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Recent Patterns and Trends in UK Dog Theft

(Author Accepted Manuscript)

Introduction

The UK has an estimated dog population in 2023 of 13 million, with 4.1 million dogs joining families since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020 (PDSA, 2023). During this time, increased demand for canine companionship led to inflated prices for dogs, with some fashionable breeds being advertised for as much as £9,000 each (Home Office, 2021; Pets4Homes, 2020). This increased demand coincided with a reported rise in dog thefts across the country. While lockdowns and social distancing restrictions led to a decline in crimes including shoplifting and burglary (Farrell, 2020; Halford et al., 2020), the national media suggested that there was a dog theft 'epidemic' across the country, with various outlets reporting that the winter of 2020/21 saw the number of dog thefts increase between 170% and 250% since the start of lockdown. There were also suggestions of violence increasingly being used (Armstrong, 2020; Knight, 2021). Successful resolutions in dog theft cases are low. Direct Line (2021) reported that 22 percent of stolen dogs are reunited with their caregivers, whilst the limited data available indicate that around one to five percent of offences result in charge (Home Office, 2021; Selby-Fell and Allen, 2021).

Despite growing public concern, comparatively little has been written on the phenomenon of dog theft in the UK. Previous research by the third author and several colleagues has explored trends in dog theft between 2015 and 2020 drawing on police Freedom of Information Act (FOI) data (Allen et al., 2019; Selby-Fell and Allen, 2021), the emotional trauma and personal impact of dog theft on owners (Allen, Arathoon and Selby-Fell, 2022; see also Venaktramanan & Lindsey, 2024), how and why missing and stolen pets are made visible by their owners in virtual space (Arathoon, Allen and Hallett, 2024; Stickle et al., 2024), and the inequalities associated with treating sentient beings as stolen property (Allen and Wyatt, 2024; Harris, 2018). Allen et al. (2019) and Selby-Fell and Allen (2021) demonstrated an 'upward trend' in recorded dog theft offences in England and Wales from 2015 to 2021. However, the consensus is that police FOI data for dog theft is inconsistent, incomplete, and must be approached with caution (Allen et al, 2019; Allen and Wyatt, 2024; Home Office, 2021; Selby-Fell and Allen, 2021). That is not to say the critical use of police FOI

data to explore dog theft is not useful, but it is important to heed Selby-Fell and Allen's (2021) advice to triangulate using a range of sources.

There remain numerous gaps in our understanding of dog theft and the extent and nature of this offence. This lack of knowledge not only frustrates attempts to improve policy and legislation but also makes it impossible to adopt effective enforcement and prevention responses or to employ an evidence-based approach. This is an especially pertinent issue when considered in relation to the recent passing into law of The Pet Abduction Act 2024. This establishes a maximum sentence of five years imprisonment and clearly demonstrates that pet (currently dog and cat) 'theft' is something different to (and arguably more important than) simple property theft. Therefore, it is even more crucial that police forces have a clear picture, as far as possible, of the nature and patterns of such offences. To address some of these gaps, the aims of this article are (1) to identify variation in the extent of dog theft in the UK for the period 2020-2022 and (2) to determine patterns of dog theft during this period. To achieve these aims, we have analysed Police FOI data for the period 2020-2022 and, conscious of the weaknesses already identified, data provided by the UK's largest free national database of lost and stolen dogs, DogLost (Doglost.co.uk). Launched in South Wales in 2003, DogLost is a UK-wide online community resolution group for reuniting lost and stolen dogs; supported on the ground by around fifteen regional co-ordinators, eight police liaison officers, and eighty-five volunteers. Their police partners include Essex, Kent, Humberside, and Lincolnshire forces.

The Pet Theft Taskforce (Home Office, 2021:6) was commissioned to "consider the issue from end to end, including causes, prevention, reporting, enforcement and prosecution". As this has not been effectively carried out by the governmental working group since 2021, our article will make original contributions to understanding the extent and nature of dog theft in the UK, create the foundations for further detailed analysis, and provide much-needed insights for future policing policy and practice. The remainder of this article is structured into three main sections. First, the methodology outlines the approach used to collect, clean and analyse police and DogLost data for the period 2020 to 2022. Second, the findings are reported, focusing on the extent and patterns of dog thefts over time, the distribution of dog thefts at force and regional level, and the specific type of location from which the thefts took place. Finally, the article discusses the implications of these findings for future research and practice.

Methodology

To address the aims of this research, a quantitative approach was most appropriate. We have already rehearsed the issues of police data obtained through Freedom of Information Act (FOI) requests and the need to triangulate sources. Therefore, we used two main datasets. The first was UK police recorded dog thefts for the calendar years 2020, 2021, and 2022 (the most recent full years when the request was made). These were obtained by the third author sending an FOI request to all 45 territorial and three special police forces within the jurisdiction, asking them to provide information on the total number of recorded dog thefts in each year and, for each recorded offence: the outcome; how many dogs were stolen; the location of the theft; and the sex and age of the dog(s) stolen. The data provided were entered into Microsoft Excel, where they were cleaned before being imported into Jamovi (v2.4.7) for analysis. The second dataset was provided to the third author by DogLost as an Excel spreadsheet covering the period 2013 to 2023. To ensure comparability, the data for the years 2020, 2021 and 2022 were extracted for analysis. The DogLost dataset, based on information uploaded to the free website when registering dogs and creating missing and stolen posters, contained data including the dog's name, age, sex, colour and breed, the date (s)he was stolen, the region and postcode where the theft took place, and the police force covering that area.It also included a crime reference number (CRN) for dogs recorded as stolen (which means, as noted below, that these are a subset of police recorded crime data).As with the police FOI data, once the DogLost data had been cleaned and recoded in Excel, they were imported into Jamovi for analysis.

As noted in the introduction, while both datasets provide invaluable information on patterns of dog theft in the UK, neither is without its problems. Primarily, a number of police forces declined to provide the data requested. For 2020, data were provided by 32 forces (71%), 27 forces (60%) supplied data for 2021, and 23 forces (51%) for 2022. This is in notable contrast to previous research on the topic that recorded returns from all but a few forces (see Allen et al., 2019; Direct Line, 2018; The Insurance Emporium, 2018). Thus, while the data returned provide an official picture of recorded dog theft in the UK over the period, it is not complete. Completeness was also affected by there being no standard way of recording dog thefts for the UK police. This meant that not all forces provided the same data and in most cases the data were provided in an aggregated form, meaning that it was not possible to perform more complex statistical analyses. Further compounding this issue, it is possible that

many offences are not reported to, or recorded by, the police an issue that requires further exploration. Finally, many of the forces provided both the number of reported thefts (crimes) and the number of dogs abducted in each incident, but this was not always the case. Crime recording rules require one crime be recorded per victim (Home Office, 2024). As the victim of dog theft is deemed to be the human caregiver (rather than the dog him/herself) this means a single crime will be recorded regardless of the number of dogs stolen in that incident. Therefore, it has not been possible to ascertain the number of dogs stolen, only the number of crimes recorded.

The DogLost dataset, in contrast, records each missing dog as a single case, but a police crime reference number (CRN) is required for a listed dog to be regarded as stolen rather than lost. This means that stolen dogs recorded by DogLost are actually a subset of police recorded dog thefts. The police did not furnish us with crime reference numbers (some, although not all, provided partial postcodes as an alternative) and, as not all forces provided returns, it was not possible to match cases across the two datasets. Therefore, they were analysed separately, whilst acknowledging there is significant overlap between them. It should also be borne in mind that while the group is the largest free database of lost and stolen dogs in the UK, there are other, sometimes paid for, online databases (e.g. Animal Search UK, Pets Reunited), and community resolution groups (e.g. Beauty's Legacy, Missing Dogs Wales), often linked with specific regions. It is thus possible that dogs reported stolen to the police may be listed on an alternative database, or not at all. As such, DogLost data, like that provided by the police, cannot be viewed as a complete picture of dog theft in the UK. Despite these limitations, however, the data are sufficient to extrapolate the extent of dog theft and to demonstrate patterns that will be useful for future researchers, practitioners and policy makers.

Findings

This section presents the results of our analysis of dog theft in the UK between 2020 and 2022. We consider the extent and rate of dog theft, changes over the period analysed, patterns in theft by force area, as well as the type of location from which the theft took place. Where data are available, we consider these patterns from both police recorded crime and DogLost data.

Extent of dog theft over time

The police FOI data for the UK contained 4,791 recorded dog thefts during the three-year period 2020-2022. This equates to 1,573 recorded dog thefts for 2020, 1,587 for 2021, and 1,631 for 2022. Whilst we cannot assume that the forces who supplied data are representative of all 45 regional forces, if this were the case, it would equate to 2,212 recorded dog thefts in 2020, 2,645 in 2021, and 3,191 in 2022. DogLost data for the UK represents a smaller sample, with a total of 893 dogs recorded as stolen between 2020 and 2022. This equates to 414 dogs recorded as stolen in 2020, 335 in 2021, and 144 in 2022. The three-year trend for both datasets is presented in Figure 1.

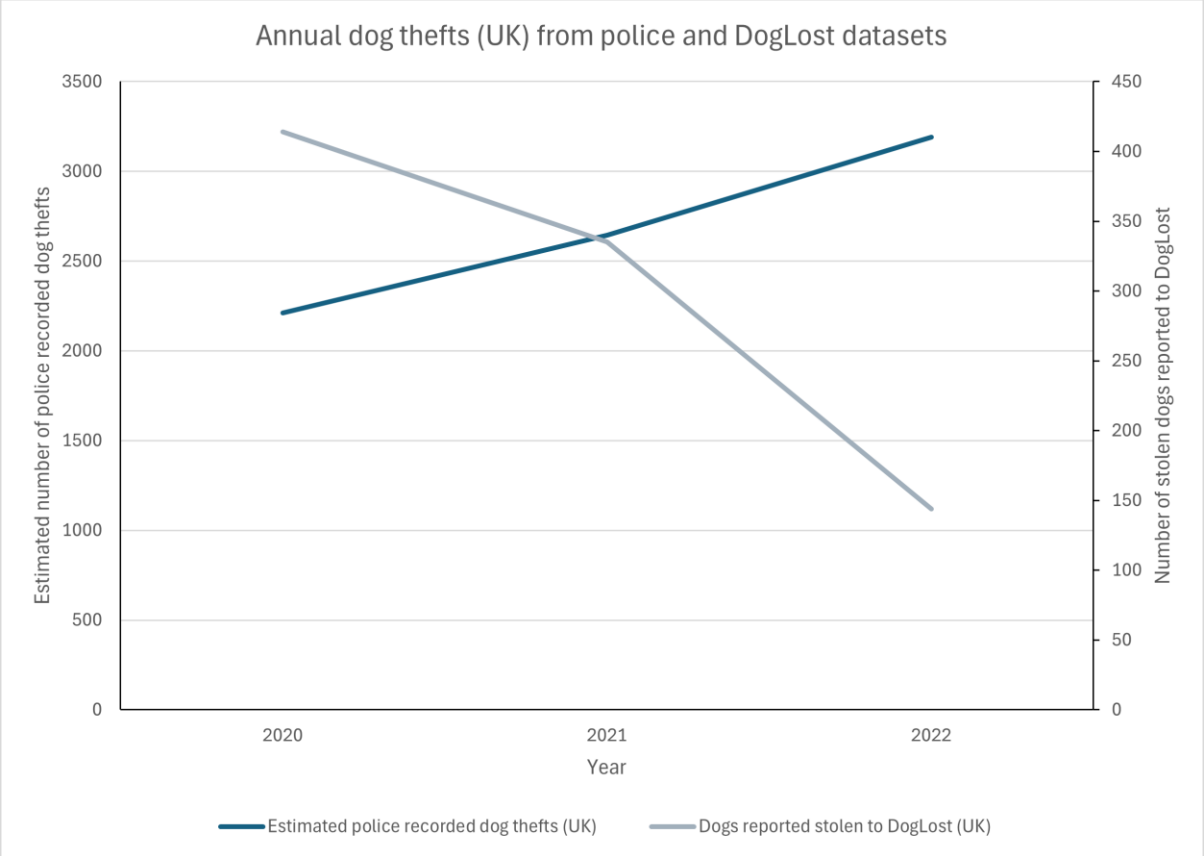

Fig 1

The number of police recorded dog thefts reported through the FOI request increased over the three-year period by 3.7%. However, the number of forces providing data decreased over the same time, therefore our national estimates (above) provide a more suitable comparison. Another way to compare these data is to consider the mean number of dog thefts per force, for each year. These means were calculated by dividing the total number of dog thefts returned for each year by the number of forces providing a return. This equated to a mean of 49 recorded dog thefts per force in 2020, 59 in 2021, and 71 in 2022. This represents

an increase of 44.9%. DogLost data demonstrate a reverse trend, with a decline in the number of dogs reported stolen of 65.2% in 2022 compared to 2020.

To determine if there were any seasonal patterns, both datasets were also examined monthly and quarterly. Here, the number of underlying forces was not taken into consideration, as it was the yearly pattern, as opposed to absolute numbers, that was being considered. The police data demonstrate a clear seasonal pattern over the three years studied, with a peak in recorded offences each year for Quarter 3 (Jul-Sep). This distribution can be seen in Figure 2a. An independent-samples t-test indicated that the difference in the mean number of recorded dog thefts in the third quarter of each year (*M*=443, *SD*=2.645) compared with the other quarters (*M*=384.666, *SD*=27.263) was statistically significant; (8)=2.89, p=.005. In contrast, the DogLost data demonstrate no clear seasonal pattern. Though inspected in the same way as the police data, it was apparent that the variation in quarterly counts was the result of the longer term decrease already reported. Quarters 3 and 4 of 2020 saw an increase in reports, but these have declined quarter-on-quarter since then, as shown in Figure 2b.

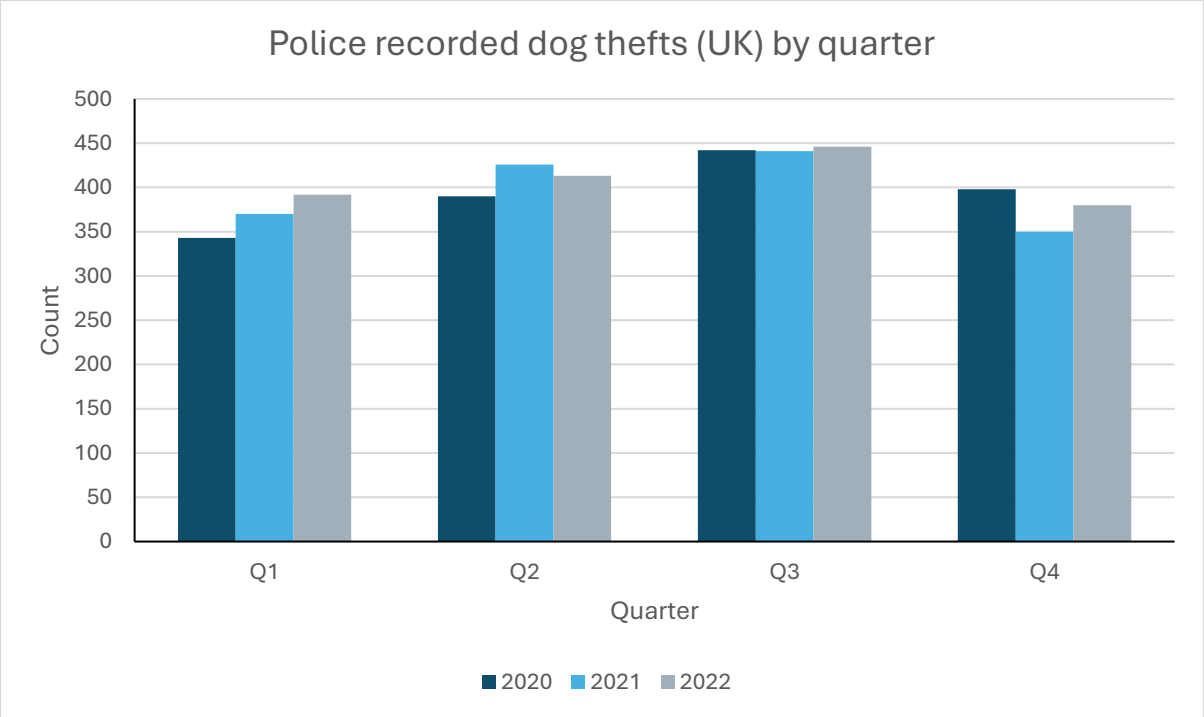

Fig 2a

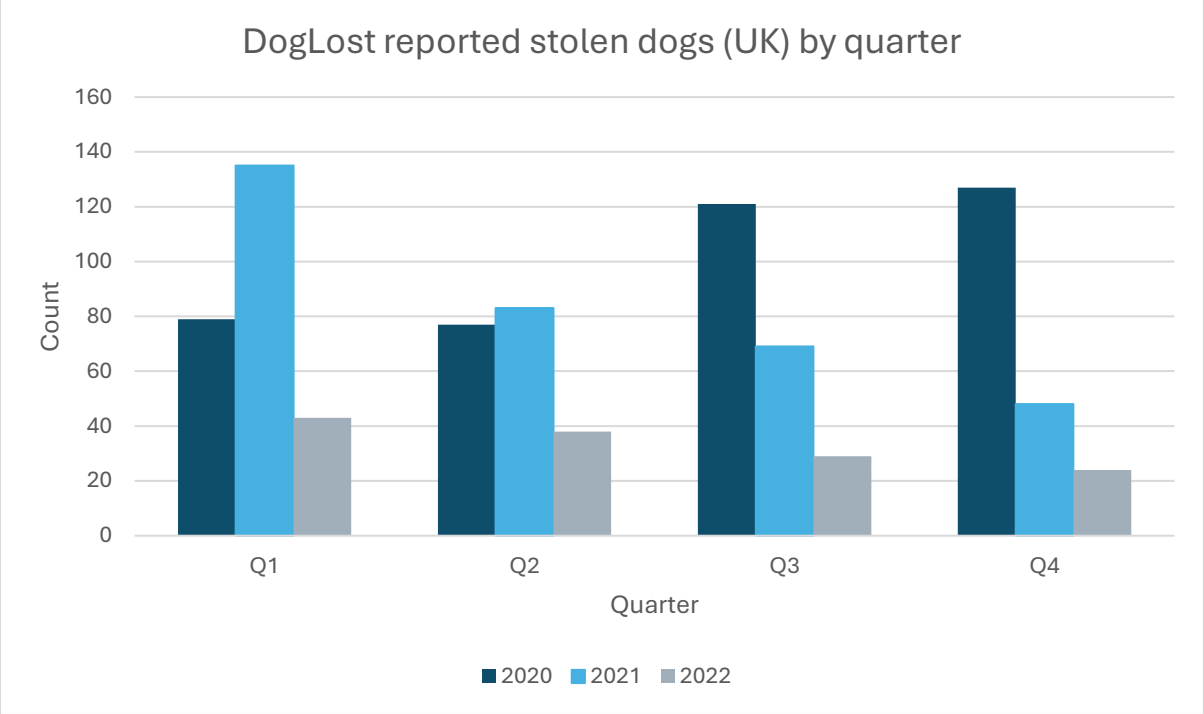

Fig 2b

Finally, with respect to patterns over time, we considered whether COVID-19 lockdowns (or Tier restrictions) coincided with changes in dog thefts. Here, the mean monthly force averages (see above) were used so that the findings were not skewed by the change in number of forces providing returns. However, this does mean that the counts are small, which may impact the reliability of the statistical findings. The pattern for each data source can be seen in Figure 3. The mean monthly force average for police recorded dog thefts was lower during lockdown (4.4) than non-lockdown periods (5.1), but this difference was not statistically significant. This distribution may also be affected by the general increase in recorded offences over the three years analysed. When inspected visually, there appear to have been increases during the first and third lockdown/tiered periods (March to June 2020 and January to July 2021). However, this is not dissimilar to the seasonal pattern outlined previously. A visual inspection of the monthly distribution of DogLost reported thefts suggests an increase during the first two lockdowns (2020), and a sharp increase in February 2021, early in the third lockdown. This was the highest monthly count for DogLost during the three years of data provided (n=66). From this point, however, reports dropped quickly, and an overall decline has been maintained since. Overall, the mean number of dogs recorded as stolen by DogLost was significantly higher during Lockdown/Tiers (M = 38.67, SD = 16.56) than outside these periods (M = 20.19, SD = 10.78). An independent-samples t-test indicated that this difference was statistically significant ((34)=3.8766, p < .001).

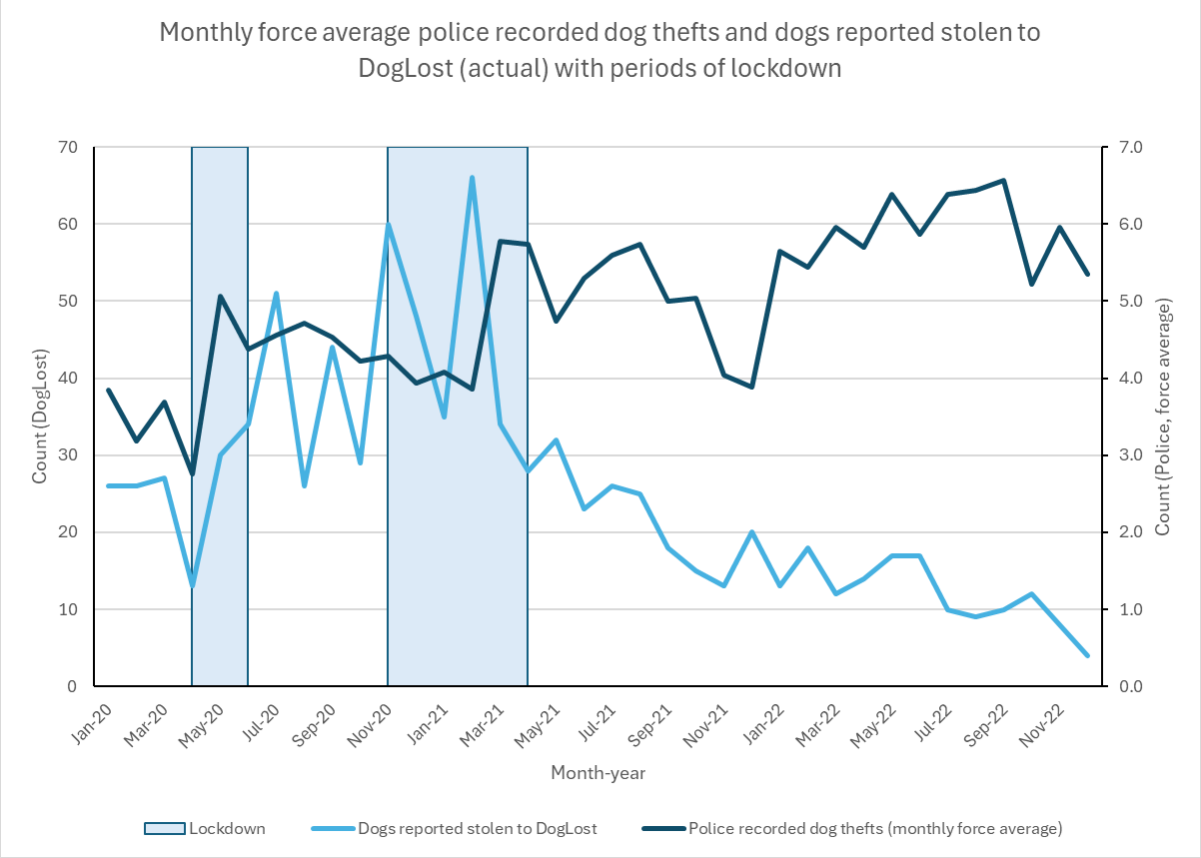

Fig 3

Location

When considering police recorded dog thefts by Force, the analyses are based on force yearly averages to account for some forces supplying only one or two years of data. This obviously excludes those forces who did not provide any data.

By Force

The forces returning the highest yearly average of recorded dog thefts for the period 2020-2022 were The Metropolitan Police Service (MPS) (*n*=340), Kent (*n*=144), West Yorkshire (*n*=129) and Lancashire (*n*=110). However, this does not account for the size of the force, the population it covers, or the underlying level of recorded crime. When considering the rate of police recorded dog theft per 1,000 households, the top ranked forces were Cleveland, Kent, Lancashire, and Gwent as shown in Table 1:

Table 1: The top ten forces (England and Wales only) ranked by rate of recorded dog theft per 1,000 households, based on a one-year average count, 2020-22

Force	One-year average count of police recorded dog theft	Rate of police recorded dog theft per 1,000 households
Cleveland	54	0.220
Kent	144	0.185
Lancashire	110	0.170
Gwent	43	0.168
Dyfed Powys	33	0.143
South Yorkshire	86	0.143
Northumbria	88	0.135
West Yorkshire	129	0.133
Cumbria	29	0.126
Derbyshire	55	0.119

Similar analysis was also carried out using as the denominator the recorded crime count for each force (year ending December 2022, which excludes Devon and Cornwall). We again used a force yearly average to account for those who did not return three years of data. The rate of recorded dog theft per 1,000 recorded crimes (all, excluding fraud) and per 1,000 theft offences (all types) were calculated and the top ten forces for each are shown in Table 2.

Table 2: The top ten forces (England and Wales only) ranked by rate of police recorded dog theft per 1,000 crimes and per 1,000 thefts, based on a one-year average count, 2020-22.

Force	Recorded dog theft per 1,000 crimes (all crime exc. fraud)	Force	Recorded dog theft per 1,000 theft offences (all types)
Lancashire	0.821	Dyfed-Powys	4.882
Kent	0.812	Cumbria	3.708
Dyfed-Powys	0.737	Gwent	3.653
Cumbria	0.734	Kent	3.173
Gwent	0.725	Lancashire	2.953
Cleveland	0.661	Derbyshire	2.690
Derbyshire	0.657	Cleveland	2.375

Northumbria	0.623	Northumbria	2.181
West Mercia	0.546	Northamptonshire	1.989
South Yorkshire	0.537	West Mercia	1.947

These results demonstrate that when we consider rates of recorded dog theft to account for both underlying population and underlying levels of recorded crime, the same forces tend to be ranked the highest: Lancashire, Kent, Cleveland, Dyfed-Powys, Gwent, Derbyshire, Cumbria, and Northumbria. The MPS features only when counts (as opposed to rates) are considered. The results also demonstrate that the risk of dog theft varies quite substantially across forces and that, for some, it represents a not inconsequential proportion of recorded theft offences.

It is not possible to ascertain from the data provided through the FOI request whether the patterns outlined above represent variation in the extent of dog theft, the reporting and recording of dog theft, or (most likely) a mixture of both. To provide some comparison, DogLost data were also used to calculate a rate per 1,000 households (for consistency, using a yearly average count calculated from the three years of data provided), based on the police force area where the theft was reported. What is of interest, is the variation in area rankings where the two datasets are compared. Again, these patterns must be interpreted with caution, as DogLost may have a varying presence and profile in different regions, resulting in lower numbers of reports. Table 3 summarises the top 10 force areas per 1,000 households, calculated from DogLost data, alongside (for reference) where that force ranked when calculated from police recorded dog thefts (per 1,000 households).

Table 3: The top ten forces (England and Wales only) ranked by rate of DogLost theft reports per 1,000 households compared with rank of police recorded dog thefts per 1,000 households, based on a one-year average count, 2020-22.

Force	**Rank (DogLost theft reports per 1,000 households, highest rate is ranked 1st)**	**Rank (police recorded dog thefts per 1,000 households)**
Northamptonshire	1st	11th
Suffolk	2nd	27th
West Mercia	3rd	13th

Kent	4th	2nd
Essex	5th	18th
Leicestershire	6th	17th
Derbyshire	7th	10th
Thames Valley	8th	No data provided
Warwickshire	9th	19th
Dorset	10th	24th

Just Kent and Derbyshire are ranked in the top 10 force areas per 1,000 households using both police and DogLost data. Northamptonshire, the top ranked force according to DogLost data, was 11th according to the police data, while Leicestershire, Essex, and Warwickshire all fell within the top 20, but were more highly ranked according to DogLost. All other forces were ranked dissimilarly. The forces that did not provide data for the FOI request were ranked low in the DogLost data, perhaps suggesting they experience few reported dog thefts. However, Thames Valley was ranked 8th by DogLost while Greater Manchester was ranked 12th. Neither returned data (on grounds of cost/time), yet there are clearly offences taking place within these force areas, possibly at comparably high levels.

Type of location

Having considered the geographical spread of dog theft, we now present findings related to micro-level distributions, considering the type of location from which dogs were reported to have been stolen. Table 4 shows the location type where each police recorded dog theft took place (cleaned and categorised by the researchers). This information was only provided for 58% of records.

Table 4: The location type of police recorded dog theft offences for 2020-2022, as recorded in the police data.

Location Type	**2020 % (*n*)**	**2021 % (*n*)**	**2022 % (*n*)**	**Total % (*n*)**
Home	36.9% (359)	44.3% (473)	43.6% (308)	41.5% (1140)
Garden	27.1% (263)	20.9% (223)	22.6% (160)	23.5% (646)

Known Person	10.2% (99)	7.7% (82)	6.5% (46)	8.3% (227)
In public	5.5% (53)	7.3% (78)	9.1% (64)	7.1% (195)
During walk	6.0% (58)	7.2% (77)	3.8% (27)	5.9% (162)
Other	3.8% (37)	5.9% (63)	4.0% (28)	4.7% (128)
Kennel/Rescue	2.5% (24)	1.4% (15)	5.0% (35)	2.7% (74)
Agricultural	4.0% (39)	2.0% (21)	1.4% (10)	2.5% (70)
Vehicle	1.5% (15)	1.2% (13)	2.0% (14)	1.5% (42)
Outside shop	1.7% (17)	0.8% (9)	1.6% (11)	1.3% (37)
Commercial Location	0.8% (8)	1.2% (13)	0.6% (4)	0.9% (25)
Total	100% (972)	100% (1067)	100% (707)	100% (2746)

Overall, most police recorded dog thefts took place from the home or garden (65%). It was not possible to ascertain from the data whether *home* meant inside the house, therefore these categories may overlap. Over the three years, thefts from gardens have decreased, whilst thefts from homes have increased. This may indicate a shift in where dogs are accessed (moving from outside to inside) or it may be an artefact of recording practices (if the two are being used synonymously). Comparatively fewer thefts were recorded as occurring in public or during a walk (7.1% and 5.9% respectively), or while fastened up outside a shop (just 1.3%). A number of locations were coded as 'other' by the researchers (4.7%). This category was used for records that contained ambiguous responses, such as 'home/garden' or 'park/garden', Other patterns of interest were an apparent increase in the proportion of thefts from a public place over the three years studied, but a decrease in 2022 for dogs stolen during walks. There was also a small but increasing number of thefts recorded from kennels or rescues.

Discussion

Our results have demonstrated that, overall, there has been an increase in dog theft from 2020 to 2022, following already identified increases in the preceding years (Allen et al., 2019; Selby-Fell and Allen, 2021; Direct Line, 2018). There may also have been an increase in the number of people reporting offences and/or in police recording thereof, but it is not possible using the data provided to determine to what extent this affects the patterns observed. Although dog theft may be viewed as a relatively rare offence, we have demonstrated annual rates of offending in some force areas of more than 0.15 offences per thousand households. Indeed, if we assume that most dog thefts will be classed as 'theft other' (whilst acknowledging a proportion will be recorded as burglaries), in the top-ranking forces, around one in 100 'theft other' offences would involve stealing a dog. We contend, therefore, that police forces need to take dog theft (now abduction) seriously.

Police data seem to indicate that seasonal variation (with a peak in quarter 3, July to September) and an overall increase in thefts are important explanatory factors in dog theft trends, probably more so than the direct effects of lockdowns. The seasonal peak coincides with summer and school holiday periods; a time when families are more likely to have time for longer dog walks, trips away, and to make more use of their gardens, all of which may increase the accessibility of their dogs to potential thieves. DogLost saw decreases in reports of stolen dogs over the three years studied, but this is more likely to represent a change in the number of people making use of their provision than it is a decrease in offences. It may be that more people reporting stolen dogs to the police are unaware of DogLost, or they do not feel the need to make use of additional services. However, a more likely explanation is that people are utilising other community resolution groups that have emerged during the period studied, as well as relying on independent social media posting when their dogs go missing (see Arathoon et al, 2024). This would be one fruitful avenue for further research. Though there were media reports of increases in dog thefts during lockdowns, our findings are inconclusive. When taken together, the data from both sources suggest the possibility of increases during some lockdown periods, but this is only visually (not statistically) supported for police recorded thefts. Although there was a sharp increase in police recorded dog thefts during the third lockdown (early 2021), figures did not drop back to more typical levels after restrictions were lifted later that year. Rather, they continued to increase. Our overall findings, therefore, suggest that it was not lockdown but the increase in dog ownership driven by the restrictions imposed during this period that may have resulted in an increase in dog thefts, and that this has persisted. This suggests that dog theft may be driven by both opportunity and the suitability of dogs as theft targets. As such, it might be proposed that dog thieves are rational

actors, attracted (at that time) by a growing market, high rewards, and low risks (Felson and Clarke, 1998). Although we find the concept of dogs as property problematic, they may also be viewed as 'hot products', being Concealable, Removable, Available, Valuable, Enjoyable, and Disposable (CRAVED) (Clarke, 1999). Wellsmith and Burrell (2005) identified that ownership levels and purchase price impact on what hot products are stolen during domestic burglaries, whilst Allen and Wyatt (2024) apply this concept explicitly to stolen dogs. Routine activity theory may also have explanatory power for the patterns identified. Cohen and Felson (1979) explain that crime occurs when a suitable target (here, a dog) comes together in time and space with a motivated offender, in the absence of a capable guardian. A guardian may not be capable either because they are not present (e.g., a dog is unattended) or because they are not able to stop the offence taking place (e.g., when threats, force, or scams have been used). If it is established through further research that dog theft can be explained as a result of crime opportunity, this would help identify where and when high levels of dog theft are likely to take place, as well as opening up better exploration of the application of situational crime prevention (Allen and Wyatt, 2024; Cornish and Clarke, 2003). It is therefore recommended that researchers and practitioners adopt rational choice and routine activity theories as conceptual frameworks for their analysis.

Turning to theft locations, we have demonstrated large variation in dog thefts by force, both in police recorded crime data and DogLost reports. However, the patterns identified are rather different across the two datasets. The two most obvious explanations for these variations are differences in reporting and recording practices across forces (recorded crime data) and diverse levels of use and awareness of the DogLost service in different regions. We are unable to confirm, therefore, if those forces ranked as having the highest counts or rates of dog theft are in fact the forces that experience the greatest problem with dog thefts or those who are more likely to record a crime when a report is made. Further investigation is required as the implications of this are important. If the top ranked forces contain the greatest risk of dog theft, then analysing the reasons for this distribution will help shed light on the motivations and drivers of dog theft. On the other hand, if these forces are better at recording and responding to reports of dog theft, they may provide useful examples of good practice for other forces.

It is important to consider what the data can suggest in terms of geographic patterns, whilst taking these confounding issues into account. As well as considering counts (which demonstrated similar patterns to those identified by Allen et al., 2019), we determined the rate

of recorded dog theft using population, total crime (excluding fraud), and theft offences as denominators. These presented different patterns but overall indicate that the forces experiencing or recording the most dog theft tend to be Lancashire, Kent, Cleveland, Dyfed-Powys, Gwent, Derbyshire, and Cumbria. We were unable to identify dog 'ownership' data for force areas, therefore it has not been possible to take this into consideration. This potential explanatory factor aside, other than Cleveland Police, the forces represented tend to be relatively geographically large and to include rural or semi-rural areas and access to countryside (for example the Peak District in Derbyshire and Lake District in Cumbria). It is not possible to test topographical patterns with the data provided and conclusions remain tentative not least because of forces missing from the analysis, but this may be a fruitful area for further research at the macro and micro-level. We acknowledge that DogLost data are unlikely to accurately represent trends by force area, however, the quite different findings presented are illuminating. Where DogLost rates are low compared to police numbers, this could be the result of the visibility or physical presence of DogLost networks; and/or the availability of alternative voluntary or commercial lost and stolen dog services in that area; and/or a reluctance to share personal information on online support forums at a time when online scammers are targeting victims of dog theft (see Pacelli, 2023; Cumbria Constabulary, 2024). However, where they are high, this suggests areas of concern, regardless of police recorded data.

When considering where dogs are stolen from, police recorded crime data clearly demonstrate that homes and gardens are the most risky locations. We have already noted that it is possible 'home' may have been used by some recording officers to also encompass a private garden, or even a driveway or 'known' person' offence. Regardless, taken together, these categories make up by far the greatest proportion of offences and so should be the focus of enforcement and prevention activities, as opposed to while on walks, outside shops and other places that may be perceived as more likely theft locations. In addition, improved recording of location-type will aid crime analysts in identifying more specific and illuminating patterns, whilst analysis of location (and method) of recovery, offender characteristics, and *modus operandi* (MO) behaviour, will all contribute towards better understanding of dog theft and how to effectively respond to it.

Conclusions

This study aimed to determine the extent and patterns of dog theft in the UK between 2020 and 2022. We have established that dog theft appears to have increased during the period 2020 to 2022, continuing a trend identified in the previous literature, although we acknowledge at least some of this may be the result of changing reporting and recording practices. We have also identified large variations in recorded dog thefts by force and tentatively suggested that geographically large and more rural forces may experience more dog thefts. However, further research is required to explore how much these patterns reflect real differences in risk and how much they result from police practices. Dog theft appears to peak during the summer months, and offences are most likely to occur in the home or garden, where dogs spend more time and may be less well guarded. This suggests either that thieves may be willing to target private property to secure dogs, or possibly that dogs are stolen alongside other items in a burglary. Again, further analysis of police data is required to test this hypothesis and respond accordingly.

Throughout, we have recognised that our ability to draw firmer conclusions is hampered by the limitations of our datasets. With the passing of the Pet Abduction Act (2024), where dog abduction and cat abduction are regarded as specific offences, it is more crucial than ever for police forces to improve the recording of pet 'thefts'. Where these are not already being used, the adoption of standardised forms requiring more detailed descriptive information about the stolen dog(s) (e.g., age, breed, sex), location, and circumstances would help capture more analytically useful details of the crime and its specific characteristics. Better data collection is essential for understanding trends, improving investigations, and ensuring that resources are allocated effectively to tackle this issue. This is particularly needed because dog theft/abduction is not currently a well-understood crime, which compounds the challenges of successful investigation. Alongside this, further research is needed to explore the feasibility of using rational choice and routine activity theories to explain dog theft/abduction and, if applicable, the development and evaluation of opportunity reduction and situational crime prevention interventions. While DogLost data is national and includes more detail about the stolen/abducted dogs, it represents only those cases where this service has been used, with many other organisations also offering lost and stolen dog support services. On the other hand, the police data obtained through FOI requests did not cover all forces and it did not provide the necessary event-level information required for more detailed research. We recommend, therefore, that research now focuses on identifying and exploring these more detailed patterns, utilising more reliable offence data. This should includei a robust exploration of seasonality and the effects of weather. In

addition, analysis of MO, circumstances of recovery, and offender characteristics will help paint a clearer picture of dog theft, which is crucial for better understanding and responding to this growing and traumatic crime.

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