

# Stolen Property

**California Penal Code Section 496(a) PC: Receiving Stolen Property.**

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# CA PC § 496 - Rcvng Stolen Property

## California Code, Penal Code - PEN § 496

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(a) Every person who buys or receives any property that has been stolen or that has been obtained in any manner constituting theft or extortion, knowing the property to be so stolen or obtained, or who conceals, sells, withholds, or aids in concealing, selling, or withholding any property from the owner, knowing the property to be so stolen or obtained, shall be punished by imprisonment in a county jail for not more than one year, or imprisonment pursuant to [subdivision \(h\) of Section 1170](#). However, if the value of the property does not exceed nine hundred fifty dollars (\$950), the offense shall be a misdemeanor, punishable only by imprisonment in a county jail not exceeding one year, if such person has no prior convictions for an offense specified in clause (iv) of [subparagraph \(C\) of paragraph \(2\) of subdivision \(e\) of Section 667](#) or for an offense requiring registration pursuant to [subdivision \(c\) of Section 290](#).

**A principal in the actual theft of the property may be convicted pursuant to this section. However, no person may be convicted both pursuant to this section and of the theft of the same property.**

**(b) Every swap meet vendor, as defined in [Section 21661 of the Business and Professions Code](#), and every person whose principal business is dealing in, or collecting, merchandise or personal property, and every agent, employee, or representative of that person, who buys or receives any property of a value in excess of nine hundred fifty dollars (\$950) that has been stolen or obtained in any manner constituting theft or extortion, under circumstances that should cause the person, agent, employee, or representative to make reasonable inquiry to ascertain that the person from whom the property was bought or received had the legal right to sell or deliver it, without making a reasonable inquiry, shall be punished by imprisonment in a county jail for not more than one year, or imprisonment pursuant to [subdivision \(h\) of Section 1170](#).**

**Every swap meet vendor, as defined in [Section 21661 of the Business and Professions Code](#), and every person whose principal business is dealing in, or collecting, merchandise or personal property, and every agent, employee, or representative of that person, who buys or receives any property of a value of nine hundred fifty dollars (\$950) or less that has been stolen or obtained in any manner constituting theft or extortion, under circumstances that should cause the person, agent, employee, or representative to make reasonable inquiry to ascertain that the person from whom the property was bought or received had the legal right to sell or deliver it, without making a reasonable inquiry, shall be guilty of a misdemeanor.**

**(c) Any person who has been injured by a violation of subdivision (a) or (b) may bring an action for three times the amount of actual damages, if any, sustained by the plaintiff, costs of suit, and reasonable attorney's fees.**

**(d) Notwithstanding [Section 664](#), any attempt to commit any act prohibited by this section, except an offense specified in the accusatory pleading as a misdemeanor, is punishable by imprisonment in a county jail for not more than one year, or by imprisonment pursuant to [subdivision \(h\) of Section 1170](#).**

**source: <https://codes.findlaw.com/ca/penal-code/pen-sect-496/>**

# Receiving Stolen Property

## California Penal Code Section 496(a) PC: Receiving Stolen Property

### Definition and Elements of the Crime

While many [theft offenses](#) make it illegal to unlawfully take or steal property from someone else, the person who [receives stolen property](#) can also be charged with a crime under the law. [Receiving stolen property](#) is a serious criminal offense under [California Penal Code Section 496\(a\) PC](#) that can result in a felony conviction.

To prove that the defendant is guilty of receiving stolen property, a prosecutor must be able to establish the following elements:

1. The defendant received, sold or otherwise disposed of the property or withheld property that has been stolen from another
2. The defendant knew at the time of receiving, selling or otherwise disposing of the property or withholding the property that it was stolen property

The Penal Code establishes individual crimes for specific persons buying or receiving certain types of stolen property, including the following:

2. ~~Dealing in stolen goods and property taken from a victim of a crime~~ **Dealing in stolen goods and property taken from a victim of a crime** ~~California Penal Code Section 496(a) PC~~ **California Penal Code Section 496(b) PC**

A defendant who receives more than one item of stolen property on a single occasion commits only one offense of receiving stolen property. In addition, a person may not be convicted of stealing and receiving the same property. That means a person who steals a car and is caught with it can be prosecuted for [grand theft auto](#) under [California Penal Code Section 487\(d\)\(1\) PC](#) or [receiving stolen property](#) under [California Penal Code Section 496\(a\) PC](#), but not both.

## Examples

A man finds a cell phone for sale over the Internet and arranges a meeting with the seller. The phone is offered at a reasonable price and the seller claims it belongs to him and he just got a new phone so he wanted to get rid of his old phone. The man buys the phone from the seller. It is later determined that the cell phone was actually stolen from the manufacturer. The buyer probably would not be guilty of receiving stolen property, as he did not know the phone was stolen nor were there circumstances that would lead a reasonable person to believe the property was stolen. However, if the phone was sold for far less than its value, if serial numbers were scratched off, or there were other circumstances that seemed suspicious, the buyer could be criminally liable for receiving stolen property even if he was not specifically informed that the property was stolen.

## Defenses to Receiving Stolen Property

**As described above, a person who accidentally or unknowingly receives stolen property would not be criminally liable under statute. In these circumstances, the defendant would have a valid [accident](#) defense if charged with this offense.**

## **Penalties**

**Receiving stolen property is a "wobbler" offense that can be charged as either a felony or a misdemeanor, depending on the factual circumstances of the case and the defendant's criminal history. If convicted of receiving stolen property as a misdemeanor, the defendant can be sentenced to up to a year in jail and costly court fines. If convicted as a felony, the maximum sentence is three years in prison. In addition, the victim of this offense would be entitled to collect three times the amount of his or her damages, in addition to attorney fees and costs.**

# Immigration Consequences

## Matter of Alday- Dominguez, 27 I&N Dec. 48 (BIA 2017)

Receiving stolen property under section 496(a) of the California Penal Code was categorically an aggravated felony theft offense under section 101(a)(43)(G) of the INA,

On June 1, 2017, the Board of Immigration Appeals (BIA) issued a precedent decision in the *Matter of Alday-Dominguez*, 27 I&N Dec. 48 (BIA 2017) [[PDF version](#)]. The Board held that the aggravated felony receipt of stolen property codified in section 101(a)(43)(G) of the Immigration and Nationality Act (INA) does not require that the unlawfully received property have been obtained by means of common law theft or larceny.



# **Facts and Procedural History:**

## **27 I&N Dec. at 48-49**

**The respondent, a native and citizen of Mexico, was a lawful permanent resident (LPR) of the United States. On March 11, 2011, the respondent was convicted of receiving stolen property in violation of section 496(a) of the California Penal Code. As a result of the conviction, the respondent was sentenced to serve 16 months in prison.**

**In footnote 1, the BIA quoted the pertinent part of section 496(a) of the California Penal Code at all relevant times in the case:**

**“ Every person who buys or receives any property that has been stolen or that has been obtained in any manner construing theft or extortion, knowing the property to be so stolen or obtained, or who conceals, sells, withholds, or aids in concealing, selling, or withholding any property from the owner, knowing the property to be so stolen or obtained, shall be punished by imprisonment...**

**Based on the conviction, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) issued a notice to appear to the respondent, charging him as removable based on having been convicted of an aggravated felony theft offense under section 101(a)(43)(G) of the INA.**

**In proceedings, the Immigration Judge concluded that the DHS failed to demonstrate that the respondent was removable as charged and thus**

terminated removal proceedings. The Immigration Judge reasoned that a conviction under section 496(a) of the California Penal Code is not categorically a conviction for an aggravated felony theft offense. To this effect, the Immigration Judge cited to controlling precedent from the United States Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit in *Lopez-Valencia v. Lynch*, 798 F.3d 863 (9th Cir. 2015) [[PDF version](#)].

## **Board's Analysis and Decision**

### **27 I&N Dec. at 49-51**

The Board would review *de novo* whether receiving stolen property under section 496(a) of the California Penal Code was categorically an aggravated felony theft offense under section 101(a)(43)(G) of the INA, that is, review the case from the beginning. In employing the “categorical approach,” the question involved not the respondent’s specific conduct, but rather whether the minimum conduct that would violate section 496(a) would be an aggravated felony under section 101(a)(43)(G) of the INA.

For reasons that we will examine, the BIA would conclude that a conviction under section 496(a) of the California Penal Code was categorically an aggravated felony theft offense as defined in section 101(a)(43)(G) of the INA.

The Board explained that section 101(a)(43)(G) of the INA defines aggravated felony theft as “a theft offense (including receipt of stolen property) or burglary offense for which the term of imprisonment is [at] least one year.” The Board explained in footnote 2 that the Supreme Court of the United States, the Ninth Circuit, and the Board itself have each defined

**“theft” as “the taking of property or an exercise of control over property without consent with the criminal intent to deprive the owner of rights and benefits of ownership, even if such deprivation is less than permanent.”**

**In the *Matter of Cardiel*, 25 I&N Dec. 12, 17 (BIA 2009) [[PDF version](#)], the Board held that a conviction for receipt of stolen property under the statute of conviction in the instant case — section 496(a) of the California Penal Code — was categorically a conviction for aggravated felony theft under section 101(a)(43)(G) of the INA, provided that such conviction was accompanied by a prison sentence of at least one year. The Board noted that the Ninth Circuit had reached the same conclusion that same year in *Verdugo-Gonzalez v. Holder*, 581 F.3d 1059, 1061-62 (9th Cir. 2009) [[PDF version](#)].**

**The Board explained that in *Matter of Cardiel*, 25 I&N Dec. at 14, it held that the term “receipt of stolen property” is not a subset of “theft,” as the term is used in section 101(a)(43)(G) of the INA, “because each can be considered a distinct and separate offense.”**

**In the instant case, the respondent argued that “receipt of stolen property” in section 101(a)(43)(G) only encompasses offenses where the stolen property is obtained through theft. However, the Board found this argument unpersuasive. The Board noted that “[t]he parenthetical does not say that it only includes ‘receipt of stolen property obtained by theft’ or some comparable formulation.”**

**Furthermore, the Board cited to the Supreme Court decision in *United States v. Turley*, 352 U.S. 407, 415-17 (1957) [[PDF version](#)]. The Board described the Supreme Court decision in *Turley* as having held that the term “stolen does not have a fixed meaning that only refers to common law offenses such as theft and larceny. Rather, the Board noted that the Supreme Court held that the term “stolen should, instead, be interpreted broadly as including**

**offenses of embezzlement, false pretenses, and any other felonious takings.” The Board noted that the issue arose in a “different, albeit relevant, context...”**

**Relying on *Turley*, the Board held that it was not necessary for it to decide whether the respondent’s violation of section 496(a) of the California Penal Code is a generic “theft” offense as the Board has defined the term. This is because, as the Board reiterated, “the receipt of stolen property parenthetical [in section 101(a)(43)(G)] is not limited to receipt offenses in which the property was obtained by means of theft.**

**In footnote 4, the Board explained why the Immigration Judge was incorrect when it found that the Ninth Circuit had implicitly overruled *Verdugo-Gonzalez* in *Lopez-Valencia*. The Board noted that *Lopez-Valencia* addressed an entirely different statute — section 484 of the California Penal Code — than the statute at issue in *Matter of Alday-Dominguez*. In *Lopez-Valencia*, the Ninth Circuit held that section 484 was categorically overbroad relative to the generic definition of aggravated felony theft because it covered theft of labor, false credit reporting, and false pretenses. The Board in the instant case explained that this ruling has no bearing on the issue in the instant case. Furthermore, the Ninth Circuit did not once mention *Verdugo-Gonzalez* in the *Lopez-Valencia* decision. In any event,, in 2016, the Ninth Circuit explicitly reaffirmed *Verdugo-Gonzalez* in a non-precedent decision titled *Prieto-Hernandez v. Lynch*, 653 F.App’x 547, 549 (9th Cir. 2016) [[PDF version](#)].**

## **Ninth Circuit Decision**

**For the foregoing reasons, the Ninth Circuit concluded that the respondent’s conviction in violation of section 496(a) of the California Penal Code for**

receipt of stolen property was categorically an aggravated felony theft offense under section 101(a)(43)(G) of the INA. The Board held that “the Immigration Judge’s reliance on *Lopez-Valencia* was misplaced.” The Board sustained the DHS’s appeal, reinstated removal proceedings, and remanded the record for consideration of any relief from removal for which the respondent may be eligible.

# Conclusion

In the *Matter of Alday-Dominguez*, the Board made clear that a conviction for “receipt of stolen property” need not require proof that the property have been originally obtained through “theft” in order for the conviction to fall under section 101(a)(43)(G) of the INA for aggravated felony theft.

Considering the fact that the Board had previously found that the very same California statute categorically fell under section 101(a)(43)(G) in the *Matter of Cardiel*, this decision is unlikely to cause any significant changes in how immigration courts read the provision.