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 are just two of thousands of other Americans who have become victims of pet theft. Action 81, a nationwide organization, had received reports of stolen pets, estimates that more than 2 million dogs are stolen every year.

Pet theft has increased 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 reporting on the problem of pet theft and the brutality stolen animals endure on the road to research.

Working with Fayetteville Animal Shelter Director Lib Horn, Ms. Robinson discovered a pattern of dog theft that was disturbingly similar to outbreaks in parts of Missouri. The Missouri Humane Society estimates that, in Missouri alone, 25,000 dogs are stolen annually.

MANY GO TO RESEARCH LABS

Pets are stolen for resale into different outlets—laboratory research, the guard-dog trade, or puppy-mill production. Dogfighters have been known to steal dogs to be used for training fighting dogs. In some communities, it is suspected that dogs are being stolen, slaughtered, and sold for food to certain ethnic groups that eat dog meat.

Local humane groups suspect that most of the dogs stolen are sold to research, because the research market is theonest and often pays the highest going rate for dogs. Not all laboratories will knowingly buy a stolen pet, but some will. Research facilities are dependent on the use 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 missing 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 doubled to 50—for a total of 300 in six months—from June to December of 1988. In one week, in another community, 8 dogs of the same size and age disappeared. In another two-week period, 16 dogs disappeared in a four-block area. Of the 16, all were the same size and coat length; 4 of the 16 were basset hounds.

In Lawrence County, Indiana, 250 dogs were reported missing in six months; the previous average was 10-12 per month. Of the 250, 40 to 50 were beagles; a dozen were huskies; 8 to 10 were schnauzers.

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 "case" a neighborhood in advance and know exactly what dogs they want and where they are. They will also determine which homeowners are gone all day. So as not to arouse suspicion in a neighborhood, dog thieves often drive 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.

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 citizen's 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.

In 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 $5000 reward for information leading to the arrest and conviction of anyone stealing dogs. With media attention, the thefts dropped off. They resumed at 50 to 75 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
In one Mid-Atlantic state, a dog-theft ring is suspected of stealing purebred female dogs from three counties for the puppy-mill trade. Puppy-mill 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. The dog thief was finally sold to a dealer to a laboratory in New York State, researchers found the dog's tattoo and were able to have the dog returned to its owner.

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' premises and research facilities, but, to date, has done a relatively ineffective job. Shelters are supposed to be tagged and an inventory kept of where the animal was purchased and its description. Without adequate regulation and enforcement, pet theft is easy.

One problem is that the Animal Welfare Act, the USDA has created a new division to work exclusively on enforcing the Animal Welfare Act. The USDA is charged with inspecting dealers' premises and research facilities, but, to date, has done a relatively ineffective job. Shelters are supposed to be tagged and an inventory kept of where the animal was purchased and its description. Without adequate regulation and enforcement, pet theft is easy.

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There are several ways you can prevent your pet from being stolen. The most important is never 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 to post in your neighborhood.

It is also important to tattoo your pet. According to Julie Moscove, founder of Tattoo-A-Pet (625 Emmens Avenue, Brooklyn, NY 11235), "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.

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