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# International Summaries

A Series of Selected Translations in Law Enforcement and Criminal Justice

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From The Netherlands

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## Fencing Stolen Goods in The Netherlands

*Professional receivers of stolen goods with large operations are seldom caught; only small, well-known operators who also commit other crimes are imprisoned.*

By Guus Roell

### Introduction

While much research has been done in the United States and England on the subject of fencing, no such studies had been conducted in The Netherlands until this one, conducted by the Dutch Ministry of Justice: Center for Scholarly Research and Documentation. Prior studies in the United States and England found divergent results: in the United States, the typical dealer in stolen goods was found to be a respectable, white, middle-aged, self-employed businessman (primarily in the retail hotel industry) without previous convictions. A typical fence in England, however, was found to be an "amateur" trafficker for whom handling stolen goods was primarily a means to obtain and maintain social relations, rather than economic gain.

Because of these divergent results, this investigation of fencing in The Netherlands used data gathered from many different sources, such as court reports; conversations with fences, thieves, police officers, insurance personnel, shop-

keepers, bartenders, pawnbrokers, and auctioneers; and personal observations. The purpose of this study was to comprehensively describe fences and fencing operations in The Netherlands as a starting point for dealing with them. The investigation reviewed court cases and studied the age, sex, nationality, and social status of fences.

### Court cases reviewed

This study examined 144 court cases of receiving in The Netherlands, involving 318 fences whose operations were shut down in 1984 and 1985: 33 were from Amsterdam, 27 from Rotterdam, 32 from Utrecht, 23 from The Hague, and 14 from Haarlem. Because of an increasing crime rate and limited police power, cases involving long-standing fencing operations not specifically brought to the attention of police seldom came before the court. Police encountered those operations almost by accident because a captured thief mentioned a fence's name or, in the case of stolen checks or credit cards, someone was caught trying to cash the checks or use the card.

### Age and sex of fences

Of the 318 fences, 285 were men and 29 were women. The average age was 33—

13 years older than the average age of robbers and thieves. Of the men in the study, 25 percent had no previous record.

A great many differences existed between the male and female subjects, but especially notable were the motivational factors in these cases. The men usually turned to fencing for economic reasons, while the women usually became involved for social reasons; women fences usually had a family relationship with their suppliers. Often, however, it was a man who began the fencing operation in which a woman played a secondary role. This may explain why women accounted for only 9 percent of fences but 18 percent of robbers and thieves.

The women in the study were prosecuted for the following reasons:

- Eleven received stolen goods, such as a bicycle, video recorder, color television, cigarettes, or coffee, as a gift from a thief who was a boyfriend, ex-husband, or son.
- Five women joined boyfriends or husbands in fencing work; the majority were Turkish women who worked in family-owned coffeehouses or clothing shops.
- Seven were drug addicts who fenced to support their habits.

Summarized from "Een inventarisatie van hieling in Nederland," by Guus Roell, with permission of the Centrum van het Ministerie van Justitie, The Hague, The Netherlands 1986. 40 pp. NCJ 114608. Summary published January 1989.

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- Five were independent operators who bought mostly from their sons or sons' friends.
- Two were first-time fences.

Only the drug addicts had previous police records.

## Nationality of fences

The nationalities of the subjects were as follows (according to the court records):

- Dutch, 76 percent
- Surinamer, 8 percent
- Turkish, 8 percent
- North African, 4 percent
- European, 3 percent
- Asian, 1 percent

In general, the fencing marketplace in the Netherlands is segregated: Dutch fences buy from the Dutch, Surinamers from Surinamers, and so on. Drug addicts proved the exception, however; 50 percent of the drug addicts dealt with anyone. Less than 10 percent of the fences were drug addicts or alcoholics.

The average age of the Dutch fences was 33. About half were single with no children; 25 percent were married with children; the rest were married with no children or divorced with children. About 33 percent were unemployed; 25 percent were employed; 25 percent were self-employed, and 15 percent were students or housewives. Overall, the Dutch fences appeared to be a fairly homogeneous group.

The Surinamers' average age was under 27 years; only 4 were employed, and 23 were addicts or dealers who fenced to support their drug habits or received goods in exchange for drugs. The Surinamers were the youngest, least established and integrated, and most addicted of the ethnic groups reviewed.

None of the 26 Turkish fences, whose average age was 36, were addicts; 23 were married with children. Most were employed: 13 were self-employed and 5 worked for others. At least 8 said they fenced for money and goods to impress their families in Turkey on their annual trips home.

Moroccans, Italians, and Pakistani fences gave the same reason as the Turks for fencing: to impress family and friends back home with their material wealth.

## Social status of fences

Investigators studied the social status of the fences and divided them into the following categories: students, addicts, the unemployed, the employed, the self-employed, and illegal aliens. Since the following profile of the fences was based on actual court cases, it is merely a "snapshot" of fences prosecuted in the Netherlands in the early 1980's and not a representative sample of fencing operations. Except for the fences who receive disability and those who are self-employed, the study profile of fences differs little from that of thieves, robbers, and embezzlers. (In contrast, a study conducted in one large American city found that the self-employed fences make up 66 percent of the fencing population.)

## Students

Only 13 of the fences were under age 19: 10 boys and 3 girls, all Dutch nationals. The girls had been prosecuted for receiving stolen goods as gifts from friends; only one had a police record. Non-Dutch students were less visible to the police because they fenced primarily within their ethnic peer groups. Of this group, half had police records for offenses other than fencing.

## Addicts

Of the 43 addicts in the group, 39 used drugs and 4 used alcohol. More than 50 percent of all addicts were Surinamers; 40 percent were Dutch and 10 percent were Moroccan. Seven of the addicts were women; 90 percent already had a police record. Most of the addict-fences were also drug dealers who accepted goods instead of cash for drug debts. All addicts dealt with other addicts, but only 28 percent of nonaddicts dealt with addicts. Nonaddicts believed that addicts would easily confess and implicate others to support their habits. In addition to stolen goods, stolen checks, ID cards, and

credit cards were a major source of income for addict-fences.

## The unemployed

The unemployed fences were on welfare or disability. The average age for the 26 men (3 non-Dutch) on disability was 46. For the 78 fences on welfare (13 non-Dutch), the average age was 26. Of the total unemployed, 75 percent were married and 50 percent had no previous convictions. In contrast, only 25 percent of those on welfare were married, and 50 percent had no previous record. Among those receiving disability, 40 percent said they fenced to keep busy and to maintain social contacts. Those on welfare fenced for economic gain and had more contact with the law than those on disability.

## The employed

Of the 68 fences who were employed, 3 were women and 8 were non-Dutch. More than 50 percent were married and already had police records consisting mainly of crimes other than fencing. Some were employed in construction, retail, hotel, wholesale, automotive, trucking, and the military; also in this group were a barber, a social worker, a graphic artist, and a civil servant. Although sometimes the fence's employment was a source for goods, most of the fences separated work and fencing. Nearly 66 percent were only occasional fences, usually buying for personal use.

## The self-employed

Of the 82 self-employed fences, 65 percent were married. Like the other employed, more than 50 percent had a previous police record. But unlike the employed, the self-employed had been more often prosecuted for white-collar types of crimes, such as fencing, forgery, and fraud. Violence, however, characterized some of these cases. In many cases the subject's business was in trouble, and fencing was a way to keep it viable.

Twenty-three fences had their own retail stores. Most of the Dutch owners bought only goods that fit in with their regular merchandise, and they seldom bought

from addicts. Occasionally, they bought other types of goods for personal use or purchased checks or credit cards as well. Two Turkish owners bought goods from addicts.

More than 50 percent of the 22 fences in the hospitality business were Turks, who later transported the goods (purchased mostly from addicts) to family and friends in Turkey. Among the Dutch fences, three bought goods only for personal use in exchange for clearing customers' bar bills. Three other Dutch fences specialized in checks and credit cards obtained through postal employees; one specialized in clothing; and two bought anything. More than 50 percent in this group had previous police records involving all types of crimes.

Thirteen of the self-employed group had a sort of wholesale business: eight specialized in auto parts; three bought furnishings; and two specialized in gold and silver. Most of their goods were sold at the market in Utrecht, where the law required a seller to have a police permit and to keep meticulous records of all transactions. Yet none of the 13 had a permit. Two had held permits in the past but did not renew them because no one had ever asked to see them. Approximately 50 percent of this group had previous records, mostly for fencing and theft.

Six self-employed fences worked in the construction trade. Most purchased for resale, but one bought a sailboat for personal use.

Four businessmen were in this group: a broker who fenced a large oil shipment; a real estate agent who fenced personal property across the border; a salesman who purchased a camera for personal use; and a government bureaucrat who purchased a stolen car. The first two were supported by well-organized, international fencing organizations; only the last two had previous police records.

Three transportation workers were also among the self-employed fences: a taxi driver who accepted a leather jacket as a fare from an addict; another dealing in stolen checks; and the owner of a trucking firm who lent a truck to a fence. Others in this group were a farmer with a police record for fencing who bought for

personal use; an artist, once arrested for vandalism, who also bought for personal use; a photographer with no police record, arrested for forgery; and a draftsman, also a first-time offender, who bought for personal use.

Five illegal aliens were in the study sample: two Moroccans, one Algerian, one Austrian, and one Italian. All five were full-time criminals in international fencing organizations dealing in illicit cars, goods, or documentation.

### **Interviews with incarcerated fences**

Interviews with incarcerated fences provided additional background information on serious stolen-goods operations because only convictions for such operations carried a jail term. Investigators selected 35 men and one woman (who declined to participate) for the interviews from the jails of Amsterdam, Rotterdam, The Hague, Utrecht, and Haarlem. The average age of the men interviewed was 34.

Most of those interviewed expressed the belief that everyone fenced, that it was not fair that they were in prison while others were free, that fencing was easy work, and that they were in prison only because someone informed the authorities about them. The check and credit card fences seemed to accept that they would one day be caught, but thought the penalty was so light and the gain so great that it was worth it. A few were taking computer correspondence courses without the prison officials' knowledge to prepare for the day when the risk of fencing might outweigh the gain.

Three non-Dutch fences had no previous police record in The Netherlands. None of the fences exhibited any remorse for his deed or feelings that he had done anything wrong. A few expressed anger that they had been so stupid as to have been caught by the police. Some accepted that, as successful fences, they would have sooner or later been caught.

All the fences considered handling checks and credit cards the first step in a fencing career since this area requires fewer contacts and no personal expenditures. Moreover, the prison sentences are

lighter. These operations are also the easiest to organize and expand upon with friends and insider assistance. Coffee, alcohol, and cigarettes were the next most popular contraband items because they keep their value in the marketplace, demand is great, and risk is small.

All seemed to agree that buying from addicts was risky because the prices are usually lower.

### **Observations of fencing operations**

Investigator's observations of fencing operations in Amsterdam revealed that many stolen goods are for sale. Stolen clothing is most valued if it still has the store price tag on it. Operations differ: some fences display their goods as a jewelry store would; others simply use a convenient tabletop. Bigger items can be discussed surreptitiously in passing conversation or on the classified advertising programs of pirate radio stations. Fencing locations, such as the Waterloplein in Amsterdam, although unofficial, seem to be designated. These locations are often only frequented by beginning fences, addicts, and tourists. More professional fences depend on friends, colleagues, clubs, workplaces, and even former prisoners.

Many types of workers in all kinds of professions are especially susceptible to fencing: retail shop owners; employees in bars, cafes, clubs, hotels; social workers in drug centers; guards in prisons; auto mechanics and gasoline attendants; warehouse personnel in auction houses; and purchasing personnel. Discussions with such people revealed that goods were often stolen, but more often than not the fences legitimately acquired the goods. The fences acted as if this were always the case, otherwise they might lose all their customers.

### **Interviews with the police**

Researchers interviewed State and local police in large cities, such as Amsterdam and Rotterdam. Although many local police have units dealing solely with fencing, several have been eliminated as cost-cutting measures. Every city and police department has different ways of dealing with fencing.

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Almost all police officers agreed that professional fences with large operations are seldom caught; only small, well-known operators who also commit other crimes are imprisoned. The police describe the professional fences as people without police records who are neither thieves nor former addicts but who work at fencing beyond their retirement years without being caught. Their customers do not circulate among the criminal element where the police most often focus their efforts. Yet even the special police forces in the larger cities who often concentrate on the largest fencing operations are soon disbanded because the officers often find that they must spend more time defending themselves than chasing fences.

When asked who engages in fencing, police officers responded that when fencing was more strictly controlled, it was easier to discern who the fences were; today, because of increased drugs and violence, it's hard to tell who they are. Police officers blamed different groups for fencing in The Netherlands. For instance, anyone buying goods without checking papers or permits is contributing to the fencing market. Also at fault, the police contended, are school children who steal and pass the goods to underlings to dispose of. Unless one is caught and thus the whole group is caught, these youths become fences in the future. Most police officers prefer to pursue fences, who are less numerous than robbers, hoping to discourage fencing by making life miserable for the often self-assured and arrogant fences. The police identified six groups of fences:

- Foreigners who take risks not possible for the Dutch.
- "System" fences, mainly shopkeepers who buy through a system of fences.
- "At-home" fences, who are unemployed or disabled and run a small fencing business in their homes.
- The "gold caravan" that travels through the countryside, buys old silver and gold, and then recasts it for resale.
- Those who frequent fencing locations in each city where many fences are caught.
- Organizers who have addicts or unemployed persons working for them.

All the police officers agreed that not much was being done to control fencing. It has a low priority because it requires a long time to conduct investigations and complete paperwork. Moreover, the organization of the police force makes it difficult to catch other than local operators. The police lack automated information for tracing stolen goods and have too little control of those who actually purchase fenced goods.

To control fencing, police have to first find the stolen goods, then incarcerate offenders. Although automated information may help the situation, developing good relations between police and buyers may be a bigger help. In addition, police are often frustrated by the courts; because fences cost the courts more time and money to prosecute than do robbers or thieves, they usually receive the minimum sentence or are set free.

## Interviews with insurance firm personnel

Interviews with insurance firm personnel revealed that the firms are only concerned with the return of stolen goods so that claims need not be paid. Often they offer a finder's reward of 10 percent of the value of the goods or some compensation for the return of the goods. In many cases, an insurance company, having already paid the insured for the stolen goods, does not really want them returned, leaving the police no choice but to return the goods to the fence.

## Ways to control fencing

The picture of fencing emerging from this study is neither complete nor representative because the larger operators are seldom found in the courts and prisons. Therefore, the effects of amateur fences may be overestimated. The most common justification for controlling fencing is the eventual reduction in thefts and robberies; most of the stolen goods, however, are not fenced but kept for personal use. Furthermore, even if the authorities could round up most of the fences and reform them, it seems more likely that those not caught would fill the gap in the stolen goods market and lower the prices of the goods, rather than that the thefts and robberies would decline.

An ample supply of stolen goods encourages fencing operations, rather than vice versa, so it is doubtful that controlling fencing will reduce thefts or robberies. Although this indicates police could use fences to find stolen goods, this is not current practice. Once a robber is caught, the case is usually closed.

Fencing operations have no visible casualties and therefore do not cause the public outcry that would yield increased efforts by police. Society must choose which crimes police will concentrate on. If, however, robbers and thieves would reveal more fences' names in arrangements like plea bargains, then controlling fencing could play an important role in crime reduction.

Police officers want to catch fences more than they do thieves and robbers and feel that existing laws against fencing are sufficient. But the low priority given police efforts to stop fences, combined with economic, social, and political factors are a hindrance. Everyone wants thefts and robberies stopped, the study found, but people do not want to have to prove possession before they can sell or purchase goods—even to achieve this goal.

Computerized control of information on stolen goods is a first step in controlling fencing. But this must be preceded by the marking and police registration of goods with, for example, serial numbers based on mailing addresses or house numbers. Another possibility is the use of a television classified ads program. A tie-in between such a program and the police stolen goods record might help to recover the goods and perhaps curtail fencing operations.

*The Assistant Attorney General, Office of Justice Programs, coordinates the activities of the following program Offices and Bureaus: National Institute of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, Bureau of Justice Assistance, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, and Office for Victims of Crime.*