs or personal contacts, some buyers now operate as intermediaries, sourcing products from multiple offenders and distributing them through established online marketplace accounts. The model reduces risk for offenders, increases the speed at which goods can be monetised, and makes the illicit origins of products more difficult to detect.

Identifying Stolen Goods Online

The online resale of stolen goods presents significant evidential challenges. Unlike physical markets, where retailers or police may directly observe suspicious activity, online listings often provide only limited information about a product's origin. Establishing provenance remains particularly difficult for fast-moving consumer goods (FMCGs), where individual items are largely indistinguishable from legitimate stock.

Assisted by retailers and brand owners, OPAL's intelligence unit has identified several indicators commonly associated with the resale of stolen goods online. These include damaged or torn packaging, security tags still attached, consistent pricing between 19–30% below market value, and the repeated sale of small quantities of identical products over extended periods. Health and beauty products, including razors, pregnancy tests, nicotine replacement products, vitamins and electric toothbrushes, featured prominently within the first wave of the analysis.

Several retailers described proactively monitoring online marketplaces by "scraping" listings for suspicious activity and conducting test purchases where they suspected stolen goods were being offered for sale. While serialised or uniquely marked products can often be traced back to a retailer or manufacturer, proving the origin of mass-produced goods remains considerably more challenging. Retailers and / or brand owners undertaking test purchases nevertheless reported regularly receiving products displaying indicators consistent with theft, including damaged packaging, evidence of forced security tag removal and, in some cases, live security tags still attached.

Spotlight 7. The Safer Business Network: Mapping Organised Retail Crime and the Online Resale of Stolen Goods

The details of a criminal network operating across London was shared with us as part of this study. The group comprises more than 30 offenders and is known to be responsible for theft to the value of approximately £150,000 worth of goods from stores across London over the last 18 months. Their offending is concentrated at weekends, particularly from Friday to Sunday, although activity is not limited to this pattern.

The group's methods are organised, targeted and intimidating. They routinely use violence and aggression, often wearing balaclavas during offences. Stores are deliberately selected when they are known to be staffed by women, and incidents frequently take place shortly before closing time, increasing vulnerability through reduced footfall.

The network initially focused on mid-market clothing retailers, alongside smaller volumes of footwear, accessories and cosmetics. However, from late 2024 to the present day, there has been a clear escalation in both confidence and ambition, with the group increasingly targeting high-end retailers. Stolen goods now include premium clothing, accessories and high-end women's handbags and fashion items.

Through open-source intelligence, investigators mapped onward sales channels and identified multiple accounts on the online platform Vinted offering repeated quantities of identical items for sale, often advertised as "New with Tags" within days of the thefts. In several cases, goods were directly linked to this criminal network through unique identifiers visible in the sales images. Engagement with law enforcement confirmed that the goods were linked to the store thefts.

This case highlights not only the scale and persistence of organised retail crime, but also the brazen exploitation of online marketplaces to rapidly convert stolen goods into profit.

Blending Legitimate and Illegitimate Supply Chains

One of the more sophisticated practices identified during this research was the blending of legitimate and stolen stock. By mixing lawfully acquired goods with stolen merchandise, sellers are able to create a veneer of legitimacy, produce selected receipts or invoices if challenged, and reduce the likelihood of attracting scrutiny from consumers or platforms.

In some cases, stakeholders suggested that organised sellers were able to build apparently legitimate online businesses using a combination of genuine and stolen stock. The presence of legitimate inventory helped establish account credibility, generate positive feedback, and unlock enhanced platform services, including warehousing, fulfilment and delivery support. This blurring of legitimate and illegitimate supply chains presents significant challenges for retailers, law enforcement and online marketplaces alike, making it increasingly difficult to distinguish professional criminal activity from ordinary e-commerce.

Online Platforms and Regulatory Responsibility

Online marketplaces were identified across virtually all interviews as a structural enabler of stolen goods markets, particularly peer-to-peer marketplaces. This was explained for several reasons including combinations of low barriers to entry, seller anonymity (although this is increasingly harder on many platforms that facilitate payments), high transaction volumes and limited face-to-face interaction creates favourable conditions for the resale of stolen goods at scale. However, stakeholders were divided on the extent to which current legislation places sufficient obligations on platforms to detect and prevent such activity. Several stakeholders pointed to the INFORM Consumers Act in the United States as a potentially useful model. The legislation requires online marketplaces to collect and verify identity, tax and banking information from high-volume sellers (those making more than 200 sales or $5,000 in a 12-month period) and creates enhanced transparency obligations for those operating at commercial scale.[28]

Below we outline the multiple elements of UK legislation to establish if there are potential gaps that would be valuable to implement.

In the UK, the legislative framework governing online platforms has evolved considerably in recent years. The Online Safety Act 2023 (OSA 2023), enforced by Ofcom[29], places duties on user-to-user services and search providers to assess and mitigate the risk of illegal activity occurring on their platforms. There are two elements particularly relevant to stolen goods:

[28] The Integrity, Notification, and Fairness in Online Retail Marketplaces for Consumers Act – or the 'INFORM Consumers Act' became effective in the USA as of June 27, 2023. Details of the Act can be found here: https://www.ftc.gov/business-guidance/resources/INFORMAct

[29] Ofcom (the Office of Communications) is the independent regulatory and competition authority for the UK communications industries. See, https://www.ofcom.org.uk/

1 **The "Proceeds of Crime" Priority Duty.** Handling, advertising, or trafficking stolen goods falls directly under the "Proceeds of Crime" category, which Ofcom lists as one of the Act's 17 Priority Offence areas. Because it is a priority offence, platforms cannot simply wait for a victim to report a stolen item, including:

- **Risk Assessments:** Marketplaces must systematically assess how vulnerable their platform is to criminals trying to liquidate stolen merchandise.
- **Proactive Prevention:** Platforms may be expected to implement proportionate measures to mitigate identified risks, which could include seller verification, behavioural monitoring, automated detection tools or other preventative controls.

2 **The "Reactive" Takedown Duty.** For any instance where stolen goods bypass preventative filters, the Act mandates swift reactive measures:

- **Swift Removal:** A platform is required to act expeditiously once they become aware of illegal content or activity.
- **Easy Reporting:** Platforms must provide clear, easily accessible reporting tools specifically designed so victims or law enforcement can flag illicit listings without friction.

Failure to comply with these duties can result in substantial penalties. Ofcom has the power to impose fines of up to £18 million or 10% of a company's qualifying worldwide annual revenue, whichever is higher. In cases of persistent or serious non-compliance, Ofcom may also seek court orders restricting access to services within the UK.

Alongside the OSA 2023, the UK has also introduced the Digital Reporting Rules[30] which legally requires UK-based digital platforms to track the trading activities of sellers and report them directly to HM Revenue & Customs (HMRC) if a user makes 30 or more sales, or if their total sales value exceeds €2,000 (roughly £1,700). Furthermore, the Digital Markets, Competition and Consumers Act 2024 (DMCCA 2024), holds online platforms accountable for protecting consumers from deceptive trading which incentivises marketplaces to tighten vendor verification and clean up illicit activity to ensure consumers are not misled into purchasing unlawful property.

Collectively, these frameworks provide significant powers to tackle illicit online trading. However, the research undertaken as part of this study revealed broad agreement among retailers, brand owners, law enforcement and industry stakeholders that regulatory gaps remain. While interviewees acknowledged that the complete prevention of stolen goods listings is unrealistic, many argued that significantly more could be done to increase the risks and costs associated with selling stolen goods online.

[30] The Digital Reporting Rules are the UK equivalent of the EU's Directive on Administrative Cooperation (DAC) known as 'DAC7'. They fall under The Platform Operators (Due Diligence and Reporting Requirements) Regulations 2023. They were enacted by HMRC under powers conferred by section 136 of the Finance Act 2002 and section 349 of the Finance (No. 2) Act 2023.

The evidence reviewed for this study suggests that the UK does not lack a regulatory framework capable of addressing illicit online trading. Rather, the challenge lies in ensuring that existing obligations are effectively aligned with the realities of stolen goods markets. That said, while seller identification and reporting requirements have expanded significantly through recent legislative reforms, less attention has been paid to provenance, suspicious trading patterns and the identification of repeat commercial sellers operating within high-risk product categories. In this vein, several potential gaps emerged from the research.

1. First, while existing reporting frameworks help platforms and HMRC identify sellers operating at commercial scale, they do little to improve transparency for consumers, who are often unable to distinguish between casual private sellers and individuals conducting large-scale trading activity. While platforms provide consumers with convenience and choice, they can also provide a degree of legitimacy to sellers and create distance between buyers and the provenance of goods. Greater visibility of commercial selling behaviour may help buyers make more informed decisions and increase accountability within secondary markets.

2. Second, current regulatory frameworks do not differentiate between product categories. Yet the findings of this report suggest that certain goods - including mobile phones, tools, cosmetics, toiletries and other frequently stolen products - present elevated risks and may warrant enhanced scrutiny. Stakeholders questioned whether certain product categories repeatedly associated with theft - such as mobile phones, tools, cosmetics and other high-value consumer goods - should be subject to enhanced verification, monitoring and seller due diligence requirements. This could include the requirement to input serial numbers before listing for sale. Some suggested that where platforms are unable to adequately manage the risks associated with particular categories, policymakers should consider whether unrestricted third-party selling remains appropriate. A more risk-based approach, focusing attention on categories repeatedly associated with theft, could improve the effectiveness of existing controls.

3. Third, several stakeholders argued that trusted notifier arrangements could strengthen cooperation between platforms, retailers and law enforcement. Many major retailers already monitor online marketplaces, conduct test purchases and identify suspicious listings, but there are currently limited mechanisms for ensuring that such intelligence receives expedited review and action. Formal trusted notifier schemes may offer a proportionate means of increasing responsiveness without imposing significant burdens on platforms or legitimate sellers.

4. Finally, while considerable emphasis is placed on identifying who is selling goods online, far less attention is paid to how those goods were acquired. Several interviewees highlighted the potential value of using behavioural indicators - including repeated sales of identical products, unusually large volumes of stock, persistent under-market pricing, or unusual product mixes - as indicators of potential illicit trading. The experience given by the second-hand retailers, such as CEX and Cash Converters in this study (see above) demonstrates that suspicious patterns of supply can be as informative as the provenance of individual items. Similarly, the interview with eBay representatives supported a risk-based approach.

Taken together, these findings suggest that future policy interventions should focus on enhancing the application of existing frameworks, improving intelligence-sharing and increasing transparency, rather than creating entirely new regulation. The objective should not be to regulate occasional private sales, but to make it increasingly difficult for professional handlers, facilitators and organised offenders to operate anonymously or at scale within online marketplaces. Ultimately, the challenge is not a lack of legal powers but a lack of visibility. Effective regulation should focus on improving traceability, accountability and information sharing across online marketplaces, reducing the ability of offenders to exploit anonymity as a means of converting stolen goods into profit.

International Disposal Networks and the "Missing Middle"

As stolen goods move further from the point of theft, they often pass through increasingly sophisticated handling and distribution networks. Beyond local buyers, independent retailers and online marketplaces, some goods are consolidated into wholesale or near-wholesale supply chains and distributed nationally or internationally. Stakeholders described examples of own-brand cosmetics being exported overseas in significant quantities and specialist tools being moved through organised criminal networks, with some intelligence suggesting onward shipment to international markets including Russia.

Several interviewees also highlighted the role of organised criminal groups in infiltrating legitimate supply chains. Examples were provided of warehouses, distribution centres and logistics operations being targeted by organised offenders who exploited insider knowledge, compromised employees or operational vulnerabilities to obtain high-value stock. Once removed from legitimate supply chains, these goods could be absorbed into both domestic and international resale markets.

Despite these insights, a significant intelligence gap remains regarding what an OPAL representative describes as the "missing middle": the largely invisible layer that sits between prolific local offenders and high-level organised criminal networks. While the activities of individual shoplifters and organised crime groups are comparatively well understood, far less is known about the intermediaries, handlers, consolidators and facilitators that connect them.

Figure 2. The "Missing Middle":
The least understood but most strategically important part of the stolen goods ecosystem

It remains unclear whether prolific offenders are routinely supplying larger organised networks, whether local groups operate independently but utilise common disposal routes, or whether a separate tier of criminal entrepreneurs exists whose primary role is to aggregate, store, transport and redistribute stolen goods. Understanding these actors is critical because they may represent the point at which local acquisitive crime is transformed into organised criminal enterprise.

3. DISRUPTING ILLICIT MARKETS:
WHAT WORKS, WHAT DOESN'T, AND WHY

Legislatively, the offence of handling stolen goods - often referred to as "fencing" - is recognised as a serious element of acquisitive crime in England and Wales under Section 22 of the Theft Act 1968. Reflecting its seriousness, the maximum sentence for this offence is significantly higher than for theft: up to fourteen years' imprisonment on conviction, compared to a maximum of seven years for theft.[31]

For a conviction, the prosecution must prove that the **goods were stolen** prior to or at the time of handling, the defendant **handled the property** (e.g., received, kept, moved, or sold), **knowing or believing** them to be stolen at the time of handling.

Despite the relatively strong punishments available to the courts, enforcement remains sporadic. Policing efforts often prioritise the thieves themselves, while those who fence or facilitate the resale of stolen goods are seldom prosecuted.[32] Several factors contribute to this enforcement gap. These include limited or stunted intelligence sharing between regulatory and law enforcement bodies such as Ofcom, Trading Standards, BCRPs / BIDs and the police, as well as evidential challenges: under the Theft Act, prosecutors must prove that individuals handled goods "knowing or believing them to be stolen" - a legal threshold that can be difficult to meet. As one PCC interviewee put it, "without traceability, you can't prove goods are stolen, and without that, you can't act." This reality is particularly acute for FMCGs - food, drink, health and beauty products - which lack individual product identifiers and are essentially untraceable once removed from packaging.

Multiple interviewees suggested that the Theft Act 1968's handling provisions are inadequate and outdated for modern retail environments, online sales, and informal resale venues. Several interviewees called for legislative reform in this area, whereas others argued that the law is sufficient but is simply not being applied, pointing to resource and prioritisation gaps rather than legislative deficiency. It is not without doubt that the Theft Act was drafted in an era where handling was exclusively physical, with key sites including lock-ups, market traders and local fences. The reality now is networked and technologically-enhanced through online spaces and encrypted messaging. The volatility of markets mean they shift like sand and the velocity provided by e-commerce and transportation means goods rapidly 'disappear'. The problem therefore is not the wording or coverage of the offence; The problem is proving it.

[31] If tried in the Magistrates Court, it carries a maximum penalty of up to 12 months in prison, an unlimited fine, or both.

[32] Currently 'handling stolen goods' is not reported separately as an offence but rather categorised together with what are described as "non-victim based" crimes (also including crimes such as public disorder, drug offences, weapon possession) and categorised under 'Miscellaneous crimes against society' in Home Office Outcomes tables. This makes it challenging to

Increasingly complex supply chains, the blending of legitimate and stolen stock, the growth of online marketplaces and difficulties establishing provenance all make it harder to prove that individuals knew or believed goods to be stolen. As a result, the principal challenge may lie less in the legal definition of handling and more in improving intelligence sharing and traceability mechanisms within increasingly sophisticated resale markets. It is to these two concerns that we now turn.

From *Handling* Stolen Goods to *Facilitating* their Monetisation

More fundamentally, the findings from this study raise questions about whether the traditional focus on *handling* stolen goods fully captures the realities of contemporary stolen goods markets. The offence envisages an individual knowingly receiving, possessing or disposing of stolen property. Yet many of the actors identified throughout this research occupy a more ambiguous position. Online platforms, fulfilment providers, landlords, repeat buyers, market organisers, warehousing operators and businesses purchasing stock at suspiciously low prices may not always physically *handle* stolen goods themselves, but can nonetheless create the infrastructure, opportunities and demand that enable stolen goods markets to flourish. In this sense, the contemporary challenge may be shifting from one of handling to one of facilitation.

Spotlight 8. Operation Aladdin: Holding Landlords Accountable for Criminal Markets (The Viscomi Case)

Between 2011 and 2018, Lincolnshire Trading Standards repeatedly targeted a retail premises on Lincoln High Street that was being used by successive tenants to sell counterfeit and illicit tobacco products. Despite numerous raids, seizures and prosecutions against the shop operators, the criminal activity continued.

The premises were owned by local landlord Mr Viscomi, who was repeatedly informed by Trading Standards about the offending taking place within his property. Although he was not involved in the day-to-day operation of the business and had no direct role in selling illicit goods, he continued to rent the premises and accept rental income despite repeated warnings and evidence of criminality.

In a landmark prosecution, Lincolnshire Trading Standards successfully argued that the landlord had allowed his premises to be used for criminal activity. Following conviction, he received a suspended prison sentence and was ordered to repay approximately £60,000 in rental income under the Proceeds of Crime Act 2002 (POCA). The court determined that the rent he had received constituted criminal property because it had been derived from illegal trading activity.

The case was significant because it demonstrated that enforcement action could extend beyond those directly committing offences to those who knowingly profit from or facilitate criminal activity. Following the ruling, Lincolnshire Trading Standards formalised the approach through **Operation Aladdin**, proactively warning landlords that they could face prosecution and asset recovery if they continued to profit from premises being used for illicit trade.

The Viscomi case (Spotlight 8) illustrates the potential of existing legislation to target facilitators rather than solely offenders. While developed in response to illicit tobacco sales, the principles underpinning the case have wider relevance to stolen goods markets.

> *"If we have a problematic market or car boot sale that has repeatedly been warned for selling counterfeit goods, and the same could apply for stolen goods, we'd make the point that they're receiving rental income from the proceeds of crime. And that as the landlord or organiser, they're potentially liable under the Proceeds of Crime Act." (The Anti-Counterfeiting Group)*

As demonstrated here, rather than focusing exclusively on thieves and handlers, enforcement agencies may achieve greater disruption by targeting the businesses, landlords, market operators or organisers of car boot sales, who provide the infrastructure, premises and commercial opportunities that enable illicit markets to flourish. Representatives from The Real Deal and The Anti-Counterfeiting Group agreed that to effectively disrupt the trade of stolen (and counterfeit) goods at physical marketplaces, enforcement activity needs to start "higher up the chain" to target the landlords and operators. Otherwise, it's just a case of "whack-a-mole; taking out a trader here and a trader there" only for them to "pop up in another market."

The distinction between handling and facilitating is important because modern stolen goods markets increasingly resemble legitimate supply chains. Goods move through multiple intermediaries, are mixed with legitimate stock, stored in warehouses, advertised through online platforms and distributed through established logistics networks. As a result, the actors generating the greatest harm may not always be those physically in possession of stolen property, but those who provide the mechanisms through which stolen goods are monetised, distributed and legitimised. The challenge for policymakers is therefore not simply identifying who handles stolen goods but understanding who facilitates their onward movement through increasingly complex and interconnected markets.

Viewed through this lens, disrupting stolen goods markets requires more than the prosecution of individual thieves and handlers. It requires greater visibility of the networks, systems and commercial environments that enable stolen goods to be converted into profit. This places renewed importance on intelligence sharing, product traceability and the ability to identify suspicious patterns of trading activity across both physical and digital marketplaces.

Intelligence and Enforcement: Improving Multi-Agency Working

Intelligence Flows and Silos

One of the clearest findings from this study is that the challenge facing enforcement agencies is not an absence of intelligence about stolen goods markets, but the difficulty of aggregating, sharing and acting upon that intelligence effectively. Retailers, Business Crime Reduction Partnerships (BCRPs), Business Improvement Districts (BIDs), Trading Standards, online platforms and law enforcement agencies each hold pieces of the intelligence picture. However, these insights are often fragmented across organisations, geographical boundaries and systems, limiting their operational value.

Retailers and BCRPs generate substantial frontline intelligence through direct observation of offender behaviour, CCTV analysis, social media monitoring, facial recognition systems, open-source intelligence and regular engagement with local police. Increasingly, organisations such as the Safer Business Network (see Spotlight 7) are developing dedicated intelligence functions focused not only on theft but on disposal routes, tracking offenders from theft through to resale, identifying repeat handlers, and building evidential packages for enforcement agencies. Despite this growing capability, stakeholders repeatedly highlighted the absence of consistent national mechanisms through which intelligence can be fed into regional and national enforcement structures. Those with knowledge of – or a footprint in – North America highlighted relative alignment between retailers, online platforms and law enforcement.

Despite this growing capability, stakeholders repeatedly highlighted the absence of consistent national mechanisms through which intelligence can be fed into regional and national enforcement structures. Those with knowledge of – or a footprint in – North America highlighted relative alignment between retailers, online platforms and law enforcement. Interviewees described a model in which organised retail crime associations (ORCAs)[33], retailers, prosecutors, law enforcement agencies and online marketplaces work in close partnership, sharing intelligence, building evidential packages and jointly targeting prolific offenders and organised networks. Rather than relying on individual incidents, partners are able to aggregate intelligence across multiple thefts, locations and jurisdictions, creating a more complete picture of offending and increasing the likelihood of prosecution. Several stakeholders contrasted this with the UK, where intelligence-sharing often remains fragmented and cases can lose momentum if individual police forces don’t support them. The creation of the High Street Organised Crime Unit presents an opportunity to develop a more coordinated UK model. A similar approach to the USA could be achieved through closer integration between Regional Organised Crime Units (ROCUs), OPAL, local police forces, Business Crime Reduction Partnerships (BCRPs), Business Improvement Districts (BIDs), retailers and online marketplaces. For example, BCRPs and in-store retailers often possess detailed intelligence on prolific offenders, suspicious disposal routes and local handlers, while platforms hold valuable data on sales activity, account histories and organised online trading networks. ROCUs and OPAL are well positioned to act as intelligence fusion hubs, identifying cross-force patterns,

[33] ORCAs (Organized Retail Crime Associations) in the USA are state or regional partnerships uniting retailers, law enforcement agencies, and prosecutors. They collaborate to share intelligence, track repeat offenders, and investigate organized syndicates that steal large quantities of merchandise for resale The Organized Retail Crime Resource Center can be found here: http://www.orcinfo.com/orc-associations.html

linking local offending to wider organised crime networks and coordinating enforcement activity across force boundaries. Such a model would reduce reliance on informal personal relationships, create clearer pathways for intelligence escalation, and help bridge the current gap between theft incidents and the markets through which stolen goods are ultimately sold. In doing so, it would move the response beyond individual offences and towards the systematic disruption of the criminal ecosystems that make acquisitive crime profitable.

Reporting Challenges

Several interviewees identified reporting processes as a significant barrier to intelligence development. Reporting through 101 or online systems was frequently described as cumbersome, offering little feedback to those submitting information and limited assurance that intelligence would be acted upon. The result is a negative feedback loop: low confidence reduces reporting, reduced reporting weakens intelligence, and weaker intelligence contributes to fewer enforcement outcomes, further eroding confidence.

Similar challenges were identified within local authority enforcement structures. Trading Standards teams often hold valuable intelligence relating to suspected handlers, rogue traders and illicit businesses, yet information-sharing arrangements between local authorities remain inconsistent. Stakeholders described instances where businesses suspected of selling stolen goods were able to relocate across local authority boundaries without attracting scrutiny due to the absence of effective cross-regional intelligence sharing mechanisms.

Taken together, these findings suggest that intelligence concerning stolen goods markets is often plentiful but disconnected. The challenge lies not simply in collecting information, but in creating systems capable of bringing disparate intelligence sources together into a coherent operational picture.

Prolific Offenders as an Underused Intelligence Source

A recurring theme throughout the research was the depth of knowledge possessed by prolific acquisitive offenders. The offenders interviewed demonstrated a sophisticated understanding of local disposal routes, product demand, pricing structures, buyer preferences, seasonal trends and the relative risks associated with different forms of offending. Several spoke about stolen goods markets in almost commercial terms, displaying an awareness of supply, demand and profit margins that could prove invaluable to investigators seeking to understand local criminal ecosystems.

Policing stakeholders argued that prolific offenders—particularly those in custody—represent a significant and largely untapped source of intelligence regarding disposal routes, handling networks and local stolen goods markets. Yet custody processes rarely seek to systematically gather such intelligence, while digital devices seized from offenders are not always examined for information relating to resale networks, handlers and facilitators.

As one policing stakeholder observed:

> *"Forces need to be more proactive in treating prolific retail offenders as sources of intelligence... actually, they have a goldmine of intelligence sat behind them that we perhaps haven't routinely looked for in an organised enough way."*

Several former offenders who participated in this study also described a significant shift in how they viewed the individuals who purchased stolen goods from them. What they once perceived as friendships or mutually beneficial arrangements came to be seen as exploitative relationships in which others profited from their addiction, vulnerability or financial desperation.

One interviewee reflected:

> *"I've realised these people are taking advantage of vulnerable people. You've got someone who's stealing to fund their habit because they're unwell... but then you've got people with nice cars and nice houses buying and selling the stuff, and drug dealers profiting from all of it. Nothing seems to happen to them."*

Such reflections suggest that offenders may be willing to provide valuable intelligence regarding handlers and facilitators if approached appropriately. Understanding these relationships may offer opportunities not only for intelligence gathering but also for disrupting the individuals and businesses that profit most from stolen goods markets.

"Everyone Needs to Play Their Part": Multi-Agency Operations as a Proof of Concept

The operations most frequently cited as effective practice by stakeholders were those that combined police, Trading Standards, retailers and other regulatory partners in coordinated enforcement activity. As a police representative stated, "everyone needs to play their part" and these operations demonstrate the value of intelligence-led, multi-agency approaches to tackling stolen goods markets.

Operation Zoridon[34], a Metropolitan Police-led initiative targeting approximately 120 premises suspected of handling stolen goods, was repeatedly cited as an example of effective practice. The operation demonstrated how forensic marking technologies such as SelectaDNA can support coordinated enforcement activity across multiple locations, while bringing together police, Trading Standards and the London Fire Brigade enabled simultaneous action against a range of criminal and regulatory offences. Similarly, Operation Machinize 2[35], led by the National Crime Agency (NCA) and conducted in cooperation with the National Police Chiefs'

[34] Details of Operation Zoridon can be found on the College of Policing website (https://www.college.police.uk/support-forces/practices/operation-zoridon-disruption-handling-stolen-goods).

[35] National Crime Agency (NCA) (2025) 'Operation Machinize 2: Thousands of businesses targeted in coordinated crackdown on high street crime', Available at: https://www.nationalcrimeagency.gov.uk/news/operation-machinize-2-thousands-of-businesses-targeted-in-coordinated-crackdown-on-high-street-crime

Council (NPCC), ran throughout October and involved every UK police force and Regional Organised Crime Unit, Home Office Immigration Enforcement, Trading Standards, HM Revenue & Customs and Companies House. Across the two intensification periods, the multi-partner activity saw:

959
individuals arrested

£10.7million
total seized or froze cash, high value goods, and bank accounts

£2.7million
of illegal commodities destroyed

97
individuals safeguarded in relation to modern slavery concerns

The NCA noted that Operation Machinize is "the largest operation of its kind focused on rooting out the economic crime and grey economy that makes our high streets less safe and prosperous."

Stakeholders noted that businesses involved in the handling of stolen goods were often non-compliant across multiple regulatory domains, including licensing, fire safety, counterfeit goods, illicit tobacco and immigration offences. As a result, multi-agency operations frequently generated intelligence and enforcement opportunities extending far beyond the original objective of recovering stolen property.

Similar principles have underpinned operations such as Operation Pedlar in Essex. Meanwhile, the "We Don't Buy Crime" initiative in West Mercia demonstrated sustained reductions in burglary through a combination of property marking, second-hand retailer engagement and intelligence-led interventions.

The wider lesson emerging from these initiatives is clear: stolen goods markets are most effectively disrupted when intelligence, enforcement powers and regulatory tools are brought together.

Trading Standards: Essential but Under-Resourced

Trading Standards was consistently identified as one of the most important but underutilised partners in tackling stolen goods markets. The service possesses unique powers relevant to second-hand markets, rogue traders, counterfeit goods, illicit tobacco and car boot sales, making it particularly well placed to address many of the environments in which stolen goods are bought, sold and distributed.

However, stakeholders repeatedly described Trading Standards as operating under significant resource constraints. Recent research by the Chartered Trading Standards Institute (CTSI) identified serious and organised crime on UK high streets as the most significant threat facing the profession. The survey found that 96 per cent of respondents had encountered organised crime groups during the course of their work, while 97 per cent were aware of suspected organised criminal activity operating from retail premises within their local area.

Interviewees argued that these pressures are increasingly diverting resources away from core consumer protection functions and limiting the service's ability to proactively tackle criminality. Budget reductions, workforce pressures and intelligence silos between local authority areas were all identified as barriers preventing Trading Standards from realising its full potential within the stolen goods enforcement landscape.

Stakeholders therefore called for closer operational and strategic integration between Trading Standards and policing, alongside renewed investment in intelligence capabilities. The recently announced High Street Illegality Taskforce and High Street Organised Crime Unit represent a significant opportunity in this regard, bringing together Trading Standards, the National Crime Agency, HMRC and other partners to target rogue businesses and criminal enterprises operating on UK high streets.

Connecting the Intelligence Picture

A consistent message emerged throughout this study: stolen goods markets are rarely visible to any single organisation. Retailers see the theft. Online platforms see the resale. Trading Standards identify regulatory breaches. Police encounter offenders. Each possesses a fragment of the wider picture, but it is often only when these fragments are combined that the underlying market becomes visible.

The challenge facing policymakers is therefore not simply generating more intelligence, but creating the structures, relationships and capabilities required to connect existing intelligence more effectively. If stolen goods markets operate through networks, then the response to them must be networked too.

Spotlight 9. A New High Street Organised Crime Unit[36]

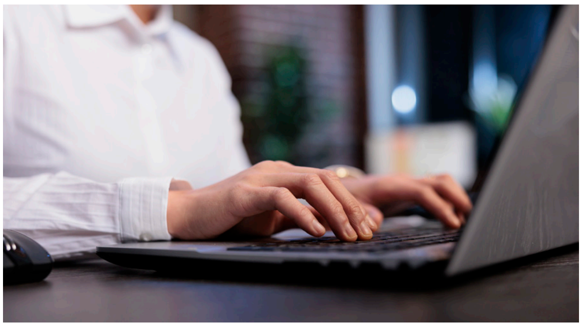
Rogue barber shops, vape stores, mini-marts and sweet shops linked to organised crime will face raids, closures and cash seizures under a new £30 million crackdown targeting money laundering, tax evasion, and illegal working over 3 years.

£20 million of funding will go towards an enhanced law enforcement response, including establishing a new multi-agency co-ordination cell based out of the National Crime Agency (NCA).

Police officers will also be uplifted across forces in hotspot regions. Altogether, 75 new police officers will be recruited across the NCA, Greater Manchester Police, West Midlands Police and a joint Kent Police and Essex Police Unit, to build intelligence at a national level and increase the number of dedicated officers tackling organised crime on the ground.

Trading Standards will also be backed with £6 million in new funding to bolster the response to sham businesses in at-risk local authorities. New officer training will be rolled out to identify suspicious businesses, strengthen business compliance, and boost enforcement.

Traceability, Forensic Marking and Benefit Denial



A recurring theme throughout this study was the importance of traceability. A fundamental challenge in tackling stolen goods markets is provenance: unless investigators can link a specific item to a specific victim or theft, it becomes significantly more difficult to recover property, prosecute handlers and disrupt disposal networks.

> *"When we found someone with those [suspected stolen] items on them, it was really hard to identify who the victim was. And if we didn't have a victim, we didn't have stolen goods." (Policing)*

As stolen goods move further from the point of theft - passing through intermediaries, warehouses, online platforms and secondary markets - their origins become increasingly obscured. Improving traceability is therefore one of the most powerful tools available for disrupting stolen goods markets.

[36] Gov.UK(2026) New high street unit set up in nationwide blitz on dodgy shops
Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/news/new-high-street-unit-set-up-in-nationwide-blitz-on-dodgy-shops

Forensic Marking and Ownership Attribution

Both major property marking providers interviewed for this study - DeterTech (SmartWater) and Selectamark (SelectaDNA) - emphasised the role of forensic marking in overcoming evidential barriers associated with stolen property.

SmartWater applies a unique forensic liquid to property and individuals, enabling recovered items to be linked to a registered owner through laboratory analysis. SelectaDNA uses microscopic identification dots and forensic markers that allow police to connect recovered property directly to a victim or organisation. Both systems provide a means of establishing ownership long after goods have been removed from their original location, making them particularly valuable in investigations involving handlers and organised resale networks.

Importantly, stakeholders stressed that the value of forensic marking extends beyond detection. Visible signage, warning labels and public awareness campaigns create a deterrent effect by increasing the perceived risk of identification and prosecution.

As one provider explained:

> *"It's that continuity of the message – telling people we've got SelectaDNA in place, and you will be forensically marked. The stock that you think you're going to come in and steal, we can link it back to its owner."*

Operations such as the Metropolitan Police's Operation Zoridon demonstrate the wider value of forensic marking. By linking recovered goods directly to victims, property marking technologies enabled coordinated enforcement activity across multiple premises suspected of handling stolen property.

Item Registration and Databases

The *BikeRegister* scheme was cited as one example of how the public can be encouraged to register and forensically mark personal items so they can be identified if stolen.[37] By combining visible marking with a national ownership database accessible to both police and the public, the scheme has improved recovery rates and reduced theft risks in participating areas. Currently, over 1.5 million bikes have been registered. Stakeholders suggested that similar models could be explored for other frequently stolen products, including tools, mobile phones and selected categories of high-risk consumer goods.

A recurring theme throughout the interviews with second-hand retailers including Cash Converters and CEX was the importance of traceability. For example, Cash Converters described using a range of databases and verification systems to identify stolen or finance-linked property, including checks on mobile phones, watches, bicycles and tools. The company also reported strengthening its approach to tool theft following engagement with policing initiatives, including increased use of ultraviolet detection methods to identify ownership markings and enhanced staff training on provenance checks.

[37] For further details, see: https://www.bikeregister.com/

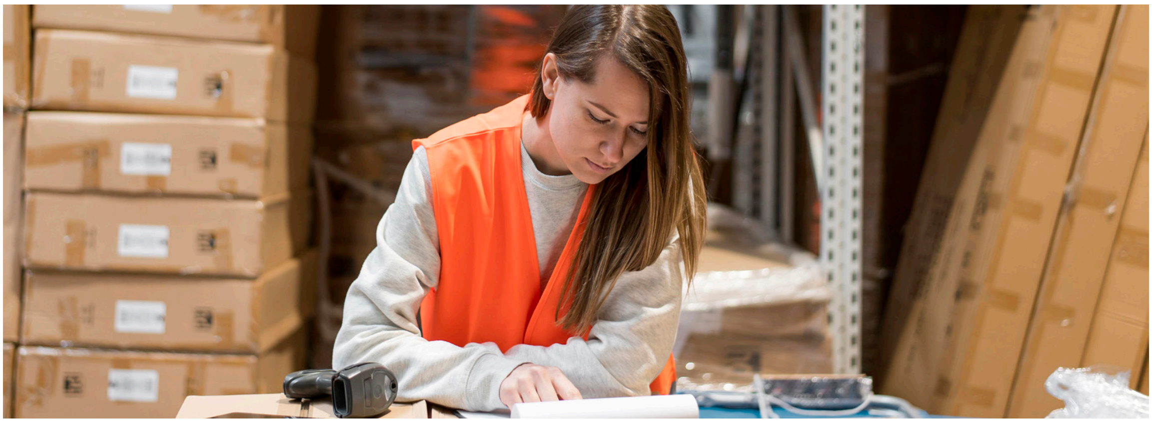
Enhancing Traceability and Proving Provenance

Several stakeholders argued that the most effective approach would be to embed traceability much earlier in the product lifecycle. Rather than relying solely on end users to register or mark property, manufacturers could incorporate unique identifiers at the point of manufacture, adopt default (opt-out) product registration and warranty schemes, ensuring that products enter the supply chain with a permanent link to their origin. In some instances, it was highlighted that tracking capabilities are already included – for example in vehicles, surveying equipment and agricultural machinery – but sharing that data is often the problem, particularly for international manufacturers.

> As technology has evolved, manufacturers have far more power to make them worthless [if they are stolen], but they don't seem to want to. We could do far more with tracking and immobilizing vehicles and equipment but sadly there is significant resistance to sharing the data. It might be held in a different jurisdiction, but the government could say you can only sell vehicles in this country if you provide law enforcement with 'XYZ' data so when a vehicle has been stolen we can do more in terms of tracking it and disabling it. Agricultural machinery and surveying equipment is the same – we see roadside robberies where surveyors have been assaulted and their kit including cameras and radar systems stolen because they are worth £30,000. When you dig into it, not only can the manufacturers find out where that stuff is, they can also disable it and make it worthless. So, I do wonder whether there is a market imperative – if it gets stolen, they're going to sell more items to replace the stolen ones.

Recent legislative developments relating to equipment theft reflect growing recognition of this principle. The Equipment Theft (Prevention) Act 2023 introduces requirements for certain categories of agricultural and construction equipment to be marked and registered. However, interviewees noted that the legislation does not extend to many of the products most frequently encountered within stolen goods markets, including hand tools, consumer electronics and retail goods.

Several policing stakeholders argued that wider adoption of manufacturer-led traceability could significantly improve the recovery of stolen property and reduce opportunities for resale. However, industry concerns relating to cost, international supply chains, warranty issues and commercial competitiveness continue to limit implementation.



Tobacco Track and Trace: An Existing Model Chronically Underused

Tobacco products represent a notable exception within the retail environment. Under existing regulations, tobacco products are already subject to a sophisticated Tobacco Track and Trace system (TT&T)[38] capable of identifying the movement of individual packs and pallets throughout the supply chain. Yet, access to this system remains largely restricted to HMRC and Trading Standards. Frontline police officers are generally unable to access track-and-trace information directly, limiting its operational value during enforcement activity.

Stakeholders argued that extending police access would provide a practical and immediately achievable means of improving enforcement against stolen and illicit tobacco markets. Furthermore, expanding the TT&T identification and tracking programme to include vaping products should be seriously considered. More broadly, the tobacco system demonstrates how supply chain visibility can assist enforcement agencies and may offer lessons for other product categories vulnerable to theft and diversion.

Benefit Denial: Reducing the Value of Stolen Goods

While traceability improves the likelihood of identifying stolen goods after a theft has occurred, benefit denial seeks to address the problem at an earlier stage by reducing or eliminating the value of stolen property altogether. The principle is straightforward: if stolen goods cannot be used, activated or resold, their attractiveness to offenders declines significantly. This reflects a long-established principle of situational crime prevention - reducing the rewards associated with offending.[39]

Retailers have long employed benefit denial measures through security tags, ink tags and product protection devices designed to damage goods if forcibly removed. Such measures increase the risk that stolen items will be rendered unsaleable, thereby reducing their value within secondary markets. However, some of the most promising opportunities lie with manufacturers. Mobile phones provide perhaps the clearest example. The high resale value of smartphones continues to drive significant levels of theft, particularly in urban areas. While enforcement activity can suppress offending, many stakeholders argue that policing alone cannot solve the problem while stolen devices remain valuable and easily resold.

There have been repeated calls by the police for stronger deployment of "kill switch" technologies that render devices permanently unusable once reported stolen. The rationale is simple: if a stolen phone cannot be activated, used or sold, much of its criminal value disappears. The principle of benefit denial itself is not new. Similar approaches have been used successfully in other crime prevention contexts. Vehicle theft fell substantially following the widespread adoption of immobilisers, central locking systems and electronic anti-theft technologies. Criminologists have long highlighted the importance of reducing the rewards associated with offending as a means of preventing crime. From a situational crime prevention perspective, making stolen goods harder to use, sell or profit from directly undermines the market incentives that sustain theft.

[38] See Gov.UK (2024) Tobacco Track and Trace Compliance. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/hmrc-internal-manuals/tobacco-track-and-trace-compliance/tttc2050

[39] For an overview of Situational Crime Prevention see the Center for Problem-Oriented Policing. Available at: https://popcenter.asu.edu/content/situational-crime-prevention

The Metropolitan Police have invested substantial resources into tackling mobile phone theft and have reported notable reductions in offending.[40] However, policing stakeholders participating in this study argued that enforcement alone is unlikely to eliminate the problem while stolen devices retain significant resale value. This raises an important policy question: where manufacturers possess the technical capability to render stolen products unusable, what responsibility do they have to do so? The evidence reviewed in this report suggests that technological solutions capable of removing value from stolen goods may represent one of the most effective long-term strategies for disrupting illicit markets. While law enforcement can target offenders, handlers and disposal routes, manufacturers are uniquely positioned to influence the attractiveness of products themselves. In most cases, reducing the value of stolen goods may prove the most effective approach; prevention is better than the cure.

This highlights an important shift in thinking. Traditionally, efforts have focused on recovering stolen goods after a theft has occurred. Increasingly, however, the most effective interventions may be those that prevent stolen goods from retaining value in the first place. In this respect, manufacturers, retailers and technology providers may have as important a role to play as law enforcement in disrupting the stolen goods economy.

Cultural Normalisation and Demand Reduction

Stolen goods as "victimless"

"Everyday people are more likely to turn a blind eye to where stuff has come from if they're getting a really good deal for it." - Retailer

A recurring theme across interviews is the cultural normalisation of purchasing stolen goods. Several interviewees described a widespread public perception that buying cheap goods from informal sellers - whether at a car boot sale, an online marketplace, or from a door-to-door seller - is essentially harmless: a victimless transaction between two private parties. This attitude is seen as sustaining demand and reducing the social stigma that would otherwise deter casual buyers. Returning to the introduction of this report, according to academic research, more people now view buying stolen property as justifiable compared to a decade ago.[32]

Social media and popular culture are described as reinforcing this normalisation. Viral videos of mass shoplifting, social media posts where offenders display or wear stolen goods, and television programming that glamorises informal trading all contribute to a cultural environment in which handling stolen goods is under-stigmatised.

Interviewees called for stronger public awareness of the consequences of handling or selling stolen goods, emphasising the need for a stronger moral narrative around theft and its real impact on shop workers, small businesses, and communities. Several noted that popular culture - from television characters to social media content - normalises informal trading

[40] BBC News (2026) Met using e-bikes and drones to catch phone thieves, https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cdx4762znr6o

[41] Shepherd, D., Button, M., and Hawkins, (2024) 'The dishonest disposition and everyday economic criminality of the British public', Journal of Economic Criminality. Vol 5. Available at: https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2949791424000423

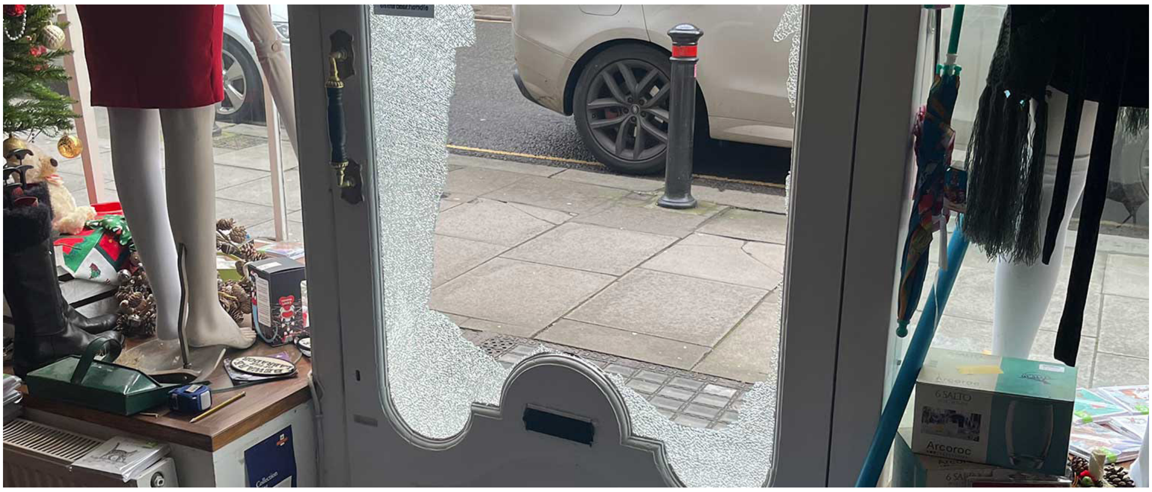
and reduces moral scrutiny, with stolen goods resale widely perceived as victimless. This cultural framing is reinforced by the localised, relationship-based nature of many stolen goods markets, which are embedded within everyday community settings in ways that make them difficult to recognise as harmful.

While there are localised campaigns such as 'We Don't Buy Crime' focusing on business premises, none of the interviewees were aware of any current sustained national public awareness campaign aimed at reducing demand for stolen goods or communicating the consequences of purchasing them. We found one example that had been run in Northern Ireland. The campaign was devised by the Northern Ireland Department of Justice launched a consumer awareness campaign called "End the Harm", which sought to highlight the link between fake or illegal goods and funding for organised crime gangs. The campaign included social media content, press releases, and website content that highlighted how buying fake and illegal goods could potentially be funding organised crime and the associated harms of violence, drugs and exploitation.

Stakeholders in the present study highlighted that members of the public frequently encounter stolen goods - online, at markets, or through informal sales - but may not recognise the harm or know how to report concerns. Improved public understanding of both the consequences and the harms of participation in stolen goods markets could meaningfully support both demand reduction and intelligence generation.

4. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS:

REFRAMING THE PROBLEM FROM THEFT REDUCTION TO MARKET DISRUPTION



A central finding of this research is that stolen goods markets should not be viewed simply as a consequence of theft. Rather, they are one of its principal drivers.

Traditional responses to acquisitive crime have focused overwhelmingly on preventing thefts, identifying thieves and improving security at the point of victimisation. While these measures remain important, they address only one side of the equation. Throughout this study, offenders, retailers, law enforcement agencies and industry stakeholders consistently described the existence of reliable disposal routes as a critical factor shaping theft decisions. Offenders repeatedly spoke of established buyers, trusted intermediaries, online resale channels and businesses willing to purchase stolen goods. In many cases, goods were stolen because a market already existed for them.

This finding challenges the conventional assumption that handling stolen goods is merely a secondary activity that follows theft. In reality, the relationship is often reversed. **Markets create demand, demand creates opportunity and opportunity incentivises theft.** The existence of efficient, low-risk and highly accessible resale channels enable offenders to convert stolen goods into cash quickly and repeatedly.

The recommendations that follow are therefore grounded in a market reduction approach. Rather than focusing exclusively on thieves, they seek to increase the risks, costs and barriers associated with handling, distributing and monetising stolen property. Taken together, they aim to make stolen goods easier to identify, harder to move, harder to sell and ultimately less profitable to steal.

1. **Create a National Stolen Goods Intelligence Framework.**
The Home Office should establish a national intelligence framework focused specifically on stolen goods markets, systematically bringing together intelligence from policing, retailers, Business Crime Reduction Partnerships (BCRPs), Business Improvement Districts (BIDs), online platforms, Trading Standards, and other relevant stakeholders. The newly established High Street Organised Crime Unit presents a significant opportunity to coordinate intelligence working alongside OPAL, the NCA, ROCUs and local police forces. A key priority should be developing a better understanding of the "missing middle" between prolific offenders and organised criminal networks, alongside improved intelligence on handlers, facilitators and disposal routes.

2. **Reduce Demand for Stolen Goods.**
The cultural normalisation of purchasing goods with suspect origins sustains demand and undermines enforcement. Research highlights a shifting acceptance of buying stolen goods that is reinforced by popular culture and social media. Tackling demand - not just supply - is a necessary component of any effective strategy. To achieve this, the development of educational public campaigns to highlight the multiple harms that underscore the stolen goods trade should be explored. While there are localised campaigns such as 'We Don't Buy Crime' focusing on business premises, there are very few aimed at reducing demand for stolen goods or communicating the consequences of purchasing them. The "End the Harm" campaign devised by the Northern Ireland Department of Justice is an exception. Using social media, press releases and online content, it demonstrated how fake and illegal goods could potentially be funding organised crime and the associated harms of violence, drugs and exploitation. A similar national public awareness campaign should be explored.

3. **Improve the Visibility of Stolen Goods Markets.**
The Home Office should increase the strategic visibility of stolen goods markets by enhancing the way handling stolen goods offences are analysed, reported and monitored. While the current classification of handling stolen goods as a non-victim-based offence is operationally appropriate, it should be recognised as a key indicator of the markets that sustain acquisitive crime. A dedicated annual statistical bulletin should bring together handling stolen goods data, enforcement activity, crime outcomes, intelligence on disposal routes and emerging trends. This would support more effective strategic analysis, intelligence-led policing and performance management, while reinforcing the role of handlers and facilitators as active enablers within the wider theft ecosystem.

4. **Introduce a Risk-Based Market Accountability Framework for Physical Markets.**
Rogue and informal car boot sales illustrate how stolen goods markets persist not because they are invisible, but because they sit at the intersection of fragmented regulation, limited traceability and constrained enforcement resources. Their continued attractiveness lies not just in their ability to absorb stolen goods, but in their ability to do so quickly, anonymously and at scale. Rather than new legislation, Government should explore whether the principles underpinning the Know Your Customer requirements and Scrap Metal Dealers Act 2013 - traceability, seller identification, record keeping and market accountability -could be adapted for higher-risk secondary markets.

5. **Risk-Based Accountability Framework for Online Platforms.**

The evidence reviewed for this study suggests that the UK does not lack a regulatory framework capable of addressing illicit online trading. Rather, the challenge lies in ensuring that existing obligations are effectively aligned with the realities of stolen goods markets. There are four pillars of accountability that can be enhanced for online platforms without requiring new or extended legislation:

- **Seller transparency.** Customers are often unable to distinguish between casual private sellers and individuals conducting large-scale trading activity. Having enhanced seller transparency enables them to buy with confidence and removes plausible deniability.
- **High-risk product scrutiny.** Enhance verification, monitoring and seller due diligence for sellers of high-risk products including mobile phones, tools, cosmetics, toiletries and other frequently stolen products. Require the input of serial number for relevant items before listing for sale.
- **Trusted notifier schemes.** These arrangements can strengthen cooperation and expedite action between platforms, retailers and law enforcement.
- **Behavioural indicators.** The repeated sales of identical products, unusually large volumes of stock, persistent under-market pricing, or unusual product mixes - as indicators of potential illicit trading – and captured through automated exception-based software.

6. **Expand Provenance, Traceability and Benefit Denial Applications Across High-Risk Product Categories.**

Government should work with manufacturers and retailers to expand traceability and benefit denial measures across high-risk product categories to include kill switches, immobilisers, tracking and traceability. Improving provenance through forensic marking, default (opt-out) product registration and warranty schemes, unique identifiers and track-and-trace systems would strengthen investigations, support prosecutions and increase the risks associated with handling stolen goods. In some cases, removing value from stolen goods through benefit denial measures may prove more effective than attempting to recover them after the event. As an example, Tobacco Track and Trace (TT&T) technology holds huge promise in identifying illicit markets, yet it continues to be chronically underutilised. Extending access to all law enforcement agencies could make a big difference to deterring and detecting the theft of stolen goods. Furthermore, expanding the TT&T identification and tracking programme to include vaping products should be seriously considered, with potential for it to be included as part of the Tobacco and Vapes Bill.

7. **Improve the disposal of recovered property.**

Recovered property that cannot be reunited with its rightful owner is often sold through public police auctions. While this enables police forces to recover value from unclaimed items, current disposal processes may have unintended consequences for efforts to disrupt stolen goods markets. Non-itemised or insufficiently detailed auction receipts can be exploited to create an appearance of legitimate ownership, while the recirculation of unmarked and unregistered high-risk goods perpetuates the provenance problems that make stolen property difficult to identify. Police forces should strengthen disposal processes by requiring high-risk items e.g. power tools to be forensically marked and/or registered before disposal, issuing detailed and verifiable itemised receipts, and maintaining digital records that preserve provenance. Where practical, high-risk recovered property should be diverted to charities, training providers or community organisations, or, where provenance cannot be reliably maintained, considered for secure destruction rather than re-entering anonymous commercial markets.

CONCLUSION

No single intervention will eliminate stolen goods markets. However, taken together, improved intelligence sharing, greater traceability, stronger market accountability and wider adoption of traceability and benefit-denial measures have the potential to fundamentally alter the risk-reward calculus that underpins acquisitive crime.

The challenge is not simply to catch more thieves. It is to make stolen goods harder to identify, harder to move, harder to sell and ultimately less profitable to steal. By shifting attention from theft alone to the markets that sustain it, policymakers, practitioners and industry can begin to address one of the most overlooked drivers of acquisitive crime.

For too long, efforts to tackle acquisitive crime have focused primarily on those who steal. Yet theft only becomes profitable when stolen goods can be sold. If we are serious about reducing theft, we must become equally serious about disrupting the markets that sustain it.

REFERENCES

BBC News (2025) One iPhone led police to gang suspected of sending up to 40,000 stolen UK phones to China. Available at: https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c20vlpwrzwdo.

BBC News (2025) The new breed of 'shoplifting entrepreneurs' fuelling the UK's petty crime problem. Available at: https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/videos/c4g32wn030qo

BBC News (2026) Make stolen phones unusable, Met Police urges tech giants. Available at: https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/ckg4dey905yo

Home Office (2022) Review of the Scrap Metal Dealers Act, Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/review-of-the-scrap-metal-dealers-act-2013

Nee C and Meenaghan A (2006) 'Expert decision making in burglars', British Journal of Criminology 46: 935–949.

Office for National Statistics (ONS) (2026), Retail Sales, Great Britain, ONS website, statistical bulletin. Available at: https://www.ons.gov.uk/businessindustryandtrade/retailindustry/bulletins/retailsales/april2026

Real Deal (2017) 'A National Charter for Safe, Fair Markets'. Available at: www.realdealmarkets.co.uk

Shepherd, D., Button, M., and Hawkins, (2024) 'The dishonest disposition and everyday economic criminality of the British public', Journal of Economic Criminality. Vol 5. Available at: https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2949791424000423

Taylor, E. (2017) 'I should have been a security consultant': The Good Lives Model and residential burglars', European Journal of Criminology, 14(4), pp. 434-450.

Taylor, E. (2019) It's Not Part of the Job: Violence and Verbal Abuse Towards Shopworkers, Co-op, Manchester. Available at: https://assets.ctfassets.net/5ywmq66472jr/22QfMejeWYbimJ9ykX9W9h/0e99f15c0ed24c16ab74d38b42d5129a/It_s_not_part_of_the_job_report.pdf

Taylor, E., Taylor, J., and Unsworth, J. (2024) 'The Politics and Pitfalls of Policing High-Volume Crime: Responding to the Shoplifting Epidemic', The Political Quarterly. Vol 95: 3. Available at: https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/1467-923X.13432

Taylor, E. (2024) Lighting Up: How Tobacco Track and Trace Could Help Illuminate Stolen Goods Markets and Other Serious Crimes, National Business Crime Centre. Available at: https://nbcc.police.uk/images/2024/NEWS%2024/Lighting%20Up_FINAL%202024.pdf

Usdaw (2025) Freedom From Fear: Campaign To End Violence And Abuse Against Retail Workers, Survey Results 2025. Available at: https://usdawlive.b-cdn.net/live/media/bzjmwbbt/fff-survey-report-2025.pdf

APPENDIX A. METHODOLOGY

Research Aims and Objectives

This research seeks to explore the evolving nature of illicit stolen goods markets in England and Wales, with a focus on both traditional and emerging resale methods. We embarked upon this project with one driving research question, 'where do all the stolen goods go?' this was then further broken down into six key themes relating to the stolen goods trade:

1. What are the primary mechanisms through which stolen goods are distributed and resold in the UK, and how have these evolved with the rise of digital platforms?
2. How do offenders identify, liaise with, and negotiate with fences?
3. What operations and tactics are currently being used by law enforcement and regulatory bodies to disrupt illicit markets?
4. How effective are current law enforcement and regulatory strategies in disrupting stolen goods markets, particularly those operating via online platforms?
5. What role do perceptions of legitimacy, normalisation, and moral economy play in community participation in stolen goods markets, and are there ways to challenge this through public campaigns?
6. What innovative interventions - e.g. community-based, technological, or regulatory/policy reform - could help to disrupt the supply and demand dynamics of stolen goods markets?

Methodological Approach

The research adopted a mixed qualitative approach to explore the evolving nature of illicit stolen goods markets in England and Wales. The project is structured around four core components: semi-structured interviews, case study analysis, scrutiny of the relevant policy and legislative landscape, and a literature review. Together, these components provide a comprehensive understanding of the contemporary landscape of how stolen goods are distributed and resold. The findings are presented with a policy lens with the aim of identifying potential realistic policy pathways to disrupt markets in the most efficient and effective way possible.

Literature Review

To provide theoretical and contextual grounding, a literature review was undertaken. While the stolen goods market plays a pivotal role in sustaining acquisitive crime, it has historically received less scholarly and policy attention than the act of theft itself. The literature was used to inform the interview tools and policy direction. Given the policy orientated focus of this report we do not present the conceptual and theoretical aspects of the literature in this report.

Semi-Structured Interviews

The primary data collection method was semi-structured interviews with a diverse range of stakeholders involved in, or impacted by, stolen goods markets. 39 interviews were conducted between January and June 2026. Participants included senior representatives from policing (including specialist units), retailers (from independents to major national chains), industry associations, property marking companies, online marketplaces, and Business Crime Reduction Partnerships.

Interviews were conducted remotely via video conference, recorded with participants' consent, and transcribed for analysis. Findings are reported thematically across all interviews rather than by participant. Direct quotations are included where they add particular clarity or emphasis (and agreed with participants). Where participants or organisations held relevant datasets or internal documents (e.g., on recovered goods or suspicious listings), these were requested, anonymised, and analysed where available. We are extremely grateful for how generous stakeholders were with their time, experience and knowledge.

In addition to stakeholders, to better understand the stolen goods markets, the relationship between thieves, intermediaries, fences and distributers, we interviewed recently active acquisitive offenders. We spoke to ten offenders; 8 of them in person and two of them online. These interviewees reported engaging in a broad spectrum of acquisitive crimes, often shifting between them depending on opportunity, need, and context. While retail crime was the most dominant theft type – and favoured for its perceived relative ease and reliable returns – the interviewees had also committed burglaries, theft from the person (e.g. bag snatches), theft from delivery vehicles (including when employed as a delivery driver), theft of cars and theft of tools. Several of the offenders had also experience of fencing and some considered themselves at times in their criminal careers to be as much as a distributor of stolen goods as a thief. Participants rarely specialise in a single offence type.[42] Instead, they demonstrate poly-criminal behaviour, moving between shoplifting, burglary, robbery, fraud and resale depending on urgency (e.g. withdrawal from drugs requiring an expedited sale), opportunity, skill/experience and access to networks. However, shop theft was typically regarded to be the most reliable and time efficient acquisitive crime type due to the ease of stealing to order.

Case Studies

To complement the primary data, the study compiled and analysed case study examples both explicit intelligence on resale markets from retailers, BCRPs, intelligence organisations and law enforcement. These included OSINT (open source intelligence) gathering of known offenders and their chosen means of disposing of stolen goods) as well as case studies of law enforcement and multi-agency interventions aimed at disrupting stolen goods markets. These provide concrete illustrations of promising or innovative practices, as well as insight into operational challenges.

[42] This counters previous research on residential burglars that has highlighted a high degree of specialism and habitual offending within crime types.

Policy and Legislative Review

A systematic review of the policy and legislative framework surrounding the handling and resale of stolen goods was additionally conducted. This included analysis of relevant UK legislation (including the Online Safety Act 2023), examination of how laws are applied in practice and where gaps exist, and consideration of international comparators such as the INFORM Consumers Act in the United States to identify best practices and potential policy transfer.

APTUS
Business Crime Research Centre

ABOUT APTUS BUSINESS CRIME RESEARCH CENTRE

Aptus Business Crime Research Centre is a leading authority on business crime, security, and community safety. Combining academic rigour with practical and actionable insight, Aptus is a trusted voice at the highest levels helping businesses, law enforcement, government agencies, and international trade bodies shape policy and drive meaningful change.

Described in The Times as ‘one of the country’s foremost criminologists’, our Director, Emmeline Taylor is Professor of Criminology with more than 20 years of experience in research across the private, public and academic sectors. Professor Taylor has worked at world-leading institutions on three continents (in England, Singapore and Australia) and is now London based. At Aptus, her and the team regularly work with the police, probation, prisons, national government and private business to develop projects to address some of the most challenging societal issues including violent crime, antisocial behaviour, retail security, burglary, and the responsible use of surveillance technologies.

Aptus is committed to producing policy-relevant outputs and engaging in activities that promote new knowledge and understanding at the forefront of complex crime-related issues.

www.aptusresearch.com

Recent Aptus Reports