

## **Research: Investigation of SARS-CoV-2 variants of concern: routine variant data update**

Data reports on novel SARS-CoV-2 variants.

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## **Research: COVID-19 variants: genomically confirmed case numbers**

Genomically confirmed case numbers for SARS-CoV-2 variants of concern and variants under investigation.

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## **Guidance: SARS-CoV-2 variants of public health interest**

Details of the variants of public health interest.

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## **Press release: Pet abduction to be made new criminal offence in crackdown on pet theft**

Pet Theft Taskforce delivers report with key findings and recommendations

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# Pet abduction to be made new criminal offence in crackdown on pet theft

- Pet Theft Taskforce delivers report with recommendations to tackle reported rise of pet theft
- Government working with the police to improve recording and tracking of pet abduction cases
- Improvements to pet microchipping processes to support the identification of lost and stolen dogs

A new criminal offence for pet abduction is set to be introduced under government plans to crack down on pet theft following a reported rise in pets being stolen during the pandemic. The new law will recognise the welfare of animals and that pets are valued as more than property.

The new offence is one of several recommendations in a [report published today](#) by the Government's [Pet Theft Taskforce](#) which was launched in May 2021. The Taskforce, made up of officials from Defra, the Home Office and the Ministry of Justice along with operational partners including the police CPS, Border Force and Local Government, considered evidence from academics, animal welfare organisations, campaign groups, enforcement agencies and industry experts.

Since its establishment, the Taskforce has considered available evidence from academics, animal welfare organisations, campaign groups, enforcement agencies and industry experts to help inform its recommendations.

The report found that seven in 10 of the animal thefts recorded by the police involve dogs. Evidence suggests that around 2,000 dog theft crimes were reported to police in 2020, causing considerable distress for owners and their pets alike. The price of some breeds increased by as much as 89% over lockdown as people spent more time at home, potentially making dog theft more appealing to criminals looking to profit from the spike in public interest in owning a pet.

The Taskforce's recommendations include:

- **The creation of a new 'pet abduction' offence:**

Pet theft is currently treated as a loss of property to the owner, but we know that does not reflect the true severity of this crime. The new offence will prioritise the welfare of our pets as sentient beings and recognise the emotional distress to the animal in addition to its owner.

- **Identifying and tracking cases:**

Reliable data on pet theft is limited and improved recording and data collection about these crimes will build a stronger evidence base about

the problem.

- **Improving the recording of ownership and transfer data:**

New requirements to register additional details and a single point of access to microchipping databases will support tracking lost and stolen dogs.

- **Tackling the fear of crime:**

Police will work together with partner agencies to raise awareness about police initiatives and prevention measures

These changes will make it easier for the police to track pet abduction incidents making it easier to clamp down on offenders. The Home Office will ensure that pet abduction is recorded in a consistent manner across police forces, while officials from each department will be able to review the way data is collected across the criminal justice system.

Pet microchip databases will also be made more accessible under the proposals. There are currently 16 microchipping databases in England, however the Taskforce found that they can be difficult to navigate for pet owners and law enforcement, making it difficult to trace stolen dogs. Under the new proposals a single point of access to all databases will simplify and streamline the system and more robust rules will also be introduced across all of the pet microchipping databases for recording the transfer of dogs to new owners to ensure full traceability.

Taken together, these proposals will make it far harder for thieves to steal and sell pets, will make it easier for the police to catch them, and will ensure that the impact on the animal is reflected in the sentences or penalties given to offenders.

The new measures will also allow the Government to capture more data on pet theft crimes and raise awareness of police activity in combatting the issue and actions owners can take to keep their pets safe.

### **Environment Secretary George Eustice said:**

Pets are much loved members of the family in households up and down the country, and reports of a rise in pet theft have been worrying. Pet owners shouldn't have to live in fear, and I am pleased this report acknowledges the unique distress caused by this crime.

Its recommendations will reassure pet owners, help the police to tackle pet theft, and deliver justice for victims. We will consider its findings carefully and work with colleagues across Government to start implementing its recommendations.

**The Lord Chancellor, Robert Buckland QC MP, said:**

Many of us have sought the companionship of pets during the pandemic which makes this crime even more cruel.

These proposals will make sure police can better identify and track down criminals who peddle in this heartless trade, whilst ensuring they are appropriately punished for their actions.

**Home Secretary Priti Patel said:**

Stealing a pet is an awful crime which can cause families great emotional distress whilst callous criminals line their pockets.

The new offence of pet abduction acknowledges that animals are far more than just property and will give police an additional tool to bring these sickening individuals to justice.

At the same time, police will continue to work to raise awareness about how owners can best to protect pets from being targeted.

**Taskforce partner, Deputy Chief Constable Amanda Blakeman said:**

The work of the taskforce means that police forces across the country will now be better placed to respond to pet theft through an improved recording process and a specific crime that recognises pets as valued members of the family with a significant emotional impact".

We would also encourage anyone buying a puppy or dog to make sure that they are buying from a responsible and genuine home. Advice on checks that can help buyers make the right choices is available through Blue Cross or RSPCA website.

**RSPCA chief executive Chris Sherwood said:**

We're really pleased to hear the Government's Pet Theft Taskforce recommendations. Pet theft can leave families in utter turmoil and have serious welfare implications for animals ripped away from everything they know.

The new Pet Abduction Offence will acknowledge the seriousness of this crime and we hope this will encourage courts to hand out much tougher sentences to pet thieves. We're also thrilled that the Government wants to simplify the microchipping database system and we believe this will help to tackle pet theft as well as other

animal welfare issues and irresponsible pet ownership generally.

The police advise that dog owners should avoid leaving their pet unattended while out in public, vary their routines when walking their dogs and should take basic security steps at home such as checking locks on doors and garden gates. The Blue Cross has also published detailed [guidance](#) for pet owners on how they can protect their animals from theft.

The Taskforce's recommendations are part of the Government's commitment to further strengthening the UK's position as a global leader in animal welfare standards, as outlined in the [Action Plan for Animal Welfare](#), and follow Defra's recent announcement of new measures to crack down on the [illegal smuggling of dogs and puppies](#).