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# A Video Data Analysis of Pet Theft Incidents: An Examination of Offense Form, Situational Dynamics, & Offender Characteristics

Ben Stickle<sup>a</sup>, Brenda Vose<sup>b</sup>, and J. Mitchell Miller<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Middle Tennessee State University, Murfreesboro, USA; <sup>b</sup>University of North Florida, Jacksonville, USA

## ABSTRACT

Pet theft is a type of property crime, but pet-owner relationships include emotional dimensions and life experiences that can compound their loss far beyond property value. Their bondedness with humans includes companionship as well as healthy lifestyle and mental wellness benefits, which are abruptly halted at junctures of pet loss. Though pets are stolen for various motives (e.g. ransom, reward, resale, or breeding), this crime form has received little research attention from academic criminology and criminal justice. Toward building a line of inquiry, this paper empirically explores the phenomena of “dognapping” as dogs are the most frequently stolen pet and the only pet for which there is a database large enough for meaningful exploration. Content analysis of online posts and web-based video data (Twitter/X<sup>1</sup> posts, YouTube videos, and social media websites dedicated to missing and stolen pets) enabled a delineation of dog theft forms, offense dynamics, and offender characteristics. Findings regarding residential and commercial dog theft center discussion on situational crime prevention implications and additional research opportunities to further evidence and explore this relatively disregarded crime.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

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## Introduction

Animal theft is a property crime that is an increasingly common occurrence, though the exact number of stolen and trafficked animals is not systematically reported to law enforcement, nor is there any national or other major pet theft database (<https://aldf.org/article/companion-animal-theft/>). The lack of pet theft data is unsurprising as the topic has been largely ignored in the scientific literature, particularly in academic criminology and criminal justice. Limited attention from the discipline may be a reflection of the criminal justice system’s ambivalence as pet theft can be viewed as inconsequential relative to violent and street crime (easily dismissed as “the dog may have run away”) and was slowed to be criminalized in much of the otherwise legally progressive western world (Allen, Peacock, and Arathoon 2019; Harris 2018). In that pets are considered legal property, their abduction should be but largely is not viewed, investigated, or prosecuted as other forms of theft.

When pet theft victims do receive justice, reparation is primarily in financial terms, and perhaps some degree of psychological satisfaction associated with criminal sanctions, but most victims receive neither (Allen, Arathoon, and Selby-Fell 2022). Court rulings seldom bring feelings of justice as equating the loss of pets in purely financial terms minimizes their essence and true value to owners whose familial-like relationships with their animals heighten the experience of their loss. While the loss or death of a pet under any circumstance can be extremely difficult for owners, for some, the sudden disappearance of a pet is akin to a missing person scenario. Pet theft is associated with difficult

combinations of anger, grief, loss, frustration, and the sudden cessation of daily pet care can disrupt sleep, meals, and social routines (Venaktramanan and Roberts 2024).

Despite the extent of victimization experiences, research on pet theft has been slow to develop with most works addressing historical legal developments, spatial analysis of incidents, the emotionality of grieving pet owners, the victimization experience relative to sanctioning leniency, and pet theft as cybercrime (Allen, Peacock, and Arathoon 2019; Halpern 2014; Howell 2004; Lavorgna 2015; Venaktramanan and Roberts 2024). These works primarily originate from the animal and other natural sciences, with few contributions from criminology and criminal justice or related social sciences. After briefly considering definitional parameters, the current study explores dog theft incidents captured on surveillance cameras and posted online to delineate the forms of dog theft, identify leading offender characteristics, and specify characteristics of theft environments, as well as interaction dynamics observed in a sample of incidents. Delineation of dog theft forms and empirically evidencing leading offender and offense characteristics yield practice and policy considerations, including implications for situational crime prevention and related research opportunities.

## Background

Pet theft is a general category definitionally spanning multiple species, and in the context of the most often stolen pet – dogs, it is often referred to as *dognapping* (American Kennel Club 2021; Kim 2021). This type of theft entails stealing another person’s dog, irrespective of personal use, resale, breeding, or other motives. Pet reselling is also called *pet flipping*, where the goal is to procure an animal free of charge and then sell it to the public through Craigslist, Market Place, or similar anonymous type web-markets (Animal Hearted Printing 2023; Halpern 2014). Pet trafficking is also sometimes referred to as *puppy trafficking*, a practice that entails the illegal and frequently inhumane smuggling of dogs for sale in ongoing criminal enterprises. As noted by Kim (2021), animal trafficking is used to illegally transport animals across state lines or out of the country. Importation regulations can spike demand for certain breeds, and high profitability incentivizes pet trafficking to account for the rise in dog theft in the United Kingdom, where the topic has received the most scientific attention (Miller 2019). The lack of scientific interest is curious, given Americans’ love of pets, particularly dogs.

However, several high-profile pet thefts have recently attracted attention to the issue. Reports from Psychology Today and TIME, for example, shed light on the strategic targeting of small and valuable breeds, like French bulldogs, to capitalize on the heightened demand for companionship that spiked during the pandemic (Chan 2021; Coren 2022). Some high-profile instances of pet theft in recent decades include, a French bulldog snatched in West Hollywood later found in Philadelphia, and a foiled attempt to steal the Obamas’ dogs from the White House in 2016 (Berenson 2016). Perhaps the most sensational story was the dognapping of Lady Gaga’s French bulldogs.

Lady Gaga’s dog walker, Ryan] Fischer was walking three French bulldogs belonging to the singer when he was shot, and two of the dogs were stolen in the 1500 block of North Sierra Bonita Avenue, near Sunset Boulevard. Surveillance video from a home security system shows Fischer walking on the sidewalk when a white sedan pulls up and stops in the street, with two people jumping from the back seat and saying, “Give it up.” A struggle ensued and one gunshot was fired, prompting Fischer to fall to the ground, screaming. The assailants each grabbed one dog - Koji and Gustav - and got back into the car’s rear seat, leaving Fischer on the ground yelling for help. (City News Service 2022)

Relative to other crimes, pet theft is a somewhat “quiet” offense that, while not presenting direct public safety concerns, yields victimization consequences that are difficult to express. According to attachment theory-based research, the bond people form with their pets can offer stability that can be as significant or even surpass human relationships. Brain scan research, for example, has shown that the brain perceives pets much like biological human children, shedding light on the deep emotional impact of these animal friends. The positive outcomes of having a pet go beyond emotional ties in that

owners experience enhanced physical and mental well-being that are immediately lost at the junctures of pet theft (Venaktramanan and Roberts 2024).

The issue of pet theft is not just an emotional strain but a financial one. Searching for a missing or stolen pet can rack up significant costs, with estimates reaching around \$1,000, without factoring in potential rewards (American Kennel Club 2021). As cases of pet theft rise, the contrast between the emotional value of pets and the inadequacy of legal consequences has become increasingly apparent as bemoaned by animal rights and similar advocacy groups as well as frustrated victims (Harris 2018; Wilks 1995). The shortage of highly desirable dog breeds in the United States, worsened by import restrictions, has become a post-pandemic concern as over 23 million Americans adopted dogs during lockdowns, again underscoring pets' vital role in providing companionship and comfort during challenging times (Chan 2021). More importantly, the supply and demand imbalance suggests the U.S. may follow the U.K. trend of increased incidents of dog theft and pet trafficking due to the lack of pets for sale or adoption. Given the lack of systematically collected data, this trend may well have already occurred as scientific scrutiny has lagged on the topic otherwise. The extant empirical literature only minimally indicates the more popular breeds stolen (Kim 2021) and where they are stolen (Peacock, Arathoon, and Allen 2019). However, there has not been a basic dissection of the nature of pet theft *per se*, particularly from a criminology and criminal justice approach. Toward providing an initial empirically informed typology of pet theft actors and crime dynamics, we employ video data analysis to explore a sample of dog theft incidents empirically.

## Research methods

### Sample

Dogs form notably close bonds with their owners, are specified as the animal type stolen most often in available pet theft and related searching accounts, and are the only type of pet theft on which there is extant literature. We searched for videos readily available on social media platforms, YouTube, X, and news media outlet websites from December 2019 through March 2020 using the following query terms: *pet theft*, *animal theft*, *dog flipping*, *pet trafficking*, *animal trafficking*, *puppy trafficking*, *dognapping*, *pet-flipping*, and *dog smuggling*. When selecting videos for review, we applied the definition of "optimal capture," which is, "visual data must enable researchers to establish the sequence of relevant actions and obtain empirical evidence for correlation between actions" (Anne and Legewie 2018:21). Replicating this sampling approach, we also required that videos included: 1) a depiction of at least one person illegally taking a pet; 2) an ability to discern if the theft was residential or commercial; and 3) the suspects' criminal process to complete the theft. Eighty-two videos ( $n = 82$ ) met these sample selection criteria and were included for analysis.

### Video data analysis (VDA)

VDA is essentially a form of content analysis (Wright and Mitchell Miller 1998) that, in the case of video data, offers researchers investigatory insight and advantage by meticulously breaking down events frame by frame (Bramsen 2018; Dabney, Hollinger, and Dugan 2004, Nassauer & Legewie, 2018; Frank, Weenink, and Lindegaard 2018; Legewie and Nassauer 2018; Nassauer 2016, 2018a, 2018b; Sytsma and Piza 2018; Willits and Makin 2018; Moeller, 2018). VDA draws inspiration from four primary methodological traditions (visual studies, ethnography, experimental behavioral studies, and multimodal interaction analysis) to create a unique approach to studying the situational dynamics across social settings (Legewie and Nassauer 2018). The specific analytic dimensions of VDA include three main categories: facial expressions and body posture, interactions, and context (Jordan and Henderson 1995), allowing for examining events in slow motion, shifting focus among different actors through repeated replays and stepwise breakdown of events to scrutinize actions, displayed behaviors, and emotional expressions. Perhaps the strongest methodological basis of VDA lies in the capacity to

assess the *immediacy of crime*, that is, its occurrence in live time and natural settings (Ferrell 1997; Mitchell and Holly 2015; Wright and Decker 1994, 1997; Jacobs 1999; Stickle 2017; and for a detailed overview see; Copes and Miller 2015). While VDA can generate an exceptionally detailed account of the situational nuances of criminal scenarios, it has been somewhat trapped in the technocratic criminalistics realm of criminal justice and, unfortunately, has not gained mainstream traction in academic criminology and criminal justice. VDA should be well received, though, in light of the growing body of research in CCJ spearheaded by Heith Copes and colleagues around visualization to inductively thematically address foci, primarily drug misuse (Copes and Wheeldon 2021).

*Facial Expressions and Body Posture* focus on nonverbal information conveyed through facial expressions and body postures which can reveal universal emotions, positive/negative affect, interest, engagement, and attentional focus. Analyzing body postures, such as head position, shoulders, arms, and legs, can provide insights into emotional states, energy levels, and confidence (Collins 1993, 2008). For instance, Klusemann (2009) used Ekman's coding of facial expressions and body language (2003) to assess the emotional states of negotiators during the Srebrenica massacre, while Nassauer (2016) employed body postures and facial expressions to detect emotional changes among police and protesters during demonstrations. *Interactions* alternatively focus on various interactions, including physical movements, actions, gestures, movement in space, item usage, and physical contact. Verbal communication and audio cues, such as content, intonation, and tone of voice, also contribute to understanding interactions (Klusemann 2009; Nassauer 2016). *Context* is not merely a static backdrop but significantly influences the interpretation of social actions and activities. Researchers in VDA analyze context along physical and social dimensions. Physical dimensions include space, lighting, weather conditions, and access. Social context encompasses information about actors' relationships, gender, ages, attire, and social roles during situations such as a criminal act (Levine, Taylor, and Best 2011; Nassauer 2018b).

VDA encompasses three essential steps to comprehensively understand and interpret situations through visual data. The procedure aims to deconstruct, reconstruct, and establish events to identify the recurring offender, victim, and environmental characteristics within observed situations. Customizable across research questions and theoretical frameworks, these steps include: 1) situation coding; 2) process and event reconstruction; and 3) identification of correlates and plausible causal factors.

*Coding Situations* enable dichotomizing lower-level actions (e.g., gestures, changes in gaze direction, or verbal cues) from higher-level actions (multiple lower-level behaviors and events like heated conversations) preceding criminality. VDA seeks to isolate and understand each element's contribution to the holistic situation. Specialized software, such as Noldus Observer XT, Atlas.ti, NVivo, MAXQDA, Elan, or Multimodal Analysis facilitates coding and assessment. Additionally, advancements in automated coding, particularly for facial expressions and movement recognition, offer promising opportunities for expanded future applications (Gao et al. 2016; Nievas et al. 2011; Ribeiro, Audigier, and Pham 2016).

*Reconstructing Processes and Events* begins with lower-level actions that serve as a reference foundation for further analysis. The temporal sequencing and timing of actions within crimes are paramount, and researchers reconstruct temporal-spatial matrices or diagrams to visualize the flow of events and identify interaction patterns. For instance, researchers can examine things like turn-taking (for criminal opportunity) or the rhythmicity of crime within and across scenarios.

*Identifying Correlative Factors and Potential Causal Links* entails the identification of correlates and causal links between situational dynamics and observed outcomes. This step is akin to causal process tracing but at a micro situational level to create comprehensive and compelling storylines that explain how particular events occur. Researchers may use various strategies to establish these links, such as examining temporally and spatially adjacent actions or identifying mechanisms connecting actions. Smoking gun observations, turning points, critical junctures, and windows of opportunity can be explored to determine how actions may be sequential or otherwise interrelated. Specifying plausible causal links requires a combination of meticulous analysis and theoretical reflection to ensure events

are substantiated and accentuates the import of utilizing multiple coders for inter-rater reliability to enhance the scientific rigor of these data segmentation processes.

## Analysis

One author and a coding assistant used an iterative inductive coding process by viewing dozens of videos together while discussing, interpreting, and identifying possible coding schemes. Once the initial codes were established, a third assistant tested the coding scheme and provided feedback. After this iteration, adjustments were made to the coding scheme (see Table 1), and three coders collected data for each video independently. When differing codes were identified, one author and a coder met to review the video and reach a consensus, or it was coded as “unclear.” This deductively driven process, as encouraged by Lindegaard and Bernasco (2018) and demonstrated by Libest, Heinsku, and Ejbye-Ernst (2018) and Stickle et al. (2020), resulted in a standard coding schedule that was adopted by all coders and enhanced consistency, reliability, and validity.

## Findings

### Thief characteristics

We examined various characteristics of the perpetrators, starting with classification as male, female, or unknown. The perpetrators’ race was categorized into four groups: white, black, other, and those whose race could not be determined. We documented the number of perpetrators involved in each

**Table 1.** Variables and operationalizations.

Variables	Operationalizations
<i>Perpetrator Characteristics</i>	
Number of Perpetrators	1, 2, 3+
Perpetrator #1 – Sex	Male, Female, Indiscernible
Perpetrator #1 – Race	White, Black, Other, Indiscernible
Perpetrator #2 – Sex	Male, Female, Indiscernible
Perpetrator #2 – Race	White, Black, Other, Indiscernible
Accomplice(s)	Yes, No (If Yes, Number of Accomplices)
Transportation	Vehicle, Bike, Foot, Other
<i>Location Characteristics</i>	
Time	Day, Night
Indoor	Residential, Commercial, Other
Animal Proximity to Exit	Close (0–6 ft), Intermediate (7–14 ft), Far (51+ ft)
Entry Method	Guest, Trespass, Other
Outdoor	Residence, Park, Other
Set Back	Close (0–6 ft), Intermediate (7–14 ft), Far (15+ ft)
Fence	Yes, No
Location	Front Yard, Back Yard, Side Yard, Porch, Other
Animal Visible from Street	Yes, No
<i>Animal Characteristics</i>	
Animal Type	Dog, Cat, Bird, Reptile, Fish, Small Mammal, Other
Number of Animals Taken	1, 2, 3, 4, 5+
Animal Size for Dogs	Small (<25 lbs.), Medium (25–60 lbs.), Large (>60 lbs.)
Animal-Perpetrator Interaction	Aggressive, Friendly, Neutral, Other
Animal Contained Prior to Theft	Fence, Tether, Container, None, Other
<i>Theft Methods</i>	
Number of Witnesses Present	0, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5+
Violence Used to Effect Crime	Yes, No
Force Used to Enter Property	Yes, No
Suspect Approach Toward Animal	Aggressive, Friendly, Neutral
Hid Animal During Theft	No, Yes-In Clothing, Yes-In Bag, Yes-Other
Distraction to Accomplish Theft	Yes, No, Not Applicable
Decoy Pet(s)	Yes, No
Tools	Box, Leash, Food, Net, Clothing, Collar, Other, None

incident and any observed accomplices. Additionally, we considered perpetrators' modes of transportation for scene exit: vehicle, bike, foot, other means, or unclear. Overall, 120 perpetrators were identified in the study, of which approximately 66% (79 of the 120) were males, 39 (32.50%) were females, and two could not be determined. Regarding race, roughly 48% (58) were categorized as white, while 28.33% (34) were identified as black. Five individuals fell under the "other" race category, and 23 were unknown or could not be ascertained. The number of perpetrators involved in each incident ranged from 1 to 3 or more individuals. Specifically, 44 out of the 82 (54%) cases involved a single perpetrator, while 31 (38%) involved two perpetrators, and 7 (9%) included three or more individuals acting in concert. Furthermore, 46.30% (38 of 82) of the incidents had accomplices aiding the main perpetrators, while the remaining 44 (53.65%) were carried out by individuals working alone.

Regarding transportation, 37.80% (31 of 82) of pet thefts involved vehicles, only 2.43% (2 of 82) used bicycles to escape, and half (41 of 82) of the pet thieves left the scene on foot. Finally, eight theft exits could not be determined due to various factors, such as obscured exit paths or the camera's positioning in the video surveillance.

### **Pet characteristics**

Next, we recorded various animal characteristics, encompassing dogs, cats, birds, fish, reptiles, small mammals, and others. We examined the number of animals taken in a single pet theft, varying from 1 to 5 or more. Out of the 82 videos analyzed, 63 (77%) of the pet thefts were dogs, 6 (7%) were cats, and another 6 (7%) were reptiles. Birds, fish, and small mammals comprised 2.43% (each 2 of 82) of pet thefts, while 1.21% (1 of 82) fell into the "other" category.

Approximately 74% (61 of 82) of pet thefts involved only one animal. Occurrences with two animals comprised 12.19% (10 of 82) of thefts, while incidents with three accounted for around 3.65% or 3 of 82 cases. Around 2% (2 of 82) of cases involved four animals taken, while 7.31% (6 of 82) involved thefts of five or more animals. Considering that over 76% of the animals taken were dogs, the vast majority (44 of 61 or 72.13%) were small dogs,<sup>1</sup> while medium-sized dogs were the least targeted, constituting an average of about 13% (8 of 61). Large dogs comprised the remaining nine dog thefts, suggesting a "concealable" and easily 'removable' theme relevant to target selection in burglary and other property crimes (n.d.).

Regarding animal reactions during pet thefts, roughly 57% (47 of 82) of animals remained neutral (e.g., relaxed, neutral tail position, ear stance), while 32.92% (27 of 82) displayed a friendly demeanor (e.g., animated with wagging tail, trying to lick person). Only two animals reacted aggressively (e.g., growl, attempt to nip, bite, or escape) during the theft, while five reactions could not be identified. About 46% (38 of 82) of animals were confined within a crate or container before the theft, while 20.73% (17 of 82) were located inside a fenced area. Furthermore, approximately 18% (15 of 82) were not contained/confined before the theft occurred.

### **Location characteristics**

We analyzed various crime scene location characteristics, including time of day, indoor or outdoor area, distance from exits if indoors, entry methods, and the visibility of animals from the street. Among the indoor incidents, we categorized proximities to the exit as close (0–6 feet), interim (7–14 feet), or far (15 or more feet) and whether the incident was in a guest access or trespassing context. We specifically examined homes and businesses for indoor locations, while residences and parks were considered for outdoor settings.

In the set of 82 videos, approximately 68% (56 of 82) of the thefts occurred during the day, about 26% (21 of 82) happened at night, and the remaining five thefts occurred at an indeterminable time.

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<sup>1</sup>Size classifications are not governed by official standards. For the present study coders estimated dogs using small (<25 pounds), medium (25–60 pounds), and large (>60 pounds).

We observed that 49 cases (60%) occurred indoors and 33 (40%) occurred outdoors. Notably, around 90% (44 of 49) of indoor pet thefts transpired within businesses, while just 10% (5 of 49) occurred in homes. Among indoor incidents, the estimated distance from entry to the pets was intermediate in about 28 (about 57%) cases, whereas only 13 (about 27%) were close to an exit and 4 (8.15%) were far from the entrance. Interestingly, over 73% (36 of 49) of indoor pet thefts occurred with the involvement of guests, while 24% (12 of 49) were due to trespassing.

In the outdoor pet thefts, approximately 85% (28 of 33) occurred at residential sites, with 48% (16 of 33) occurring when the stolen pet was close to an exit. Of these outdoor thefts, about 45% (15 of 33) occurred with evident fencing, while 52% (17 of 33) appeared to be open spaces. There was only one instance where it was impossible to determine whether a fence or wall was present. About 58% (19 of 33) of animals within the study were snatched from owners' front yards, and around 88% (29 of 33) of pets were directly visible from the street among the outdoor coded incidents.

### **Theft techniques**

Theft events included eight discernable characteristics or actions: 1) number of perpetrators; 2) whether violence was involved; 3) whether force was used; 4) perpetrators' approach to the animal; 5) if the animal was concealed; 6) if distraction of employee(s) or witness(es) occurred; 7) if decoy pets were utilized; and last 8) if tools were involved.

We considered a range from 0 to 5 or more for the number of people present and involved in the theft. More than 51% (42 of 82) of thefts involved a sole perpetrator, 13 of the 82 (about 16%) videos had one other person present, and the rest had three or more actors. Violence was not a factor in roughly 96% (79 of 82) cases. However, in 3 (about 4%) instances, individuals did use some form of violence – defined as physical harm to another person (hitting or pushing). About 85% (70 of 82) of individuals also did not use force, while 14.63% (12 of 82) did. Observed force included breaking a door and other property damage while taking the animal.

Forty-seven (57%) videos showed the perpetrator(s) had a neutral approach to the targets. Aggressive approaches only occurred in 13% (11 of 82) of incidents, with friendly strategic approaches occurring 26% (21 of 82) of the time. Of the 82 videos analyzed, 63% (52 of 82) of perpetrators did not hide the animal during the theft, and 87% (72 of 82) did not use distraction techniques with staff or other potential witnesses. About a third (37% or 30 of 82) of thefts involved animals hidden in clothing, bags, or other materials, while 10 (about 12%) incidents involved distracted victims or witnesses. During three thefts (3.65%), an offender had another animal with them, which may have been used to facilitate the crime, comfort the stolen dog, or as a decoy or plausible excuse for being near the stolen animal.

### **Discussion & implications**

Using a video data analysis (VDA) framework, we broke down the various stages of pet theft from the initial approach to the final escape. Most pet thefts occur during daylight hours, particularly in homes near roadways; most (88%) incidents involve pets visible from the street; most are without a fence, and small dogs comprise most thefts (72%). These empirically based observations should be affirmed to identify important variables for inclusion in future studies. A range of possible situational crime prevention techniques have emerged as potential solutions to disrupt observed pet thefts.

For dog and other pet theft deterrence, a VDA approach directly indicated the principles of *situational crime prevention* (SCP) techniques as developed by Clarke (1997).<sup>2</sup> SCP aims to pinpoint

<sup>2</sup>The effectiveness of applying SCP techniques hinges on concentrating on a specific crime category (Clarke 2017), such as pet theft, rather than using the broader term "theft." SCP has been implicated across various *foci* including the examination of gas poisoning related suicide in the UK (Clarke and Mayhew 1988), residential burglary (Poyner and Webb 1991), occupational corruption (Tunley et al. 2018), package thefts (Stickle et al. 2020), crimes in public transportation in El Salvador (Natarajan et al. 2015), and various additional topics (see Guerrett, 2009 for a comprehensive review of 206 SCP projects).



alterations in the design and management of the environment that potentially decrease crime while incurring minimal economic and social costs (Clarke 2017; Mayhew and Michael 2012). This risk-averse target-hardening framework provides an established structure for devising strategies directly applicable to pet theft. As our sample involved more commercial than residential theft settings, it is unsurprising that we observed more day than nighttime incidents as a function of when pet stores are open, which also explains why most perpetrators were guests (i.e., shoppers), not trespassers.

The findings from this study suggest the need to implement select situational crime prevention (SCP) techniques to reduce the likelihood of pet theft. For example, *Increasing the Effort* involves enhancing security by installing higher fences and locked gates, encouraging owners to avoid leaving pets unattended, and using tamper-proof collars or harnesses. *Increasing the Risks* includes using surveillance cameras at entry points, assigning staff to oversee animal areas, and training pet store employees to monitor for suspicious behavior. *Reducing the Rewards* involves microchipping pets and using GPS collars to make them easily identifiable and less attractive to thieves. Employing visible tags with contact information, avoiding leaving pets with valuables, and enforcing policies requiring proper documentation for pet resale are also crucial. *Reducing Provocations* includes providing resources and training for pet owners, educating the community on avoiding confrontations, promoting awareness campaigns on the emotional impact of pet theft, and encouraging social norms that stigmatize the crime. Finally, *Removing Excuses* entails communicating that pet theft is a crime through signs, controlling pet sales, facilitating theft reporting, ensuring pets cannot be rehomed without identification or proof of ownership, providing safeguarding guidelines, and encouraging community vigilance.

While pet owners can employ situational crime prevention techniques to prevent theft of their pet(s), the findings from this study also indicate a need for policy change concerning how the criminal justice system views and addresses the issue of pet theft. Specifically, we encourage law enforcement agencies to motivate victims to report pet thefts and initiate the practice of maintaining offense-specific records in detail comparable to other property crimes. Often, these thefts are cataloged under broader “theft” or “larceny” categories, obscuring the problem’s true extent. Without sufficient and specific data, the ability to infer evidence-based practices regarding physical and perceptual deterrence actions, prevention measures, and enforcement will likely be hindered. Policymakers should revisit laws and possible sanctions for pet theft, implement standardized reporting protocols, and enhance community awareness programs to increase reporting rates and deter potential thieves.

As with any study, there are important limitations to address. We did not consider whether employees facilitated any of the thefts, but in hindsight, this factor appears to be a significant variable of interest for future research. Lindegaard and Bernasco (2018) note that a video selection bias may emerge when utilizing online surveillance footage, leading to an overrepresentation of failed attempts or humorous incidents of pet theft. Moreover, cameras do not always capture the complete crime context, including events that transpired before or after the incident or situations where the suspect moves out of the camera’s sight. While the study objectives of the initial empirical assessment and delineation of pet theft were met, the degree of generalizability of the findings is unknown without comparative methodology and extant literature. Our study relied on a purposive sample of publicly available online videos, which might not universally apply to all scenarios.

In conclusion, this study sheds light on the under-researched crime of pet theft, revealing critical insights into offender behaviors and situational dynamics. By employing Video Data Analysis, we have identified key patterns and prevention strategies that can inform both policy and community practices. Recognizing the significant emotional and financial impact on victims, future research should continue to explore this area. Continued exploration will aid in developing more effective deterrents and support systems, enhancing preventive measures and legal responses. Additionally, greater systematic data collection and reporting on pet theft incidents will provide a robust foundation for further empirical research and policy formulation. By fostering a comprehensive understanding of pet theft, we can better protect the bond between pets and their owners, ultimately reducing the prevalence of this distressing crime.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Notes on contributors

**Ben Stickle**, Ph.D., is a Professor of Criminal Justice Administration at Middle Tennessee State University and holds a Ph.D. in Justice Administration from the University of Louisville. Ben's research focuses on property crime and policing, and he is widely recognized through his research contributions on metal theft, package theft, and emergent crime trends.

**Brenda Vose** (Ph.D., 2008, University of Cincinnati) is an Associate Professor and Chair of the Department of Criminology and Criminal Justice at the University of North Florida where she teaches and researches in the areas of community corrections, offender assessment and classification, offender treatment, evidence-based interventions, and law enforcement staffing. Dr. Vose currently serves on the Southern Criminal Justice Association Executive Board and on the Editorial Board of the American Journal of Criminal Justice. Prior to joining the faculty at UNF, she was the Academic Director of the Online Master of Science Program in Criminal Justice at the University of Cincinnati. Her published work appears in Federal Probation, Journal of Contemporary Criminal Justice, Criminal Justice and Behavior, Criminology and Public Policy, American Journal of Criminal Justice, and Policing: An International Journal.

**J. Mitchell Miller** is the John A. Delaney Presidential Professor at the University of North Florida, serving on the faculty of the Department of Criminology & Criminal Justice. Specializing in the areas of drug crime and substance abuse treatment in justice settings, his current research includes mixed methods evaluations of various adult treatment courts across the nation toward the discovery and affirmation of evidence-based treatment and policing practices. He served as Editor of the American Journal of Criminal Justice over the past six years and served as the 38th President of the Southern Criminal Justice Association.

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