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Dog Theft: What can we infer from the evidence so far?

Authors: Dr Helen Selby-Fell (The Open University) & Dr Daniel Allen (Keele University).

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Previous research.

Research on the topic of ‘dog theft’ is scarce. However, a review conducted in 2018 discussed the literature relating to the human-canine bond, the impact of the loss of companion dogs on humans, and the likely impact of dog theft on their owners (Harris, 2018). The review went on to discuss the problems associated with treating companion animals as ‘property’ in law (dogs are classed as ‘property’ in the Sentencing Council Guidelines for Theft in England & Wales) (Sentencing Council, 2016). The review supported the Pet Theft Reform campaign¹, making a case for tougher sentencing legislation for dog theft, arguing that “the law trivializes the emotional harm that can be caused by the theft of a companion animal” (Harris, 2018, p. 6).

In 2019 Dr Daniel Allen, Adam Peacock (both Keele University) and Jamie Arathoon (University of Glasgow) published a paper exploring temporal and geographical trends in dog theft offences that had taken place between 2015-2017 (Allen et al., 2019). The research found that year on year, there had been increases in police recorded dog theft offences, coupled with a slight decrease in charges (fluctuating between 3.97% in 2015 to 2.11% in 2017), and that there were geographical variances in the volume of recorded offences. The paper also highlighted some of the inconsistencies with dog theft data sources and argued that dog theft (or pet theft more generally) should be classified as a specific crime type. The research was used to inform the Pet Theft Reform campaign, arguing for a standardised approach to the recording of theft of a dog by all forces across England and Wales, and classifying dog theft (or pet theft more generally) as a crime in itself under the Sentencing Guidelines (associated with the Theft Act 1968). Dr Allen subsequently examined police crime data for 2018 and 2019 and found that similar patterns had continued to emerge, however incomplete and inconsistent data sets limited the analysis (Allen, 2020).

Dr Daniel Allen and Dr Helen Selby-Fell (The Open University) began working together in late 2020 and have formulated plans for collaborative research to explore various facets of dog theft. The researchers are currently examining the extent and nature of dog theft in the UK (building upon the earlier work of Dr Allen). In addition, they are in the process of analysing qualitative data (interviews with victims of dog theft) to explore ‘victim impact’ (Allen, et.al., In Preparation). Their research will then be extended, with a focus on; identifying prevention opportunities (with reference to the existing crime reduction ‘evidence base’), better understanding the profile and behaviours of offenders (for example possible links to organised crime), and developing their work on ‘victim impact’. Professor Ken Pease (University College London) has also recently joined the research team, having held a long-standing interest in the topic. The research will be designed and conducted in collaboration with UK police forces, animal charities, and other related organisations with relevant expertise or interest. Ultimately, it is envisaged that the research will help to build the evidence base and inform the development of the policing (and wider) response to dog theft in the UK.

¹ Pet Theft Reform is the evidence-based campaign to make pet theft crime a specific offence with access to appropriate custodial sentences – through changes to the Sentencing Guidelines associated with the Theft Act 1968. The campaign was created by Dr Daniel Allen in collaboration with the Stolen and Missing Pets Alliance (Sampa) in 2018. Sampa have been lobbying to make pet theft a specific offence since 2014.

Authors: Dr Helen Selby-Fell (helen.selby-fell@open.ac.uk) & Dr Daniel Allen (d.allen@keele.ac.uk).

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The Covid-19 pandemic.

The Covid-19 pandemic has had wide-ranging implications for policing and there is evidence that crime types have changed rapidly and dramatically in the pandemic (Farrell, 2020). The mobility restrictions related to lockdowns and social distancing have had a significant effect on crime opportunities. Some crime types (such as shoplifting and burglary) have declined, while others including domestic violence and online crimes (such as fraud and online child sexual abuse) have increased (Farrell, 2020). In addition, some products have become scarce, resulting in their monetary value increasing, making their theft (or robbery) more attractive (Farrell & Birks, 2020).

It has been widely reported that ‘demand’ for dogs increased during the lockdown periods of 2020, as individuals and families sought companionship from dogs and/or thought that they had the time to get one (Battersea, 2020). Pet classified websites, dog breeders and rescues centres reported significant increases in demand for dogs during 2020 (e.g. Pets4Homes, 2020; Kennel Club, 2020; Dogs Trust, 2020a; Dogs Trust, 2020b). Linked closely to this, there is evidence that the monetary value of dogs increased significantly during 2020 (in comparison to previous years), with some reports suggesting that the value of some breeds had almost tripled (e.g. The Economist, 2020). These developments have recently been widely reported, and the links to ‘dog theft’ have been made. In addition, dog theft has received increasing attention over the last 12 months due to the progress made by the Pet Theft Reform campaign. The increased awareness is arguably very positive; it has served to provide victims with a platform to raise awareness of their cases, and has resulted in a number of police forces and OPCCs² starting to establish prevention campaigns and developing their policing strategies to include dog related criminality (e.g. OPCC Gloucestershire, 2021).

The extent and nature of dog theft.

However, the increased attention, has also resulted in some potentially misleading and/or unsupported figures being reported regarding the extent and nature of dog theft. For example, it has been widely reported that there has been a 250% increase in police recorded dog theft (e.g. Sky News, 2020; The Daily Mirror, 2021; Euronews, 2020; BBC, 2021). However, it appears that this figure was actually taken from only one police force area (with small annual volumes of offences) and was a comparison of two seven-month periods (Jan- July 2019, against the same period in 2020). In fact, the full extent and nature of dog theft is not yet clear, and there is limited research exploring this. Dr Allen and Dr Selby-Fell, in the early stages of their research, argue that there is a need to build the evidence base regarding the extent and nature of dog theft, utilising a range of different sources. The researchers also argue that, whilst their early research into the extent of dog theft suggests that it is a relatively ‘low volume’ offence -in comparison with many other ‘types’ of crime- it should be regarded as a ‘high harm’ crime in terms of victim impact. Their early analysis of qualitative interviews with victims of dog theft strongly suggests that victims experience significant negative emotional reactions, reflecting what many victims report is a traumatic experience. This supports previous research that has reported victims of dog theft experiencing feelings of loss, grief or mourning, with many victims suffering from severe psychological or physiological effects after their dog was stolen (Dogs Trust, 2018; Harris, 2018). There are of course, also consequences for the stolen dogs, and little is known about what happens to them (however recovered cases suggest that

² Office of the Police & Crime Commissioner (OPCC).

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some are used for breeding, whilst others are sold on) – this is another area which requires further investigation.

Dr Allen and Dr Selby-Fell have recently analysed police recorded crime data (collected via FOI³) for 2020. It is important to note that data was missing for 9 of the 43 forces in England & Wales (as some forces reject the FOI request for various reasons or have not yet provided the data). However, for the 33 forces where **both** 2019 and 2020 data was available, there was a total of 1504 offences of ‘dog theft’ recorded by the police in 2020, which compares to 1452 in 2019 (for the same 33 forces) equating to a 3.5 % increase year on year. When compared to the 3-year average for the same 33 forces, the 2020 data reflects a 5 % increase. DogLost, the volunteer-run service founded in 2003, has become the UK’s largest lost and found dog community. They recently reported a 170% increase in stolen dogs (with Crime Reference Numbers) registered on their website in 2020, compared to 2019 (from 172 in 2019, to 465 in 2020). This figure has been widely quoted in the media (Sky News, 2021; The Daily Mail, 2021; ITV News, 2021; The Daily Express, 2021). This large increase may be due, in part, to the increasingly pro-active approach that the organisation has adopted to working with victims and police forces (as well as the increased media coverage of the services that they offer). However, further work is needed in collaboration with DogLost to better understand this.

The 2020 police data set also suggests that there are force level variations in terms of whether police force areas have recorded increases or decreases in dog theft offences. For example, one police force area saw a large increase against their 5-year average (74% increase), whilst others saw large decreases against their five-year average (e.g. 61% decrease). The 2020 data also suggested regional variations in terms of the police force areas where multiple dogs were stolen during the offences (e.g. 4 police forces in particular had higher rates of multiple dogs stolen). DogLost have also reported that they have experienced an increase in cases of ‘mass thefts’ where multiple dogs were stolen. This is an area that needs further exploration and will help to ascertain the extent to which such offences are ‘targeted’ (and perhaps linked to organised criminality).

Dr Allen and Dr Selby-Fell have also conducted an initial analysis of the offending behaviour in police recorded dog theft crimes (to ascertain what proportion are instances where the offenders might be known to the victim, or where there might be links to organised crime for example). Similarly, the researchers have started to explore the locations at which the offences have taken place, with early analysis suggesting that in the majority of offences dogs were stolen from around the home, in particular gardens and outbuildings. This supports previous research that has analysed theft locations (e.g. Dogs Trust, 2019), and suggests that only a minority were stolen in personal robberies (for example when out walking), however, this too needs further exploration.

Limitations with data sources.

Dr Allen and Dr Selby-Fell stress the importance of treating police recorded crime data with caution, and of recognising the range of limitations associated with it (building upon the earlier work of Allen et al., 2019). In addition to the likely under-reporting of dog theft to the police in the first place, there are various limitations associated with police crime data. For example, dog theft could be captured in a range of HOCC⁴ crime types (theft other, theft from person, theft from motor vehicle, burglary dwelling, burglary other, robbery etc.) and the parameters/ search techniques that each

³ Freedom of Information (FOI) request.

⁴ Home Office Counting Rules (HOCC).

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force has used to collate their figures is not clear. This not only makes it difficult to obtain reliable 'totals', but also makes it problematic to compare forces. The researchers stress that it also important not to make binary comparisons to infer patterns and trends (i.e. simply comparing one time period with another) and point out that increases (or higher rates) in police crime data can sometimes be a reflection of improvements in crime recording practices (HMIC, 2019). Due to the current limitations of police crime data, the researchers suggest that it only provides a partial picture of the extent of the problem. The team are exploring the limitations and caveats associated with various sources of data in their research, in order to ascertain what can reliably be inferred from them.

Summary.

Dr Allen and Dr Selby-Fell emphasise the need for further research to build the evidence base on dog theft (and dog related criminality more broadly) to inform the development of the policing response. The research team are exploring various potential sources of dog theft data and emphasise the need to triangulate a range of different sources to obtain a more informed understanding of the extent and nature of it.

In order for police forces (and other organisations) to take an evidence-based approach to tackling crime problems, they must first have a clear understanding of the extent and nature of the problem (Tilley & Laycock, 2002). The fact that dog theft is not a 'crime type' hinders the ability of forces to do this, as (police) data extraction and analysis is limited by the complexities outlined earlier. The authors are keen to explore how these challenges might be overcome (and again stress the importance of triangulating sources).

In terms of tackling dog theft, it is well established that both; reducing opportunities for crime and increasing the risk of being caught, are two important mechanisms for reducing crime (e.g. Cornish & Clarke, 2017; College of Policing, n.d). The researchers intend to explore prevention opportunities in their future research, drawing upon the existing crime reduction evidence base. They also argue that further research is required to explore offending behaviour and how it can be disrupted and offenders detected. Data is not readily available for the overall detection (or 'outcome'⁵) rates for dog theft, however, 2020 FOI police data suggests that less than 1% of all recorded offences resulted in a 'charge' (and previous research has suggested charge rates of less than 5%, e.g. Allen et al., 2019; Allen, 2020).

The research team are cognisant of the current policing context; the increasing demand placed upon the police service, with both crime and non-crime incidents becoming more complex and time consuming to deal with (College of Policing, 2015; NPCC, 2016), compounded of course, by the Covid-19 pandemic. However, perhaps in response to the recent focus on the topic (and in particular the impact on victims), it seems that various police forces and OPCCs are starting to place increasing emphasis on tackling dog theft (e.g. OPCC Gloucestershire, 2021; Sussex Police Crime Commissioner, 2021; NPCC, 2021; DogWatch Alert, 2021; DogLost, 2018). The research team welcome interest from police forces, OPCCs and other policing bodies – and will be seeking opportunities to collaborate in their future research. The team are keen that their research helps to build the evidence base and ultimately, that it informs policy and practice.

⁵ Every notifiable crime recorded by the police is assigned a case outcome including those still under investigation (Home Office, 2020).

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Notes.

Dr Helen Selby-Fell is a Senior Lecturer in the Faculty of Business & Law at The Open University, working closely with the Centre for Policing Research & Learning (CPRL). Helen has a background in applied criminology and investigative psychology. Much of Helen's previous work has focused on exploring the challenges and facilitators associated with embedding an 'Evidence Based Policing' (EBP) approach in the police service, the role of crime analysts in policing and senior decision police making. Prior to moving to academia full time, Helen worked for the police service for almost fifteen years (mostly in the role of Head of Corporate Analysis for Merseyside police force, and later as Director of Commissioning & Research at the Office of the Police & Crime Commissioner for Merseyside).

Dr Daniel Allen is an animal geographer based at Keele University. With focus on policy, practice and public understandings of human-animal relations, his research informs evidence-based animal advocacy, science-policy communication, and wider decision-making. In 2018, Dr Allen created the Pet Theft Reform campaign in collaboration with the Stolen and Missing Pets Alliance (Sampa); his three government petitions passed 100,000 signatures in three consecutive years, leading to two parliamentary debates. He was lead author of the 2019 paper 'Spatialities of pet theft: A critical perspective', provided 2015-2020 police FOI dog theft data as evidence to the Petitions Committee in 2020, and continues to coordinate the Pet Theft Reform campaign.

Adam Peacock is a Postdoctoral Research Associate at Keele University specialising in peri-urban landscapes, sustainability and G.I.S. He co-authored the 2019 paper 'Spatialities of pet theft: A critical perspective.'

Jamie Arathoon is a PhD candidate at the University of Glasgow, researching human-assistance-animal lifeworlds. In his research Jamie is working with the charity Dog AID to understand how assistance dog partnerships are formed. He co-authored the 2019 paper 'Spatialities of pet theft: A critical perspective.'

Professor Ken Pease is a forensic psychologist by training and has worked in maximum security prisons and hospitals in Canada. Ken is now officially retired but remains active in crime research as Visiting Professor and Fellow of University College London. He has acted as Head of the Police Research Group at the Home Office and has been a member of the Parole Board for England and Wales. He was a member of the Home Office Design and Technology Alliance and sat on the Steering Group of the DBERR review of Home Office science. The bulk of his published work over the last thirty years has concerned crime reduction- a book was published in his honour under the title *Imagination in Crime Prevention*. He holds an OBE for services to crime prevention and a lifetime achievement award from the Environmental Criminology and Crime Analysis Association.

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