

Residential Burglars and Their Utilization of Secondhand Stores and Pawn Shops

Christian Peterson, Lauren Lyon Brown, Greg Stewart, Kris Henning | Portland State University

INTRODUCTION

Historically, pawnshops have been a primary venue for the disposal of stolen goods (Fass & Francis, 2004). Recent legislative actions requiring pawnshops to document transactions and make this data available to the police may be deterring offenders from utilizing these businesses. Similarly, new internet opportunities for reselling stolen items may also be contributing to a decrease in the use of pawnshops for illegitimate purposes.

This study assesses the degree to which known burglars are using pawnshops in Portland, Oregon. We compare the pawing history of recent burglars, to prior burglars, and other offenders with no known history of burglary. Data on the items pawned by recent burglars are also compared to the items stolen in residential burglaries in general.

METHODS

Sample

The final sample (N = 223) used in the present study was derived using two distinct steps. First, the Portland Police Bureau (PPB) provided data on all known residential burglars in Portland from 1999 through 2008. The entire local criminal history was coded for each of the offenders in this initial pool. This allowed us to differentiate recent burglars, those with a residential burglary in the first quarter of 2008 or within the prior year, from prior burglars, those with a burglary prior to 2007 but no burglaries more recent than 2007. Using these initial sampling frames we randomly selected 73 recent burglars and 75 prior burglars.

A second step involved the identification of non-burglars. PPB provided a list of all suspects arrested in the first quarter of 2008. We were granted access to the entire local criminal history of these suspects. This allowed us to identify a subset of cases where the person was arrested for the first time in Portland and the arrest was not related to a property offense. From this sampling frame we randomly selected 75 non-burglars.

Procedure

PPB also provided the researchers with access to RAPID NW, a database system used to track activities at local pawn shops and second hand stores. The names and identifying information of the 223 subjects were entered into RAPID NW to determine whether they had pawned any items over the past 5 years. If a transaction record was found, researchers categorized the types of items pawned/sold by the subject. Each subject's frequency of pawning was also recorded resulting in the following groups:

- non-pawners (no pawn transactions)
- low pawners (1 to 5 transactions)
- medium pawners (6 to 15 transactions)
- heavy pawners (16+ transactions)

Figure 1. Pawn Shop Use by Offender Types

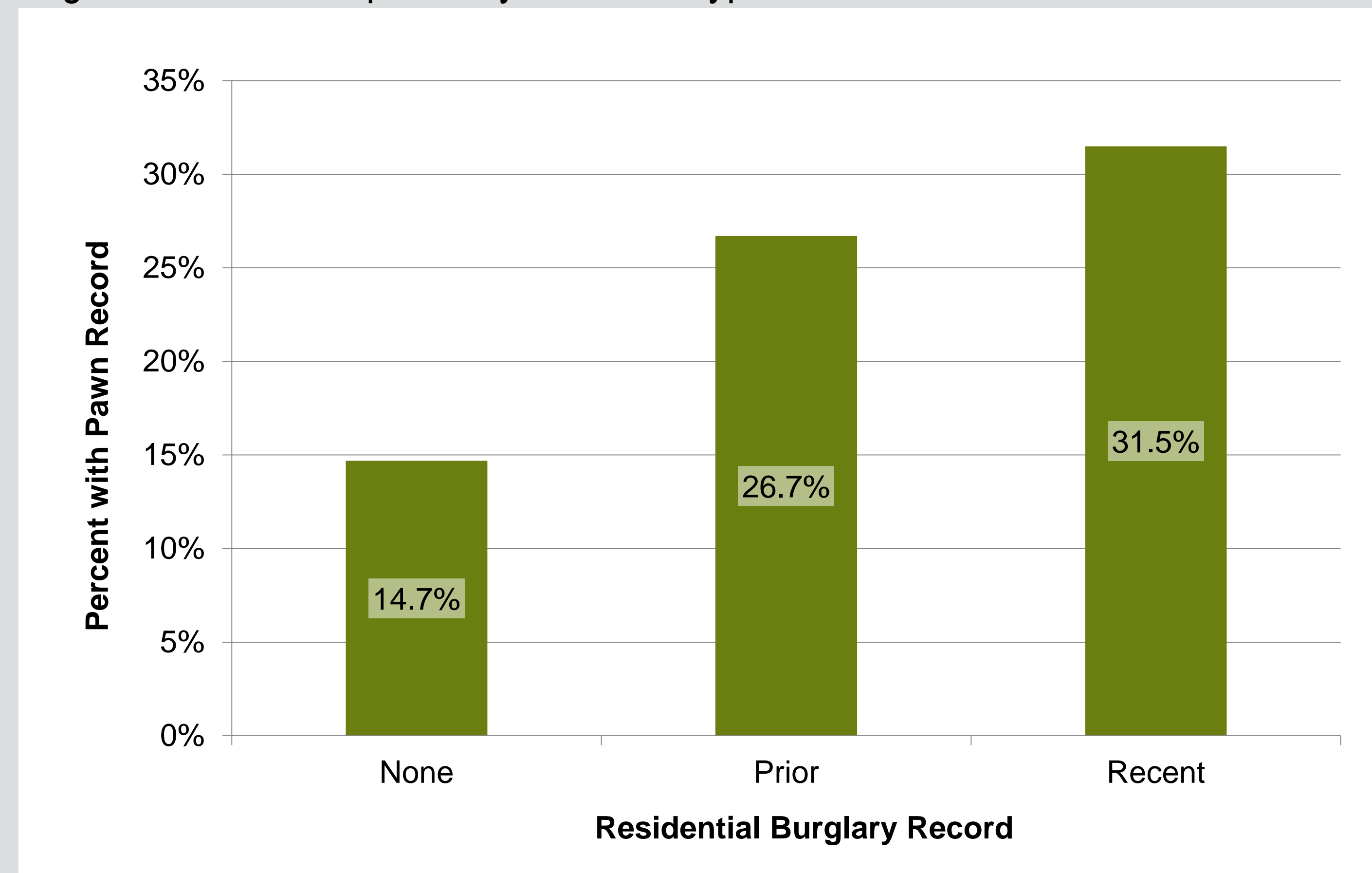


Figure 2. Frequency of Pawn Shop Use by Offender Type

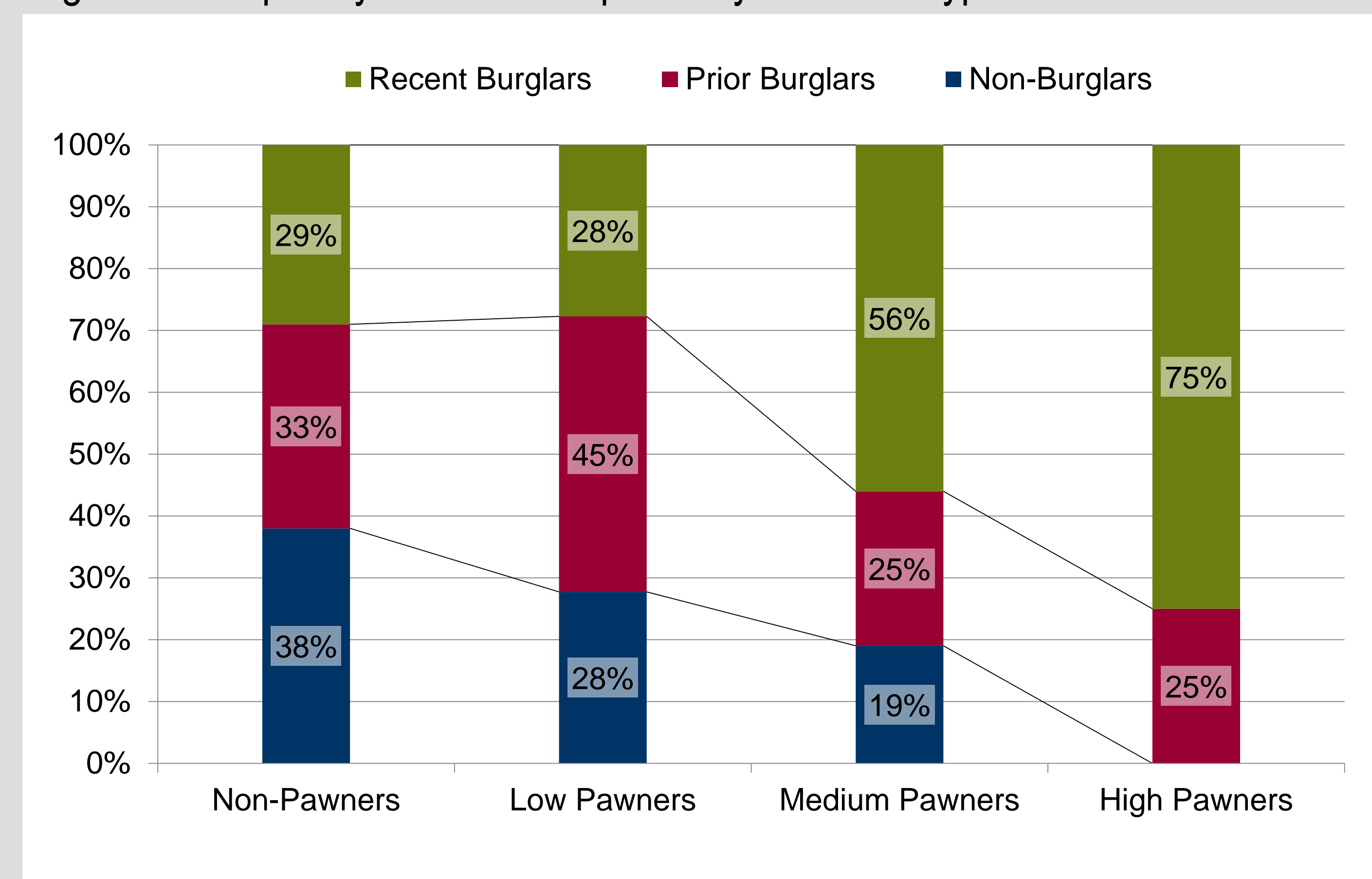
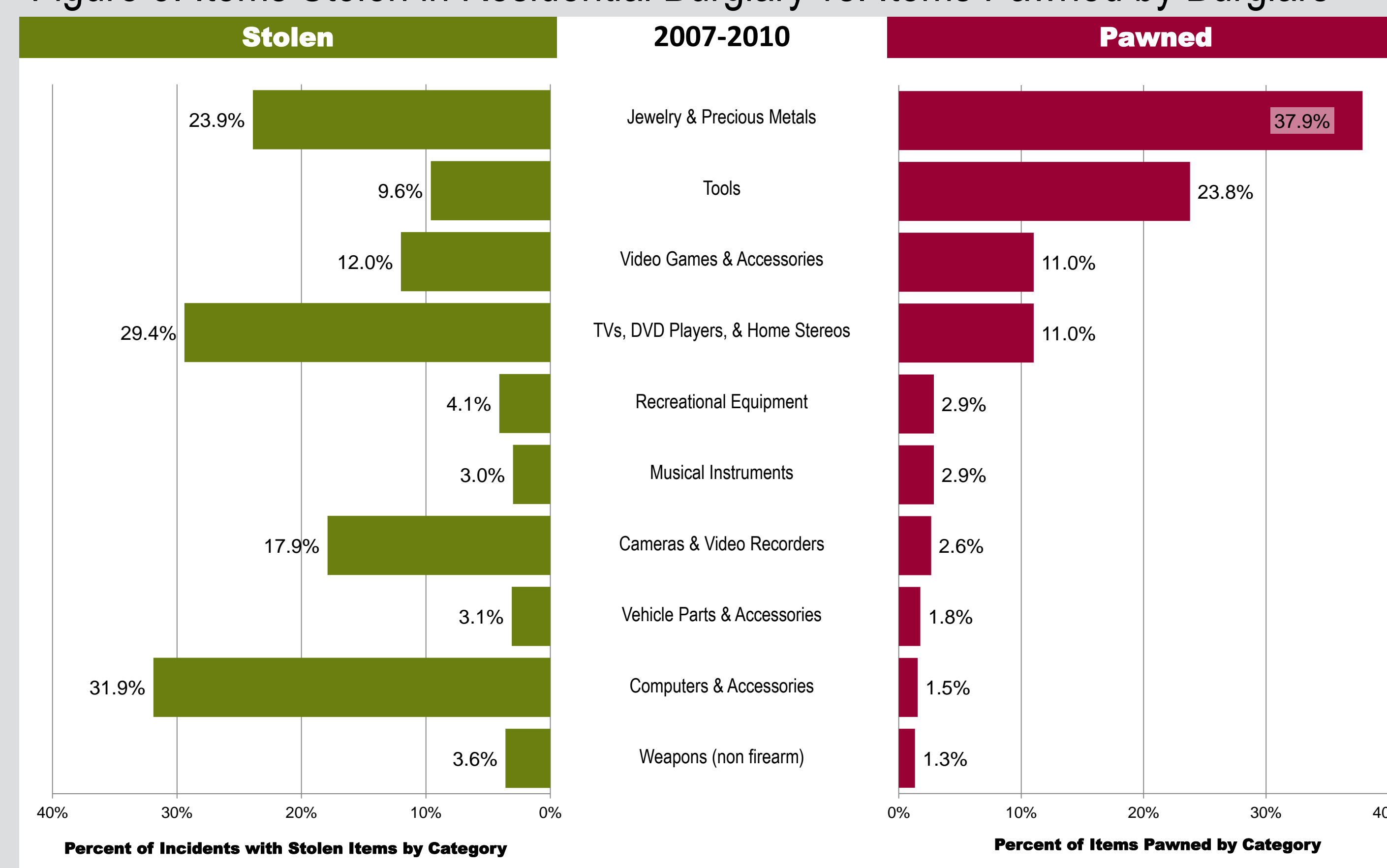


Figure 3. Items Stolen in Residential Burglary vs. Items Pawned by Burglars



RESULTS

Only 54 of the 223 individuals sampled (24.2%) had recorded transactions in the RAPID NW pawn shop database. As shown in figure 1, recent burglars were more than twice as likely to have used a pawn shop or second hand store as compared to non-burglars ($\chi^2(2, N = 223) = 6.087, p < 0.05$). Prior burglars fell between these two groups.

The subjects were also grouped based on the frequency of their pawn shop transactions. 3.6% had 16 or more transactions, 7.2% had 6 to 15, 13% had 1 to 5, and 76.2% had no recorded transactions. As shown in figure 2, recent burglars were disproportionately represented in the two highest frequency transaction groups.

Figure 3 provides data on the types of items pawned/sold by known burglars as compared to the items reported stolen in local residential burglaries. Jewelry was the most frequently recorded pawned item by recent/prior burglars. Jewelry was also involved in residential burglary incidents in Portland, Oregon 23.9% of the time. The ten categories of items most frequently pawned by recent/prior burglars include five categories with over 10% of residential burglary incidents involving theft from those categories.

CONCLUSION

Prior research found that second-hand stores and pawn shops were often used to distribute stolen goods. In response, many states developed legislation requiring these businesses to record all transactions and make these data available to police. In theory at least, this oversight should deter property offenders from using these businesses. The current study suggests that this may not be the case for everyone.

Recent burglars in the current study were twice as likely to have pawned/sold items as compared to first-time offenders charged with something other than a property crime. Recent burglars were also found to be disproportionately represented among the group of offenders with six or more pawn transactions. Finally, the items pawned/sold by known burglars closely matched the most common items stolen in residential burglaries, particularly with regard to jewelry and precious metals, which may be more difficult to trace using serial numbers.

An important limitation of the current study is that we cannot be certain that burglars were pawning stolen items as opposed to making legitimate sales. Nevertheless, the findings at least raise concern that some property offenders continue to frequent pawn shops and second-hand stores for illegitimate purposes. Further research will be needed to understand why this may be the case, and why pawn shop registries are not deterring these individuals.

References

Fass, S. M., & Francis, J. (2004). Where have all the hot goods gone? The role of pawnshops. *The Journal of Research in Crime & Delinquency*, 41(2), 156-179.