

ARTICLE

Experiences of dog theft and spatial practices of search/ing

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Abstract

Public responses to an ‘upward trend’ in recorded dog theft offences in England and Wales led to the creation of the Pet Theft Taskforce in May 2021, followed by a policy paper recommending the development of a new ‘pet abduction’ offence. Despite this, the experiential nature of dog theft, what impact this has on victims, and how they go about searching for their stolen dogs have been overlooked. Building on interdisciplinary research on dog theft, and wider literature on the impact of absence and loss on human victims, this paper explores the experiential dimension of this crime and the spatial and temporal practices of search/ing. Drawing on 15 semi-structured interviews with victims of dog theft (10) and community resolution groups (5), key themes emerged from our analyses: (i) more-than-human families and (ii) spatial and temporal practices of search/ing. The dogs in this study occupy an absent presence, their bodies not visibly present but occupying a space in the minds and words of their humans. From the realisation of loss through to ongoing searches to possible reunite, participant experiences are filled with emotions that reflect a traumatic experience and ‘ambiguous absence’. With expectations of police support rarely met, victims started physically searching themselves, moving from the local to regional and national, while connecting with animal professionals and community resolution groups. Virtual space was seen as vital, with social media amplifying the virtual presence of specific stolen dogs. Conceived as a more-human-focused animal geography, the research brings together an empirical example at the potential intersection of animal geographies and policing. The experiential evidence in this paper suggests changes to organisational practices (standardised police approach; centralised microchip database; mandatory microchip-scanning by animal professionals) and national government policy interventions (‘pet abduction’ offence) might have a positive impact on victim experiences.

KEYWORDS

animal geographies, dog theft, dogs, interviews, police, UK

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1 | INTRODUCTION

The UK has been styled as ‘a nation of pet lovers’ since the Victorian era (Howell, 2000; Ritvo, 1987). The PDSA Animal Wellbeing (PAW) Report (2021) reported 26% of UK adults now own a dog, with an estimated canine population of 9.6 million. During the lockdown periods of 2020, dog breeders and rescues centres (Battersea, 2020; Dogs Trust, 2020; Kennel Club, 2020; Pets4Homes, 2020) reported significant increases in ‘demand’ for dogs, largely as individuals and families sought canine companionship while restricted to their homes. In most cases pets are loved, cared for, and treated as sentient beings (Charles, 2014). Under UK law, however, pets are regarded as personal “property” when stolen. The sentences available under the Theft Act, 1968 are dependent on the monetary value of the stolen animal, rather than their cultural, emotional, and social significance as family members (see for example Charles, 2016; Irvine & Cilia, 2017; Power, 2008; Shir-Vertesh, 2012). For Harris, “the law trivializes the emotional harm that can be caused by the theft of a companion animal” (Harris, 2018, p. 6).

Despite the importance of pets to our daily lives, there have been national reports of a dog theft ‘epidemic’ (BBC News, 2020; Mirror Online, 2021). Using data provided by police forces under Freedom of Information (FOI) requests, 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, coupled with a year-on-year fall in the number of charges as a proportion of crimes for stealing dogs (Allen, 2020). However, Selby-Fell and Allen stress the importance of treating police recorded crime data with caution, and of “recognising the range of limitations associated with it” (2021, p. 3). In particular, they argue that as dog theft is captured in a range of HOCR¹ crime types (Home Office, 2021a), and the techniques that police forces use to collate their figures are not clear, police crime data are likely to provide only a partial picture of the extent of the problem. Furthermore, statistics do not tell us about the experiential nature of the crimes, how dog theft impacts victims emotionally, or how victims go about search/ing (Parr et al., 2016) for their stolen dogs.

The Pet Theft Taskforce was created in response to public concerns about the reported increases in dog theft in May 2021. The *Pet Theft Taskforce Policy paper* (Home Office, 2021b) recommended the development of a new ‘pet abduction’ offence through primary legislation and actions that “will ensure that the issue of pet theft is tackled end from end, and that the welfare and safety of pets is fully taken into account” (Home Office, 2021b, p. 29). Cognisant of these recommendations, we aim to build on current research (Allen et al., 2019; Harris, 2018; Selby-Fell & Allen, 2021) to explore the experiential dimension of pet theft, focusing on the impact of absence and loss on human victims (Howell, 2000), the spatial and temporal tactics involved in practices of search/ing (Parr et al., 2016; Parr & Stevenson, 2015), and the challenges present within strategies of reunification.

2 | LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 | Pets: Property versus family

Since emerging in the 1990s, ‘new’ animal geography has highlighted the differing interactions, understandings, and experiences of nonhuman animals in relation to humans (Buller, 2014; Gibbs, 2021; Hovorka, 2017; Philo & Wilbert, 2000; Wolch & Emel, 1995, 1998) by exploring the ‘complex entanglings of human–animal relations with space, place, location, environment and landscape’ (Philo & Wilbert, 2000, p. 4). Although fragmented, the subdiscipline can be broadly presented through two interrelated concerns (Lorimer & Srinivasan, 2013): (i) ‘animal spaces’, the spatial ordering of animals in relation to different human communities and practices (Enticott, 2008; Matless et al., 2005; Urbanik & Morgan, 2013); and (ii) ‘bestly places’, the lived experiences and agency of nonhuman animals and the practical, political, and ethical implications of researching with nonhuman animals (Bear, 2011; Gillespie & Collard, 2015; Ginn, 2014; Hobson, 2007; Oliver, 2021; Srinivasan, 2016; Turnbull & Van Patter, 2022). Grounded within the more-human-focused area of animal geography, this paper engages with both areas of concern.

Animals have historically been positioned as property: commodities, lacking self-awareness, objects for dominating, nonhuman living beings which are separate from humans (Haraway, 2008; Ritvo, 1987; Tuan, 1984). This has led to a social and legal blurring of status, where the values ascribed to nonhuman species relate to categories including wild (indigenous/invasive) and domestic (livestock/companion). For Collard and Dempsey, each of these can be defined as ‘lively commodities’, where “value derives from their status as living beings” (Collard & Dempsey, 2013, p. 2684). The emergence of pet custody disputes in family law (Rook, 2014) reveals a further tension between understandings of pets as property and/or family, underlining the belief that pets are more-than-property.

Studies have shown that many pet owners place their pets as family, often treating them like children and themselves as pet parents (Charles, 2014, 2016). Recognising both their similarities and differences from humans (Fox, 2006; Haraway, 2008; Power, 2008; Shir-Vertesh, 2012), Charles explains that people and their pets are understood through the idiom of kinship “which indicates significant and enduring connectedness between humans and animals” (2014, p. 715). This inter-species connectedness can be viewed through the therapeutic benefits of many human–pet relationships, in mitigating loneliness, and improving health and wellbeing (Bowen et al., 2020; Brooks et al., 2019; Cutt et al., 2007; Gillespie & Lawson, 2017; Robinson, 2019). On the other hand, in Satama and Huopainen (2018) research on canine companionship, a narrative of love and affection, but also of care and grief, through care for a dog who is between life and death, is struck. Insights from this research show us how animal companionship is about care, compassion, responsibility, and sadness. Grief and sadness in animal life and death stretches beyond the human–canine relationship to include horses (Schuurman, 2017), and “hamsters, rabbits, tortoises, turtles, budgies, mice, ferrets, guinea pigs and goldfish ... One thousand and one tales of devotion and loss, love and death” (Lorimer, 2019, p. 334). Pets thus transgress boundaries of grievability as important parts of post-human families (Redmalm, 2015; Schuurman & Redmalm, 2019).

2.2 | Pet theft: Forced absence and search/ing

Howell (2000) details historic cases of pet theft in Victorian London, describing the theft of a pet as emotional exploitation. These crimes were organised targeting the wealthy white middle classes, stealing dogs for extortionate ransoms, dog fighting, and breeding. The organisation of such crimes spread fear and anxiety across middle-class pet owners (Howell, 2000), so much that a Select Committee on Dog Stealing was considered (but rejected) in July 1844 (Hansard HC Deb, 11 July 1844). In contemporary society, pet theft offences have been reported across the UK and extend beyond the bourgeoisie. Allen et al. (2019) used FOI requests to English and Welsh police forces to map temporal and geographical trends in dog theft offences. The results showed a rise in recorded dog theft crimes across 41 police forces in England and Wales, with 1559 crimes in 2015, 1653 in 2016 (6% increase from 2015), and 1842 in 2017 (11.5% increase from 2016); and a decline in the percentage of ‘charges’, around 4% (64 of 1559) in 2015, 3% (51 of 1653) in 2016, and 2% (39 of 1842) in 2017. Similarly, Selby-Fell and Allen (2021) found a 3.5% increase in dog theft crimes for the 33 police forces where both 2019 and 2020 data were available, with less than 1% of all recorded offences resulting in a ‘charge’. Selby-Fell and Allen (2021) also reported geographical variations in terms of whether police force areas had recorded increases or decreases in dog theft offences. However, Allen et al. (2019) and Selby-Fell and Allen (2021) argue that there is a need to go beyond statistics to explore the experiential nature of dog theft, the emotional impact of theft, and the understanding of dogs as more-than-property.

Although we do not make direct comparisons between stolen pets and missing people, the experiences of families with stolen pets (Howell, 2000) and families of missing people (Parr et al., 2016; Parr & Stevenson, 2015) are bound up with emotions. With reference to wider interdisciplinary research on ‘ambiguous loss and grief’ (Boss, 1999; Boss & Carnes, 2012), Parr et al. (2016) show how families deal with the ambiguous absence of their missing family member, the search/ing practices they undertake, and how this is tied with remembering the missing person.

Following Parr et al. (2016) we adopt the phrase ‘search/ing’, as they describe:

In using ‘search/ing’ we deliberately use a combined construction of ‘search’ and ‘searching’ to indicate the simultaneous reference to a practical, material, or virtual act with particular parameters (a search) and reference to a constant processional investigation to locate another human being (searching). Search/ing may have emotional or psychological dimensions, and may combine in a variety of ways at different stages of a noticed absence and be operative at different scales.

(2016, p. 66)

Search/ing for missing people can be undertaken in several ways, such as officially by police forces (Fyfe et al., 2015) or by specialised search and rescue units (Yarwood, 2010, 2015). Parr et al. (2016) outline a range of different search practices that the families of missing people undertake, grouping them into physical searching (e.g., door knocking or site-specific searching), documentary/virtual searching (e.g., letters to specific locales or media appeals via TV, radio, or print), social networks/alerts (e.g., contacting friends and family), charitable help, and other practices such as ‘looking’ but not searching. These search/ing activities show the different lengths that families go to in order to find their missing family member – parallels can be made with families experiencing the forced absence of their stolen pets.

3 | METHODOLOGY

This study aims to explore the spatial and temporal tactics involved in practices of search/ing and the challenges present within strategies of reunification. In addition, the experiential dimension of pet theft is examined, with reference to existing evidence based on the impact of absence and loss on human victims.

We draw on 15 semi-structured interviews with UK victims of dog theft (including people whose dogs are still missing and those whose dogs have been reunited), and community and charity resolution groups (see Table 1). Three national ‘pet detective’ businesses were invited to participate, but all declined interviews or did not respond. Participants are separated into the groups ‘Dog Theft Victims’ and ‘Community Resolution Groups’, however it should be noted that many participants occupy an ‘inbetweenness’, as both victims of dog theft and organisers of community-run dog theft resolution groups. The names of owners and dogs have been changed to protect identities; those speaking on behalf of community resolution groups agreed to participate with the knowledge that they may be identifiable in relation to their public-facing roles within such groups.

Participants were recruited through Facebook groups, via Twitter, and through our existing professional and social networks.² Many victims of pet theft and community-resolution groups use Facebook and Twitter to disseminate information about their missing dogs, or dogs that have gone missing, so recruitment online acted as a natural way to engage with potential participants within this community. Semi-structured interviews were completed by telephone, due to participants being geographically dispersed across the UK, and lasted between 30 and 90 min.³

While the benefits of telephone interviewing have been outlined in previous work (McLafferty, 2010), there is a need for a greater understanding of the process of telephone interviewing, especially when the subject matter is emotional.

TABLE 1 Biographical information of participants from this study

Owner	Dog(s)/(Breed(s))	Area	Year stolen	Missing/reunited
Dog Theft Victims				
Tanya	Toby (Pomeranian)	Kent	2018	Reunited 2018
Sarah	Bailey (Sprocker)	West Mercia	2018	Missing
Julia	Twix and Twirl (Border Terriers)	Scotland	2018	Missing
James	Pippa (Rottweiler)	West Yorkshire	2015	Missing
Heather	Rocco (Beagle cross Australian Kelpie)	Leicestershire	2019	Reunited 2019
Lucy	Star (German Shepherd)	North Wales	2019	Missing
Rachel	Oreo (Cocker Spaniel)	Thames Valley	2019	Missing
Shirley	Nexus (Miniature Pinscher)	Thames Valley	2018	Missing
Megan	Nova (Whippet)	Thames Valley	2018	Missing
Rosa	Tala and Teddy (Husky and White German Shepherd)	South Yorkshire	2016	Missing
Group				Participant
Community Resolution Groups				
DogLost	The UK’s largest lost and found dog service – founded in 2003.			Regional coordinator Police liaison officer
Stolen and Missing Pets Alliance (SAMPA)	Campaigning coalition made up of DogLost, Vets Get Scanning, Dog Union, and Pet Theft Awareness formed in 2014.			Spokesperson
Help Bring Daisy Home	Facebook group set up in 2018 to raise awareness and help reunite Daisy the Labrador.			Spokesperson
Murphy’s Army	Facebook group formed in 2015 – community helped reunite stolen Murphy the Husky in 2016. Became a charitable organisation in 2017 to help reunite lost and stolen pets with their owners and raise pet theft awareness across the UK.			Spokesperson

From a researcher perspective, there were some difficulties in empathising with participants through telephone interviews due to visual expressions and embodied actions being invisible and thus our expressions of empathy being limited to verbal cues. Additionally, there was an ethical tension between our study of emotions, and the ethical consideration of ‘thou shall not cause harm’ (Probyn, 2020; Widdowfield, 2000), as emotions such as grief, loss, and trauma became prominent in participants’ discussions of their experiences of their dogs going missing and being stolen. Therefore, before interviews commenced, we provided participants with a set of questions so they were aware of the issues that may surface. The questions were organised biographically, starting with a discussion about when the participants first acquired their dog(s), and information around their dog’s characteristics, moving to the events that led them to realise their dog was missing, what they did to try to find their dog, and finally the return of their dog or, in most cases, their continued search/ing. This allowed for a chronological understanding of the events around pet theft and for a deep engagement with the participants’ biographical stories.

Parr and Stevenson (2015) discuss how, in interviews with families of missing people, talk “about absent others brought to presence *both* these missing people *and* the ambiguities often surrounding their words about them” (2015, p. 310). Similarities were echoed in our own experiences of interviewing dog owners: discussing nonhuman absence brought missing dogs into presence, showing how this absence influences the humans’ everyday lives. Furthermore, through talk about absence, the language we used in the interviews needed to be constructed carefully. The tense of the language we were using became imbued with grief, loss, and hope – “what breed *was* your dog?” became “what breed *is* your dog?” Participants actively highlighted this use of language from their own perspective when discussing their dogs:

Okay, so Oreo was, and is hopefully, a working cocker spaniel and he was six months when he was taken and he is brown.

(Rachel, Thames Valley)

She was amazing, well I say she was – I mean she is. She is amazing.

(Lucy, North Wales)

These quotes echoed the hope expressed by the participants for the future return of their dogs and the presence their dogs have in their lives, showing the geographies and worlds of words (McGeachan & Philo, 2014).

Interviews were transcribed by auto-transcription software and were then edited by the authors to make sure transcriptions were verbatim. Interviews were analysed thematically by all the researchers with themes and sub-themes emerging through immersing ourselves within our data. Two themes emerged from our analyses: more-than-human families and spatial and temporal practices of search/ing.

4 | MORE-THAN-HUMAN FAMILIES

4.1 | Social and cultural status of dogs

This first theme that was identified related to the tensions of the social and cultural status of dogs as being property and family and how this is felt and experienced through the loss of a pet through theft. The law on pet theft is currently based on a pet’s economic value; sentience and emotional bonds are not recognised (Theft Act, 1968).

As ‘lively commodities’ (Collard & Dempsey, 2013), however, the price of stolen dogs is a mix of market value based on age, breed-type, breedability, and the amount of money a family is willing and/or able to pay for their safe return. For Rachel, it was not knowing what has happened to her dog, coupled with their potential economic value to a thief, that caused emotional distress:

The cockapoo type dogs sell for over a thousand pounds ... he was quite a valuable commodity to somebody if that’s what they want to do with him ... that’s my, that’s my worry, is that that’s where he’s gone, which would be horrible.

(Rachel, Thames Valley)

She positions her dog as a commodity to those who have stolen him, rather than him as a pet to be loved, the way she values him. On occasions this tension is reflected in the high cash rewards offered to incentivise knowledge exchange with the aim of hastening reunification. Shirley, for example, offered a 'finders-fee' that far exceeded the economic value of her stolen dog: "I think we offered £11,000 which was supposedly the biggest offer ever made" (Shirley, Thames Valley). James also described the role of an economic reward as an effort for reunification:

I mean I'd give anything to have Pippa back, but the sensible part of me thinks, well, you're just fuelling the bonfire, because they'll steal your dog, they'll get that ... I mean mine, [reward] currently stands at £4,100, I believe.

(James, West Yorkshire)

James stated his desire to get his dog back no matter what the cost, thus offering a high reward beyond their realistic economic value. This value reflects the role of Pippa in James' life. Furthermore, James also highlights the issue with these high rewards as unintentionally being a reason for why someone might steal a dog.

4.2 | Emotional and behavioural experience

Our research found the theft of a pet is filled with emotional reactions, ones of dread, fear, loss, love, and sadness, reflecting what many argue is a traumatic experience. Sarah (West Mercia) explained that "we're absolutely heartbroken ... a dog is irreplaceable really". The irreplaceability of a dog centres their sentience and agency as individuals, capable of thought and creating emotional bonds (Haraway, 2003, 2008).

Heather explained her series of self-blame due to the loss of Rocco:

You start blaming yourself, you go through a lot of self-blaming because you're thinking, oh, what about if I just didn't take her on a walk today, she'll still be here.

(Heather, Leicestershire)

The unknowingness of what has happened to their dogs causes a lot of emotional distress:

It's horrendous because you don't know how they are being treated, if they have been stolen for bait. And it's that not knowing that is so traumatic.

(Tanya, Kent)

Not knowing if a dog is receiving 'good' care, if they are being abused or used for economic gain as a lively commodity, is traumatic for their human guardian. Furthermore, this unknowingness can be understood as an 'ambiguous absence'. Parr et al. (2016) argue that "ambiguous absence is different to 'ordinary' loss as missing people are *physically absent* but *psychologically present* for their families" (2016, p. 68, emphasis original, citing Boss, 1999). This is a similar experience to people whose dogs have been stolen. For Sarah, this ambiguous absence is a liminal situation of emotional significance:

This is the other thing, you live in limbo.⁴ Yes, if her body was now found by the side of the road, we'd be very upset but we'd have closure. She's only turned three in December, she's now coming up to four years old, and she could live for another 12, 15 years ... I hope, touch wood, I don't have to wait that long and never get closure. I just hope that she crops up in the meantime.

(Sarah, West Mercia)

Sarah indicates she is stuck not knowing whether her dog is dead or alive. Her wait for closure has a strong emotional affect, where she indicates a desire to understand what has happened. It is the long ambiguous absence and the twin feeling of hope that forms her experience.

Tanya explained how the loss of her dog affected her grandchildren:

They're indispensable. People don't realise the impact. At the time we had one grandchild in hospital. And she was absolutely heartbroken. And then another two grandchildren at home. All upset, in tears, everything.
(Tanya, Kent)

As Tipper (2011) argues, animals are interwoven with children's narratives of their social lives, occupying the positions of family or friends, emotionally and sensorially part of their spatial experiences. Both Julia and Sarah also explained the impact the loss of their dogs had on their personal relationships:

My marriage, in itself, has been tested, really tested.

(Julia, Scotland)

I've lost friends but I think I've gained more friends ... [I]f they're not a doggy person, a lot of the time they can't understand why I'm still hooked on wanting to find her. The only way I can say is that she's part of my family. How would you like it if suddenly, a member of your family disappeared, vanished into thin air?

(Sarah, West Mercia)

Their relationships to their pets are critiqued by some as loving their pets 'too much' (McKeithen, 2017), beyond what an acceptable (although ever changing) level of pet love is (Nast, 2006). This scepticism is similar to that of those who are challenged when experiencing grief and loss when a pet dies (Redmalm, 2015). Sarah challenges "those with no affinity for pets or those who are afraid of them", placing them as 'outsiders', unable to understand the human–animal bond (Nast, 2006, p. 896).

The return of a dog and reuniting them with their human owners was an emotional experience. Heather explained a mixture of feelings on the return of Rocco:

You go through so many emotions, you're like, oh my God, someone's finally found her. Because you do start giving up hope in the end, you do give up hope that she's ever going to be back *home*, and we were kind of reaching that place after two weeks.

(Heather, Leicestershire)

As the time of absence increases, feelings of hope for the return of the dog begin to dissipate. The return of Rocco to Heather led to a rollercoaster of emotions.

The experience of pet theft changed the pet-keeping practices of many of the participants. There was a growing trend on the individual 'response-ability' of pet owners when walking their dogs, such as keeping their dogs on leashes and within sight (Brown & Dilley, 2012; Haraway, 2008). Rachel explained that:

We now have a padlock on that side gate ... I don't let, well he doesn't really go out of my sight this one ... but I yeah, I would keep an eye on him ... not that I didn't keep an eye on them before, but definitely yeah if he were to go out in the front where it is open ... I keep my eye on him.

(Rachel, Thames Valley)

Rachel secured the home and garden as a preventative measure to lower the chance that one of their dogs would go missing in the future. She also outlined how she is more vigilant of her dogs, always keeping them in sight. Lucy also keeps her dogs in sight but has also limited the spatiality in which they share:

I just don't let them out of my sight. I've stopped walking in public. I'll only walk on the land now. I get paranoid if I'll have to take them down to the vets because they're in the back of the car. I hate it. It's horrible.

(Lucy, North Wales)

Lucy indicates her anxiety of taking her dog out into public space in case they get stolen or go missing. Both the participants indicate a greater sense of personal control over their dogs' mobility and movements. This is akin to a greater sense of

'response-ability' (Brown & Dilley, 2012; Haraway, 2008), but also shows the human control dogs are under (Tuan, 1984) and the limiting of doggy-ness through increased securitisation of canine bodies and spaces.

5 | SPATIAL AND TEMPORAL PRACTICES OF SEARCH/ING

As Parr et al. (2016) assert "the re-presenting of missing people is usually attempted by the *continued search for them* by their families, a practical activity that happens in parallel to, and not always in partnership with, official police search enquiries" (2016, p. 67, emphasis original). We attempt to explore these responses to the absence of pets that have been stolen through exploring the spatial tactics for reunification over time.

5.1 | Police response

When dogs are taken or known to be missing from a secure space, the majority of victims contact the police to report their loss (APCC, 2021). From the initial point of contact with the police, victim experiences with police forces varied significantly, but expectations of support were rarely met. For Shirley, calling the police made the experience real, but it lacked a personal connection:

The first people that we called was the police ... Calling the police, it hit me she'd been stolen, and the police didn't turn up they just gave us a crime number.

(Shirley, Thames Valley)

Those who did not witness their dog being taken found it more challenging to convince the police that their loss should be regarded as a crime. Megan reflected on this and the importance of community support interventions in gaining a crime reference number (CRN):

I think once it went past about five or six weeks, Sam and whoever it was they worked with the (DogLost) police liaison to kind of badger them into giving us a crime number which we got. I think we got it up to about two or three months we didn't get it straight away.

(Megan, Thames Valley)

Sarah expressed feelings of relief and gratitude when the 'missing' status of Bailey became 'stolen' on the police system:

I phoned them up saying that she was missing, and then I phoned them back up again to say that she was stolen. I'm actually fortunate that I did get a crime reference number.

(Sarah, West Mercia)

Julia was disappointed that police officers did not visit their home: "we rang the police three times, nothing came of it ... no one has been out" (Julia, Scotland) and Rosa felt alone: "The police weren't interested" (Rosa, South Yorkshire). Heather felt the less-than-human status of stolen pets influenced a hierarchy of prioritisation, which informed the perceived seriousness:

It's not a massive deal to the police because to them it's not a human, so they don't prioritise it. It's not a human in need and if that were a child been abducted, they'd be straight on it.

(Heather, Leicestershire)

Recognising this hierarchy, most victims took it on themselves to start physically search/ing for their stolen dogs:

I mean, the police are wonderful in their own right, but we didn't feel that this is something ... They're not going to physically go out there and look for her because that's what I needed them to do.

(Lucy, North Wales)

5.2 | Physical search/ing

For victims of dog theft, there are many avenues (beyond the above police approach) that they explore in an attempt to find their stolen pet. These resolutions to reunification varied both temporally and spatially, with victims adopting different tactics as time progressed. The initial response from most people was to search the area in which their dog had disappeared:

When she first went missing, I was obviously walking everywhere and then asking the general public if they walked in the area that we live in if they could keep an eye open.

(Sarah, West Mercia)

This was a tactic adopted by most of the participants in an attempt to cover local space quickly and efficiently to limit their dog's absence. These initial searches were sometimes characterised by:

Panic, in a word. Running around like a headless chicken all the local streets.

(James, West Yorkshire)

James' feelings of panic affected his spatial tactics in searching for Pippa, as he implies a sense of chaos to his search strategies. Other participants took these early stages of search/ing more strategically, as Lucy explains:

I was literally out walking all day every day, I would pick the kids up from school then head out, take her sister out [another dog] with her to put a scent down, or maybe they would find her.

(Lucy, North Wales)

Similar tactics are used by search and rescue dogs in which a human and dog team work together to locate missing or injured persons in often rural, mountainous areas (Yarwood, 2015).

5.3 | Involvement of other agencies

After the initial search/ing, people's tactics changed. Participants started to expand their search/ing spatially, moving the search from the nucleated local area outwards, to working with vets, dog wardens, microchip companies, and community resolution groups (such as DogLost). Heather describes how she developed her search strategy:

We rang all the vets in the local area ... We rang the dog wardens, we put posters up around the area, around the woods she were lost in so people knew we were looking for her when they were taking their dog [for a walk].

(Heather, Leicestershire)

Veterinary professionals were a key contact for many participants as dogs which are found by members of the public would be taken there (BVA, 2021; Dogs Trust, 2021). This was also true for dog wardens as victims of dog theft recognise that their dogs may be picked up as a stray – it is a legal requirement to report a stray dog to the local animal warden. Alerting the dog wardens to the fact that their dog was a missing and out-of-place pet (Creswell, 1996), rather than a stray (Srinivasan, 2013), was an important mode of legitimisation. The legitimisation of a dog's status as both a 'pet' and 'stolen' was important and alerting microchip companies to change a dog's status to 'missing'/'stolen' was a key tactic for resolution, as Heather explains:

We notified the chip company to say she was missing, and within a certain mile radius they put an alert out so if anyone scanned her it would say she is a missing dog and not a stray.

(Heather, Leicestershire)

Heather places value on changing Rocco's chip status, expressing her hope of reunification through the possibility of an animal professional scanning Rocco at first presentation. Microchipping was a contentious issue for many participants and is currently in the public eye, with petitions around microchipping being put forward to make the scanning and checking of microchips by vets 'mandatory' rather than 'best practice' (Defra, 2021).

For other participants, their search strategies in local areas took many novel avenues, as Sarah reveals:

I did try drones [to] search ... They advertise on Facebook. I either got no response back from them, or there weren't any pilots in the area, or the weather wasn't right which obviously limits it a lot. And then I did contact some pet detectives but they're so few and far between them all. They're either out working on another case or they just wouldn't come to my area.

(Sarah, West Mercia)

Some cited a mismatch between detective services, economic fees, and tactics already being undertaken (Rosa, South Yorkshire), while there was a wider scepticism towards the (reli)ability of such commercial enterprises (Lucy, North Wales).

As time progressed, some participants' tactics expanded spatially, moving from local or regional to national areas. This involved adaptation to already designed tactics such as sending posters (Sarah, West Mercia) and stamps and envelopes with images and information of the missing dog(s) (Julia, Scotland) to people across the UK. For other participants, moving the search from local to national areas required media intervention, as Rosa and Sarah recount:

[Alerting] the local newspaper was something we did in the first few weeks then as time went on, we got into the *Daily Mail*, they did an article and put their pictures in.

(Rosa, South Yorkshire)

[I] went on and appeared in *This Morning* ... It was obviously on local radio and got interviewed quite early on in a local newspaper, in a local magazine. I have people coming up to me because they recognise me now just going sorry to hear about Bailey.

(Sarah, West Mercia)

The two participants all utilise media spaces as a way of negotiating the reunion with their dogs and thereby reduce the time of absence. It is worth noting that getting into national newspapers and TV is only achieved by a lucky few.

5.4 | Search/ing and virtual space

In addition to physical space, victims of dog theft also utilised virtual space as a search tactic. Putting images and information about a missing dog online is something that is done significantly early in the absence of a dog as social media allows for the quick dissemination of information to a wide, and/or often targeted, audience. Lucy mentioned how she "plastered it [the DogLost poster] all over Facebook" (Lucy, North Wales). James, on the other hand, posted on Facebook to notify his friends that Pippa had gone missing:

[I] posted it on social media on Facebook for any of my friends that might have seen her in the area, because everybody knew who she was, they all knew that I had Rottweilers and a German Shepherd.

(James, West Yorkshire)

Facebook in particular can be used to create connections and networks within virtual space. Other people used community resolution groups to spread the word of their stolen dog on social media websites:

Loads of other people kept on telling me, post on this, post on that, and it was just like Dog SOS, and loads of DogLost sites ... but anyone that I could find I just posted on. And there are some really helpful representatives to some groups on there, they were really helpful.

(Heather, Leicestershire)

Heather took the approach of posting as much and as often as she could to hopefully be reunited with Rocco. She specifically alludes to the help of community resolution group representatives in helping her with information about where to post. The regional coordinator for DogLost explained how this voluntary role can help victims of pet theft:

We'll search on Facebook, we'll check our areas every day ... We look out for the lost and found. We'll persuade people to list their lost dogs, or any that are found, on the DogLost database. Then we start sharing where we know we're going to get the most traction ... Just really getting to know the dogs, the owners and looking to see what we can help with. With regards to stolen, we help the owners with the police too.

(Regional coordinator, DogLost)

Using virtual space to communicate and transverse physical space, the individuality of each case and prior experience and knowledge of search/ing for lost dogs is vital. Lucy also noted how community action online stretched across physical and online space to create a network of activists helping to reunite her with Star:

I'm in contact with animal rescue centres throughout the UK, and over in Ireland, constantly emailing, messaging. People send me pictures over. Could this be her? And corresponding with them everywhere.

(Lucy, North Wales)

For Megan (Thames Valley), using virtual space as a tactic for reunification meant starting her own groups and pages. The volunteers at Murphy's Army also made a Facebook group and outlined the impact of the online support networks and community resolution groups:

After about a week we had 50,000 followers, and it went right up to ... nearly 2 million people. I was getting messages from Australia, Canada, America and everything, it was ridiculous ... when I got Murphy back, people were advising me, friends, were saying, you've done your bit, pack it all in. But then I was still getting messages, my dog's been lost, my dog's been stolen, and I just knew what they were going through, so I decided to stay on.

(Murphy's Army)

However, with the move towards virtual space there are various challenges, as the participants below explained:

They [the police] showed more interest when I started getting hoax calls and texts and ransom demands a little while later.

(Shirley, Thames Valley)

I've had literally spam, abusive phone calls, and they want bitcoins ... Last night, they wanted £5,000 ... It is basically blackmail. The dog is part of your family, and yet the police can't do anything, or won't do anything.

(Sarah, West Mercia)

These participants indicate a lack of empathy and action from the police in searching for their pets and dealing with hoax calls. Those doing the hoax calls (and those stealing pets) play on the emotional and social relationship between human and dog to exploit the victims of pet theft (Howell, 2000).

Despite the vast array of search tactics deployed and the help from voluntary groups, charities, and the wider community, some people do not end up finding their dogs. The exhaustion and exasperation are summed up by the SAMPA spokesperson:

People are trying everything they can. If you've been in the newspaper, been on the radio, been on social media, getting shared by celebrities which is another big thing everybody is trying to do. Handing out posters, sticking up posters, going to taxi drivers, window cleaners, any local business where there're people going round from houses to houses. You just keep going at it, push, push, push. It's exhausting but it keeps you going in a way. But then there comes a day or must come the day where you go what else can I do?

(SAMPAspokesperson)

For those experiencing dog theft, much like those who experience wider forms of ambiguous absence, 'when loss has no certainty, the search for meaning is excruciatingly long and painful, but it is the only way to find resiliency and some measure of peace' (Boss & Carnes, 2012, p. 457; cited by Parr et al., 2016, p. 74).

6 | CONCLUSION

This research demonstrates that the theft of a pet, from the realisation of loss through to ongoing searches to reunite, is filled with emotions that reflect a traumatic experience; and not knowing the welfare, whereabouts, and chances of future presence can be understood as an 'ambiguous absence'. The forced absence has implications on family dynamics, with self-blame impacting on everyday practices such as employment, relationships, and pet-keeping. For those with dogs still in their care, a growing sense of individual 'response-ability' was demonstrated by increased securitisation of canine bodies (keeping dogs on leads and in sight) and spaces (securing gardens and homes). The experiences of human victims make it clear that dogs are seen as more-than-human family; more-than-property but less-than-human. The main tension between understandings of pets as property and/or family arises in relation to policing practice and a perceived lack of empathy, largely informed by the legal status of pets as property and associated resources for preventing and investigating this type of crime.

Inconsistent guidance and support from the police led to disappointment and resentment, influencing victims to seek alternative spatial and temporal tactics. These experiences suggest a standardised police approach from the first point of contact could improve victim–police relations. Wider resolutions to reunification emerged largely in response to feelings of helplessness and varied spatially as time progressed. The initial response from most victims was physically searching the local area in which their dog had disappeared. They would then move outwards to regional and national areas, reaching out to vets, dog wardens, microchip companies, and community resolution groups. Others adapted already designed tactics such as sending stolen dog posters on envelopes to people across the UK. The utilisation of virtual space as a search tactic was seen as vital, with social media used to create connections and networks, and to amplify the virtual presence of specific stolen dogs at national and international levels. Many participants felt these platforms could help attract attention of traditional local media and improve the chances of their dog becoming a presence on national media.

Future interviews with key stakeholders (as well as ethnographic work with community resolution groups) would help develop a better understanding of current challenges and possible interventions. This research provides only an insight into the police response to dog theft with a small sample of victims, and it is recognised that the response is likely to vary between police force areas. Further research into the police response, from the point of reporting through to investigation, is needed, as are insights from veterinary professionals, dog wardens, microchip companies, and online pet sales platforms. Furthermore, implications of the *Pet Theft Taskforce Policy paper* (Home Office, 2021a, 2021b) are yet to become clear; the paper states that "the policy development of the proposed new 'pet abduction' offence has just begun, and the details of the offence are to be determined" (p. 9).

This research may be conceived of as a more-human-focused animal geography. The dogs in this study occupy an absent presence, their bodies not visibly present, but occupying a space in the minds of their human partners and in the words they speak. We know little about what happens to dogs that are stolen, why they are stolen, who steals them, or about their changing spatial existence. More research is needed on these changing geographical experiences in understanding the animals' experiences of going missing (Lorimer et al., 2019), the wider extent and nature of pet theft (dogs, cats, and other companion animals), and whether perceived 'fear of crime' (HM Government, 2021) has any influence on pet-keeping practices.

The research also brings together an empirical example at the potential intersection of animal geographies and policing (see Yarwood, 2022). There is a need to explore the spaces in which dogs are both stolen from and housed once stolen. Further interdisciplinary research is needed to explore these issues fully and to understand the challenges associated with policing the theft of dogs (and wider dog-related criminality). Working with police and policing scholars, geographers would be well positioned to explore the spaces of animal incarceration when stolen, the puppy farms, illegal fighting rings, and spaces of commodification and sale that are currently unrecognised in geographical research.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analyzed in this study.

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ENDNOTES

¹ Home Office Counting Rules.

² All interviews were undertaken between September and December 2019, and ethical approval was granted by Keele University.

³ Daniel Allen is a patron of SAMPA (The Stolen and Missing Pets Alliance) and the author of three pet theft reform government petitions. Participants were recruited through some of his social contacts.

⁴ See also Holmes (2008) for use of this phrase.

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