

Dogs Trust Briefing on Dog Theft

Current situation

- In the UK around 2,000 dogs are stolen each year (but many more may go unreported); only 1 in 5 of those reported stolen are returned to their familiesⁱ
- Only 5% of reported dog thefts lead to a conviction
- Currently, under British law, dogs are classed as 'property' under the Theft Act 1968, meaning that if someone steals a dog, they may be punished in the same way as someone who steals a non-living object, like a mobile phone
- The maximum sentence for theft is 7 years imprisonment but the reality is that someone who steals a pet will likely just receive a fine for the reasons outlined below

The problem

- The Sentencing Council argues that 'the harm caused by the theft of a much-loved pet can be taken into account as part of the assessment of harm, in which the factor of 'emotional distress' would enable the court to reflect any significant additional harm caused by the theft'
- However, the penalty for dog theft is often decided based on monetary value of the dog
- The Sentencing Council guidelines classify the level of harm caused by theft into four categories. For theft to be classed as Category 1 or 2 (most severe) the 'property' stolen must have a monetary value over £500, regardless of how much non-financial (e.g. emotional) harm is caused
- Many dogs have little or no monetary value. The theft of a dog valued at less than £500 can only be classed as a Category 3 or 4 and therefore dog theft often results in less severe sentences
- The most severe sentence recommended for stealing a dog worth less than £500 is 2 years custody
- By equating animals to 'property', we are denying them the right to be considered sentient beings

Why change is needed

The human-canine bond

- A survey found that 99% of respondents considered their pets to be family membersⁱⁱ
- The dog-human bond has been linked to that found between a parent and child

The benefits of owning a dog

- Dog ownership can improve physical health by encouraging exercise
- Dog ownership can improve psychological wellbeing e.g. reducing the risk of depression
- Dog ownership can reduce loneliness, which has been described as an 'epidemic' in modern day society



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The impact of dog theft on an owner

- In the field of psychology 'ambiguous loss' is the term for the grief felt in response to a missing person. It is characterised by a lack of closure or understanding and can be long lasting. It is therefore likely that the emotional impact of a dog going missing has a similar effect on the owner
- 'Disenfranchised grief' is the term used to describe grief which is not acknowledged by society, causing grievers to feel that they cannot grieve openly for fear they will not be taken seriously. People mourning the loss of a dog can often be faced with unsympathetic comments such as 'it's only a dog'. Other's refusal or inability to acknowledge someone's grief may extend the time taken for the griever to recover or come to terms with their loss
- The loss of a dog can be particularly hard on those who have little support in the form of family or friends
- A study involving in depth interviews with dog owners who had experienced dog theft found that 30% reported feelings of 'loss, grief or mourning'; 48% described themselves as 'devastated' and; 37% suffered from 'severe psychological or physiological effects' after their dog was stolen
- The interviews also found that a high percentage of victims (78%) reported that their social life had been negatively affected and around 41% described negative effects on their family or work lifeⁱⁱⁱ

The solution

The Sentencing Council should amend existing guidelines to ensure that all cases of companion animals theft are treated equally seriously, regardless of monetary value. This can be achieved in two ways:

Category Grading

- Amend the 'harm' section of the guidelines so that any offence involving the theft of a companion animal is deemed to be a Category 2 offence or above
- A starting point of 2 years custody for a Category A offence, 1 year for Category B and a High Level Community Order for a Category C offence are considered more appropriate sentences for pet theft

Other aggravating factors

- Add 'theft of a companion animal' to the list of aggravating factors to increase the seriousness of the offence and allow the courts to impose tougher punishments that properly reflect the anguish that these offences cause to victims

Dogs Trust would also like to see accurate and consistent reporting of instances of the theft of a companion animal.

ⁱ Calculated from information provided by 37 police forces in response to Freedom of Information requests for 2017 data

ⁱⁱ Planchon, L.A, D.I; Stokes, S.; Keller, J. Death of a Companion Cat or Dog and Human Bereavement: Psychosocial Variables. Soc. Anim. 2002

ⁱⁱⁱ Murray, K.R An Investigation into the Experiences and Perceptions of Those Affected by Dog Theft, 2015



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