THE PROBLEM OF PET THEFT

"Darkness had just settled over Fayetteville on November 8, 1988, when Cheryl Burley let her dog Baby out for her evening constitutional. It was the last time Cheryl was ever to see Baby.

"On the afternoon of January 14, Chester Webb watched his two dogs trot over a hill toward a pond near his Bedford home. That's the last time he saw them.

Stories such as these have appeared in countless local newspapers across the country. Cheryl Burley and Chester Webb and tens of thousands of other Americans have been victims of pet theft. Action 81, a nationwide organization dedicated to recovering lost pets, estimates that more than 2 million dogs are stolen each year. Pet theft seems to be on the increase in certain parts of the country. Why?

After receiving information that the number of dogs reported missing each month in the Fayetteville area had doubled, Northwest Arkansas Times reporter Deborah Robinson began a two-month investigation to discover the fate of the animals. The result was an in-depth, five-part series on the research market. Working with Fayetteville Animal Shelter Director Lib Horn, Ms. Robinson discovered a pattern of dog theft that was disturbingly similar to outbreaks of random-source animals actually promotes pet theft. In areas where pound seizure, the practice of taking animals from a shelter for research, is permitted or mandated, pet theft has actually increased. Despite the lack of extensive data, there are documented cases of stolen dogs being found in research laboratories, often hundreds of miles from where they were last seen. Action 81, which tracks lost-animal reports and trends, reports a high rate of pet theft in areas where a pound sells to research facilities or in which there is an active animal dealer. In a 1980 survey in Virginia conducted by Action 81, it was learned that more than one half of the stolen dogs in a specific area were concentrated in the vicinities of pounds selling animals to research or of active dealers. If researchers seek animals with specific qualities, e.g., purebred dogs such as German shepherds, or dogs with a specific body size, dishonest dealers do not fill that order from a standing inventory or an inter-dealer network. They steal many of the animals.

Dealers will also sell dogs for the guard-dog trade. With the escalation of crime in many metropolitan areas, the guard-dog business has become big business. If an unusually large number of German shepherds, rottweilers, or Dobermans is found in an area, it is suspected that dog thieves are at work. Sometimes, no theft pattern will immediately emerge, but, if a local shelter keeps good, accurate records of lost reports, such a pattern will eventually become evident. For example, in Fayetteville, Arkansas, the figure of 25 missing dogs per month dwindled to 50—for a total of 300 in six months—from June to December of 1988. In one week, in another community, 8 dogs disappeared. A Virginia community has seen a doubling of its lost-dog reports on specific breeds during certain times of the year. Dog thieves use lures such as a female in heat in the back of a truck or a piece of drug-laced raw meat to attract individual dogs. Dog thieves often will "cases" in neighborhoods in and know exactly what dogs they want and where they are. They will also determine which homeowners are gone all day. Dog buyers are often driven trucks or vans that are falsely marked as animal-control or humane society vehicles. To thwart dishonest "bunchers" (dealers who sell animals for research purposes) from using that tactic in Fayetteville and to let residents know what to look out for, Lib Horn placed a photo of her agency's vehicle and uniformed animal-control officers in the local paper. Dishonest bunchers have also been known to answer "free to good home" ads or may even place an ad in the paper themselves stating they will buy litters of puppies or purebred dogs.

Researchers are willing to pay $500 or more (as documented by U.S. Department of Agriculture [USDA] license applications listing dealer incomes from sales) for healthy, obedient dogs of a specific type or breed, so bunchers go to great lengths to supply them with pet-like animals.

THEFTS ARE WIDESPREAD

An ongoing investigation in a Mid-Atlantic state has revealed evidence of a tri-county dog-theft ring. It is suspected that some of the bunchers involved are drug users who are stealing dogs for resale to a middleman to support their habit. Because almost all of the stolen dogs in this area are purebred females, it is suspected that the dogs are being stolen for the puppy-mill trade. A citizens' coalition has been formed to alert the public and gather more information. It expects to be able to go to the state's attorney with enough evidence to prosecute the bunchers.

Lawrence County, Indiana, experienced a dramatic increase in the reports of stolen pets during two periods in 1988. According to Lawrence County Humane Society Shelter Director Kathy Howe, more than 250 dogs were reported missing in a six-month period. Almost all of the reports were for large dogs such as huskies, German shepherds, and malamutes. The state police launched an investigation, and The HSUS offered a $5,000 reward for information leading to the arrest and conviction of anyone stealing dogs. With media attention, the thefts dropped off. They resumed again for a short period during the summer, when lost-dog reports for hunting dogs, coon hounds, walker hounds, and beagles jumped to forty or more in a month.

THE BRUTAL ROAD TO RESEARCH

When pets are stolen, they are not necessarily resold immediately. The roads they
travel to research are as varied as the ani-
imals themselves. While some dogs and cats
find themselves undergoing experimentation
in a matter of days, others endure severe
deprivation during a journey that may take
weeks or months and thousands of miles.

In one Mid-Atlantic state, a dog-theft ring
suspected of stealing purebred female dogs from
three counties for the puppy-nanny mill. Puppy-nunn
breeding stock, such as the dog at left, often live
miserable lives in cramped, unsanitary conditions.

One tattooed dog was reunited with its owner
after being stolen two years before. When the
dog was finally sold by a dealer to a laboratory in New York State, re-
searchers found the dog's tattoo and were able
to have the dog returned to its owner.

Where the dog had been and what it had en-
xperienced during a journey that may take
years is often way stations for animals going to re-
search. While some dogs and cats
are used in laboratories that are not specifically bred for
laboratory or research purposes. Bunchers
regularly frequent auctions or trade
shows to buy and sell animals at auctions or trade
days. They sell animals to other dealers.
The USDA has created a new division to work
exclusively on animal welfare. The
Humane Midwest Monitors is a group that
keeps tabs on buncher activity in
midwestern states and attends auctions fre-
quented by bunchers. In the interview, Ms.
Genteman said, "Another reason bunchers
travel long distances is because the animals
they are selling are stolen."

PROBLEMS WITH REGULATION

Dealers are regulated by the USDA’s
Animal Plant and Health Inspection Service
(APHIS), which has the responsibility under the Animal Welfare Act to ensure
humane treatment of dogs and cats by dealers (see the article on page 12). The
USDA is charged with inspecting dealers’
promises and research facilities, but, to date,
have not done a relatively ineffective job. Lack of
funding, coupled with apathy on the part of
many inspectors or their superiors, have
prevented a crackdown on animal dealers
and illegal activities. Dealers are required to provide adequate housing, handling,
sanitation, veterinary care, and transporta-
tion. Animals are supposed to be tagged and
an inventory kept of where the animal was
purchased and its description. Without ade-
quate regulation and enforcement, pet theft is
easy.

Because of numerous problems with en-
forcement of the Animal Welfare Act, the
USDA has created a new division to work
exclusively on animal welfare issues. The
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Dealers and bunchers regularly frequent
trade days and auctions to obtain dogs. In
an interview with the LaPorte Herald Argus,
a dog breeder confirmed that animals are
traded to other bunchers in Indiana and sur-
rounding states or to universities in Ohio.
The newspaper reported that the breeder said he “mainly looks for bound dogs that
weigh more than forty pounds, which is
the animals preferred in medical research.” Bunchers trade dogs all over Indiana,
usually at flea markets, he said.

In researching her series of articles on pet
theft in Fayetteville, Arkansas, Ms. Robin-
son learned that bunchers frequently travel
long distances to auctions. In an interview with
Gloria Genteman, a Humane Midwest Monitors, Ms. Robinson reported that bunchers make more money
at an auction than selling to a laboratory
in the Midwest. bunchers are a group that
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WHAT YOU CAN DO

There are several ways you can prevent your pet from being stolen. The most im-
portant is not to leave your animal outside,
unattended, for any periods of time and
especially when you are not at home. A
fenced yard will not stop a dog thief. Never
allow your pet to roam freely in the
neighborhood.

Always keep a good current photograph
of your pet, preferably a color photo. If your
pet does become lost, you will be able to
have duplicate photos made to distribute to
the local shelter and to make lost posters
post to your neighborhood.

It is also important to tattoo your pet. Ac-
cording to Julie Moscone, founder of Tattoo-
A-Pet (1625 Emmons Avenue, Brooklyn,
NY 11239), “A dealer is not going to take
a dog that is tattooed because it can be
traced.” Many animal shelters and
veterinarians will tattoo a pet with a non-
removable identification. If your pet is
stolen, the thief will probably dump the
animal as soon as the tattoo is found.

If you have a pet that you cannot keep, be sure of placing it in a “free to good home” ad. Dishonest bunchers prey on such ads,
providing to promise a good home in the
country. If you must give up an animal,

with the new addresses and phone numbers
as soon as they are available.

Begin, a veterinarian tattoos a family pet.
Tattooed animals can be registered with any of a
number of pet registries nationwide. Tattooing
is one way of making an animal more traceable and,
therefore, less attractive to thieves.

have introduced legislation that would pro-
hibit pound seizure. Legislation has been in-
trroduced in Missouri that would ban Class
B dealers (see sidebar) from operating in the
state. Write to your representatives and let
them know how you feel about animal
protection issues. The HSUS can assist you
with information about your state.

Spread the word about responsible pet
ownership! Urge friends and neighbors to
have their pets spayed or neutered and not to
leave their pets unattended or allow them to roam the neighborhood at will.

In 1988, Senator Wendell Ford of Ken-
tucky introduced federal legislation address-
ing pet theft. No final action was taken. In-
dications are the senator intends to introduce legislation on the same subject in the months ahead.

Definitions

Class A Dealer—USDA-licensed dealer who
breeds and raises every animal he/she
sells.

Class B Dealer—USDA-licensed dealer who
buy and/or sell warm-blooded animals
for any purpose.

Buncher—Licensed or unlicensed dealers
who buy and sell animals strictly for
breeding purposes. Bunchers buy and sell
animals at auctions or trade
days. They sell animals to other dealers.

They have been known to respond to “free to good home” ads and will take giveaway
animals. They have been known to prey on
pet theft situations to make money and
pound seizure.

Pound Seizure—The practice of taking animals from an animal shelter for use in
biomedical research.

Barbara A. Cassidy is director of animal
welfare and control for The HSUS.