



TACKLING LONDON'S THEFT EPIDEMIC



LONDON 

CITY HALL
CONSERVATIVES

TACKLING LONDON'S THEFT EPIDEMIC

Foreword



Neil Garratt AM
Leader of City Hall Conservatives

London is increasingly finding itself with a new national and international reputation. Not for our capital city's cultural life, or its long and unique history, its array of shops, theatres, parks or attractions, or its bustling economic activity as a global financial hub. That should be what comes to mind when we picture our capital city.

Instead, London finds itself recognised as the theft capital of the world. There is now a widespread perception that if you are in the city, be it as a Londoner going about your everyday business, a commuter heading to work, or a tourist visiting our city, there is a distinct possibility that you will find yourself the victim of a crime.

Given the increase in violent crime over the last eight years, much of the attention has, understandably, been centred around knives, guns and gangs, and the devastating consequences of this criminality. Against this backdrop, low-level crime in London has quietly been allowed to reach epidemic proportions. Theft, shoplifting, burglary, and business robbery have all increased significantly over the last eight years.

Being a victim of one of these crimes is, in numerical terms, the most common way you are likely to interact with the Metropolitan Police Service. Many Londoners have experienced having their phone or bike stolen and reporting the crime to the Met, sometimes with its live tracked location, only to find the case closed in less than twenty-four hours.

No investigation, no attempt to find the criminal responsible, and no justice for the victim. The whole process appears to have simply become an elongated front for receiving a crime reference number for insurance purposes. That victim is added to the crime statistics, and then left to deal with the consequences themselves. Every six minutes another person will experience exactly this.



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That simply isn't good enough. Having your phone, bike or watch stolen is not only an expensive, upsetting and immensely frustrating experience, it alters your feeling of being in this city and your anxieties towards those people around you. You may also have to spend many hours trying to protect yourself from identity fraud in the aftermath. If you have not been a victim of this criminality, the chances are you know someone who has.

It now seems frankly novel to suggest that you should be able to walk down a street in London comfortably without the fear of a criminal in a balaclava snatching your phone out of your hand at speed, or being threatened into handing over your watch, handbag or wallet. The pressing need to start taking these types of crimes seriously is not only about preventing as many individuals as possible from experiencing them and the financial loss attached to this, it is also about addressing the overall sense that London does not feel safe.

We are now beginning to truly understand not only the scale of this theft epidemic, but also the criminality it is supporting. Rather than independent operators looking to make a quick profit, these crimes are increasingly being directed by highly organised crime groups who are benefitting to the tune of hundreds of millions of pounds, both in the UK and overseas.

My hope is that this report not only helps to raise the awareness of this issue, but to produce reasoned suggestions on what we can actually do about it. Over the last eight years, the Mayor of London appears to have been utterly uninterested in tackling this personally or giving the Met the resources and political will it needs to tackle the problem. My aim through this report, and my wider work as an Assembly Member, is to help force a change on the acceptance that this crime will simply take place, and there is nothing we can do about it. That is fundamentally not the case.

London is a brilliant city full of even further potential for our communities, our tourism and our global business prospects – we should be in a position where are defined by this, and not our growing epidemic of theft. Let us hope that is something we can change in the very near future.

Neil Garratt AM is leader of City Hall Conservatives and was elected to represent Croydon and Sutton on the London Assembly in May 2021.



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Dr Lawrence Newport
Academic and Founder, CrushCrime

“London is experiencing a theft epidemic. We need to capture, convict and imprison the career criminals disproportionately responsible. This report is a welcome push against the political status quo of lack of action on crime.”

Rt. Hon Chris Philp MP
Shadow Home Secretary

“With a phone now stolen every six minutes in the capital, we cannot simply sit back and allow London’s epidemic of theft and criminality to grow larger still. Neil and City Hall Conservatives are exactly right to be raising this important issue, and putting forward proactive solutions to the Mayor, Metropolitan Police Service and the Government in this report.

“Theft has a huge impact on victims and how safe our communities feel, so it is vital that the Mayor starts taking this kind of high-volume crime seriously. By effectively decriminalising certain crimes in London, we are sending the message that actions do not have consequences, and that you are unlikely to be caught if you commit lawlessness. That is evidently the wrong approach, and this report not only highlights the scale of the issue, it also puts forward much-needed suggestions on how London can begin to tackle this epidemic.”

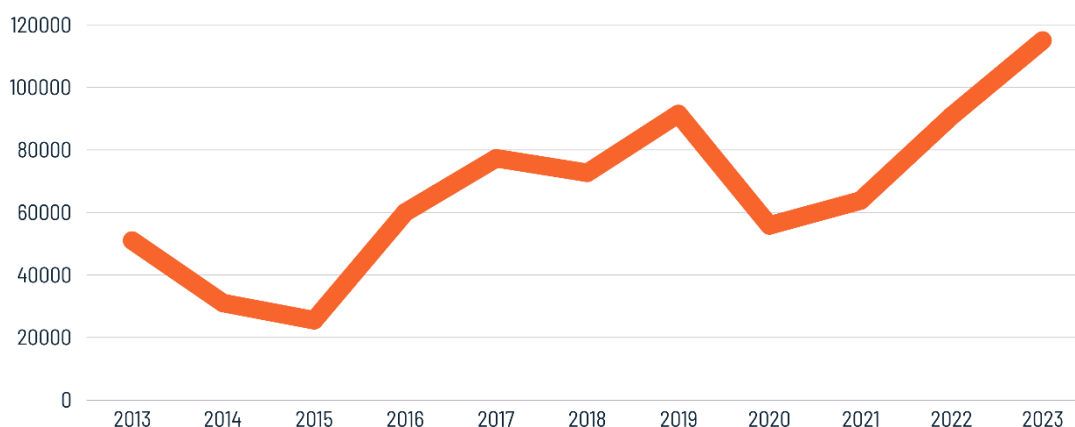


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The Scale of the Problem

Over the last eight years, much attention has rightly been paid to the highly concerning increases in violent crime across London. Knife crime reached a record high in March 2024, whilst the number of homicides peaked at 153 in 2019. A high number of notable stabbings, shootings and gang-related crimes have contributed to the sense that London simply is not safe.

At the same time, we have seen a substantial increase across London in the likes of theft and shoplifting, traditionally considered 'low-level' crime. This effect is most clearly seen within the huge increase in phone theft since 2016, while over 20,000 bikes are now stolen every year in London.



Number of recorded phone thefts in London by year (Source: Metropolitan Police Service)

While there was a brief drop in the number of stolen devices in 2020 during the pandemic, this type of crime has continued to rise steadily since 2015. In 2023, 115,000 phones were stolen in London, up from nearly 91,000 the previous year.

Hotspots for phone theft include busy areas like Oxford Street, Camden, and Shoreditch, where crowds make it easier for thieves to disappear quickly. Many incidents involve thieves on mopeds or electric motorbikes, who snatch phones from victims' hands while they are using them. Around 40% of phones are stolen from the same council wards, covering the West End and the area around Parliament.

Well-known tourist areas have become prime targets for this criminality, with visitors being particularly vulnerable due to their tendency to use phones for navigation and photography. The problem is similarly prevalent around major transport hubs like Liverpool Street and King's Cross stations, where commuters often check their devices while walking or accessing train tickets.



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Small businesses are also vulnerable to this increase in theft, with delivery drivers and mobile workers frequently targeted. Many companies now report increased insurance premiums and lost working hours as employees deal with the aftermath of theft. By October 2024, business robbery across London had increased by a staggering 82.5%.

Modern phone theft carries greater risks than ever before, as thieves increasingly target devices for access to digital assets. A study for startup FinTech found that:

- 62% of stolen phones are accessed for personal data.
- 25% experience some form of identity theft following phone theft.
- The average victim spends 15-20 hours resolving security issues.

Economics of Theft

Theft represents a significant economic issue across London, with far-reaching consequences for both individuals and businesses. The financial toll of this criminality in London is staggering, with annual losses exceeding hundreds of millions of pounds each year when considering both direct and indirect costs. The average smartphone now costs between £500-£1,500, but the true economic impact extends far beyond the device's value, including:

- Direct financial losses from stolen devices.
- Banking and identity fraud following theft.
- Lost productivity costs for victims.
- Insurance premium increases.
- Business disruption costs.

The most immediate and visible effect of theft is the direct financial loss. For individuals, theft - particularly identity theft - can lead to significant financial losses, affecting credit ratings and incurring additional costs in recovery, as well as the significant risk to personal data. For businesses, especially London's small and independent businesses, these losses can be crippling, leading to diminished cash flow and increased operating costs (for security measures, for example).

The indirect consequences of London's theft epidemic cannot be overstated – if people feel the city simply is not safe, they are less likely to visit and spend money here, businesses are less likely to choose London locations, with the loss of job opportunities and tax revenue as a result, and people are less likely to want to live and work here. Whilst less immediately obvious than the likes of violent crime in terms of impact, this criminality is clearly hampering London's economic potential.



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Response So Far

Mayor of London

Sadiq Khan, both in his role as Mayor of London and London's Police and Crime Commissioner, has been slow to respond to this issue and incredibly reluctant to tackle it proactively. Despite substantial increases in rates of theft from 2018 onwards, the Mayor appears to have taken little action in this area.

In July 2019, the Mayor delivered what he described as a 'major speech' on crime and the causes of crime. Within this speech, the Mayor did not reference theft or high-volume crime. In February 2020, the Mayor committed to "*invest £55.5m to tackle the complex causes*" of crime – again without reference to theft or burglary. While significant increases in violent crime have clearly occupied the Mayor's attention and dictated the allocation of financial resources, including to a new 'Violence Reduction Unit', increasing rates of high-volume crime appear to have been totally neglected.

The Mayor finally appears to have recognised the scale of the issue in August 2023, publishing a press release calling on the mobile phone industry to 'design out' robberies involving mobile phones, and urging the sector to "*deliver bold and innovative technological solutions*". This press release also suggested the Met would be focused on "*spearheading dedicated and targeted police work to prevent these crimes*". By this point, the number of phones stolen in London had already increased from around 60,000 in 2016 to 115,000 in 2023.

The response of the industry to this press-push from the Mayor, with little in the way of commitments on his part, appears to have been one of scepticism. One industry figure is reported to have described in response how "*Suggesting mobile phone operators aren't doing enough to tackle street robbery is like blaming Kellogg's for people shoplifting at Tesco. The Met doesn't understand the problem and the Mayor needs to get a grip rather than asking the mobile industry to tackle his shortcomings.*"

This advice does not appear to have been heeded, and in October 2023, the Mayor convened what he described as a 'landmark meeting' at City Hall. This roundtable was attended by Met Commissioner Sir Mark Rowley, mobile phone manufacturers and phone network providers. Possible solutions discussed included:

- Improving the location tracing of stolen mobile phones so the cycle of handling stolen goods can be broken, more devices can be recovered and offenders brought to justice;
- Taking action that could stop stolen mobile phones being able to be re-registered for services provided by Apple, Google Play, Samsung and other online stores;
- Exploring steps that could prevent stolen devices being used outside the UK.



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Despite warm words from the Mayor, little appears to have changed as a result. In a written question response published in December 2023, the Mayor was asked about commitments made at the roundtable and published the following response:

“Following the successful roundtable, the attendees committed to working with the Metropolitan Police Service (MPS) and MOPAC to progress actions under four main workstreams. The workstreams broadly relate to data, engineering, resale markets and guidance. These joint efforts seek to strengthen anti-theft measures and further collaboration between phone companies, network providers, and the MPS. Another roundtable discussion is being planned for early in the New Year to review progress.”

It is worth noting that the Mayor did not make any commitments on this issue at the roundtable meeting or in the months which followed – no specific investment, targets for theft reduction, or proactive policies. The subsequent roundtable referenced in the Mayor’s written response was originally planned for ‘early 2024’. It was then postponed, with a date to be announced in due course. After questioning from *City Hall Conservatives*, the Mayor revealed in October 2024 that the event had been cancelled due to the Government announcing its own ‘summit’, took place in February 2025 and with the Mayor in attendance.

In a session of Mayor’s Question Time in December 2024, Sadiq Khan was pressed by Assembly Member Garratt on what steps he was taking personally to tackle London’s theft epidemic, following the publication of the Mayor’s draft Police and Crime Plan. In response, the Mayor could not list a single proactive step he was personally taking, insisting once again that it was for manufacturers to ‘design out’ the problem, repeating his often-used comparison to the widespread theft of car radios in the 1980s. In the draft Police and Crime Plan, which is designed to set out the Mayor’s strategic priorities for keeping London safe over the next four years, there are no specific actions around theft.

The Mayor has established the ‘Robbery Reduction Partnership’ through the Mayor’s Office for Police and Crime (MOPAC). This partnership, however, has no funding attached to it and is essentially a working group, with no specific focus on theft or certain types of stolen items.

Metropolitan Police Service

For the Met’s part, ‘Operation Ringtone’ was first launched in 2013 during Boris Johnson’s time as Mayor, when 51,000 phones were stolen that year. Over the course of 2012, phones were identified by the Met as the primary driver of a 17% increase in overall theft across London.

As a result, the most affected boroughs — Islington (which had the highest theft rate in the country), Westminster, Hackney, Camden and Lambeth were all targeted with proactive intervention. In July 2013, nearly 8000 police officers were deployed in a ‘major crackdown’ on phone theft, including carrying out dawn raids on suspected thieves and



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those handling stolen goods. By the middle of 2013, the Met had recorded a 7.6% decrease in theft, halting what was evidently a rising trend as mobile phones became more valuable.

By early 2015, smartphone theft in London had fallen by 40%, with previous Mayor Boris Johnson suggesting these crimes were “much less prevalent than two years ago”, with approximately 140 thefts every day being reduced to 85 a day and 20,000 fewer victims that year as a result.

Under the previous Mayoralty, there was evidently a clear choice to tackle this type of crime and allocate the Met appropriate resources to do so. While the average mobile phone has clearly increased in price and capability since 2016, and is now far more valuable to those wishing to steal them, previous efforts demonstrate that if the will is there, specific rises in crime can be tackled proactively and subsequently reduced.

As theft began to increase once more from 2016 onwards, Sadiq Khan could have made the decision to continue his predecessor's efforts to tackle this issue, having very recently been successful in practice. New into the role, Sadiq Khan appears to have made the decision to prioritise other issues, allowing theft figures to increase substantially in a very short period. Since that decision, ‘low level’ crime has increased across London every single year, bar the pandemic.

In previous years, the Met have proactively responded to specific increases in certain crimes. Between 2018 and 2020, for example, there was surge in the number of catalytic converter thefts across specific areas of London. Nearly 15,000 cases were reported in 2020, up from 9,500 the previous year. Catalytic converters on certain models of vehicle were easily accessed by thieves and often stolen overnight or brazenly from the victim's drive in front of them, rendering the vehicle unusable. One victim's catalytic converter was stolen in just ninety seconds by a group of four men.

It is noticeable that there were also calls during this period for vehicle manufacturers to ‘design out’ the problem, by making catalytic converters harder to access. Such a suggestion was evidently going to do little for those whose model of vehicle was already a common target for this criminality.

What did make the difference in terms of ending this spike, however, was specific intervention from the Met. In March 2021, more than 300 officers took part in raids across east London, Kent and Essex. Two men were arrested, and a large number of catalytic converters, vehicles and tools were seized, alongside cash and drugs. The Met even ran proactive initiatives in supermarket car parks alongside this to mark and register vehicle owner's catalytic converters for free.

After the arrest and apprehension of the gang responsible, and the seizing of the tools used to commit their crimes, the spike in this kind of theft soon dropped. As this case demonstrates, the increase in this type of crime was halted because the will was there



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to do so. While this work only took place four years ago, such a proactive and targeted approach is almost unimaginable today when considering the Met's current handling of high-volume crime.

As the number of people falling victim to this criminality continues to grow, it is becoming increasingly apparent that theft at the rates we are seeing in the capital is entirely unacceptable. In years gone by, London-based gangs and individual thieves looking to turn a profit were predominantly the cause of the city's theft issues, but police now believe a significant proportion of phone theft is driven by sophisticated organised crime groups linked to other countries.

Government

In September 2024, the Government announced it was launching a 'crackdown' to halt the rise in phone theft, citing a 150% increase in this type of crime across the country and committing to holding a roundtable on the issue. What this did not account for, however, is that London accounts for the vast majority of the number of devices stolen nationally, and that dealing with the issue in the capital specifically would have a drastic impact on the figures overall. No specific actions were set out as part of this 'crackdown', and little appears to have changed in the months that followed.

On 6 February 2025, the Government held its phone theft 'summit', attended by the Home Secretary, policing leaders, the National Crime Agency, the Mayor of London and technology companies to '*drive new action to tackle mobile phone thefts and secure a collective effort to grip this criminality*'.

The product of this discussion appears, once again, to have been warm words, with '*all in attendance [agreeing] to greater collaboration between police and tech by significantly boosting intelligence sharing, on both sides, and to reconvene in 3 months' time.*' In details released regarding the summit, there were no legislative commitments, no funding commitments, and no specific actions set out by any of the parties present on how to tackle this issue, or what has changed as a result of meeting at a 'summit'.

When those present reconvene in three months' time, it is almost certain that nothing will have changed, and the figures will have increased further still. We simply cannot move forward and tackle this epidemic of crime through the holding of roundtables and promises of further 'collaboration' – it has not worked for the Mayor in previous years, and it will not work for the Government either.

The Met's Current View

In a January 2025 interview, current Met Commissioner Sir Mark Rowley offered his perspective on the theft epidemic facing the capital, and how he believed it should be tackled. The Commissioner described how organised crime groups were "*making a*



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fortune” out of these crimes, suggesting the “reusability and re-saleability of stolen phones” had allowed this criminality to become so profitable.

Phone manufacturers, Sir Mark suggested, had allowed the illegal trade in second hand phones to proliferate by failing to introduce sufficient security measures to permanently disable devices once stolen, and that this was *“enabling the criminal business models”*. In terms of arrests, Rowley argues, *“arresting the kids on the street who are stealing them is useful, but actually, if it’s driven by an organised crime business model, that’s not going to solve the problem”*.

It is noticeable that among the solutions Rowley calls for, including a digital ‘kill switch’ which could in theory render a stolen device worthless, there are little in the way of solid commitments for the Met or the Mayor. A digital ‘kill switch’ already exists to a degree, with the launch of services like Apple’s Find My iPhone in 2015. Given that users already have the option to remotely lock and wipe their devices, it is difficult to imagine how a technology-based solution could go further than this. Manufacturers would also need to consider that many devices initially considered lost are later found by their user, and the device still needing to be accessible to its rightful owner when found.

While the Commissioner is correct to suggest that greater restrictions on cloud services for devices reported as stolen would have a “suppressive effect” to a degree, this overlooks the fact that many phones are stripped down for the value of their parts once taken. As opposed to being used as a complete device by another user, the original phone is often disassembled with the components sold individually, either in the UK or shipped abroad.

It is impossible to imagine how any kind of technological solution could prevent a thief from physically taking apart a device once they have stolen it. Placing the burden of solving this problem on the manufacturers of these devices, rather than the Mayor we elect to keep us safe, and the police force we fund through our Council Tax, does not seem like a reasonable or proportionate response to this issue.

Furthermore, there is growing evidence to suggest that this is an overall issue around criminality and lawlessness in London, and not the need to ‘design out’ a specific problem. Incidents of “steaming”, in which a large group of youths will seek to grab as many devices as possible from a phone shop, are on the rise.

Apple Stores across the capital, including the group’s flagship outlet on Regent Street, were targeted on 13 separate occasions over a two-and-a-half-week period starting just before Christmas. In one raid captured on video, masked robbers stormed the Apple store at the Brent Cross shopping centre in north London and allegedly stole about 50 phones on display. This kind of criminality is highly distressing for both members of the public in the shop at the time, and retail workers who are now regularly facing these kinds of intimidating interactions. Videos of these incidents subsequently go viral on social



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media, reinforcing the unhelpful and incredibly damaging perception that London is a lawless city.

A similarly emerging trend has seen robbers intercepting courier vans filled with scores of brand-new smartphones. In one incident last October, three men broke into a van and ran off with a number of packages while the driver had briefly stepped out to deliver a parcel in Newham, east London. There is no technical solution imaginable which would stop a brand-new device being stolen before it has even been received and registered by its user.

It is disappointing overall to see the Commissioner suggest that it is “*up to the Government whether they want to [drive change] through persuasion or regulation*”, rather than offering a commitment to drive change through catching those criminals responsible. As positive outcome and conviction rates remain unacceptably low, the Met must demonstrate clearly that committing criminality does have consequences. No amount of technology-based legislation aimed at phone manufacturers will do the Met’s job for it.

In August 2024, work by *City Hall Conservatives* revealed that of those phones reported as stolen to the Met, 52% are immediately ‘screened out’ from further investigation. So of the 115,000 phones stolen in 2023, for example, nearly 60,000 cases were immediately closed by the Met, often within hours and with no attempt at all to find the perpetrator.

More than 322,000 thefts were reported in total across London in 2024 (Source: Met Dashboard). A ‘positive outcome’ was recorded in just 8600 of those cases. Of all those who fell victim to this criminality last year, therefore, justice was served in an appallingly low 2.7% of cases. For those unfortunate enough to have an item stolen, therefore, the chances of it being investigated are low, the chances of the perpetrator being caught are vanishingly low, and there is almost zero chance of your item being returned to you. For those committing the crimes, there is very little deterrent to stop. When you have less than a 3% chance of being caught and prosecuted for your crime, you will continue to reoffend.

We should be absolutely clear, therefore, that the rise in these new types of offences, on top of a growing epidemic of theft, is not the fault of technology or manufacturers. It is in fact directly related to the growing sense of lawlessness in the city, and if it is perceived that this type of criminality does not lead to a punishment, we will only see these crimes increase further across London.

City of London Police

In stark contrast to the Met, City of London Police, covering the area around the Square Mile, have been far more proactive and engaged with cracking down on this issue. Whilst evidently the Met covers a far larger area and deals with a far higher volume of crimes,



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the techniques deployed demonstrate this criminality can be tackled successfully if the will is there to do so.

Following a substantial increase in bike theft in August 2020, for example, City of London Police launched a targeted operation to catch those responsible. In November 2020, detectives tracked a stolen bike to a warehouse in East London, recovering a total of fifty-seven bikes at a value of £100,000. Analysis of CCTV led detectives to those responsible, and a further twenty-one bikes were recovered at the lead gang member's home address. In total, eleven gang members were caught and sentenced, and by the following January, the number of reported bike thefts that month was down by nearly 90%.

An increase in phone snatching in 2022, particularly during the summer months, prompted City of London Police to launch a special operation the following year – subsequently cutting the number of offences in half over the summer of 2023. Proactive measures launched included spraying criminals and their mopeds with a DNA spray in a bid to link them to crimes if they race away, raiding shop owners suspected of buying stolen handsets, and the establishment of a new cycle team. As a result, the number of phones snatched in July 2023 was down 70% on July 2022.

In March 2024, meanwhile, City of London Police successfully apprehended a suspect who used an electric motorbike to steal twenty-four phones in a single hour. By using proactive policing and the support of the control room, the suspect was caught before he could leave the area, removing a prolific phone snatcher from the streets.

In glaring contrast to the situation across the rest of London, the suspect in this case had been caught and apprehended before many of the victims had the opportunity to report their devices as stolen, and many of the devices were successfully returned to their owners.



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Concentration of Crime

Individual cases and operations from City of London Police are particularly effective at demonstrating that the vast majority of 'low-level' crime is carried out by a relatively small number of people. By responding to live cases immediately using surveillance and officers on the ground, and by tracking stolen items, detectives successfully cracked cases quickly and efficiently.

When the perpetrators of these crimes were caught, the increase in offences noted by officers and detectives was immediately halted and those offence rates subsequently dropped dramatically. Rather than simply being reactive to individual crimes, City of London Police proactively monitor crime rates and launch targeted operations when specific crime rates increase – because these crimes are often being committed by the same person or group of people, and often in the same place.

Academic studies around the “law of crime concentration” suggest that 5% of locations in a given city account for 50% of that city’s crime, and that this is true of almost every major city. Of those who commit crime (not the wider population), 5% of offenders commit around 50% of that city’s crime. The majority of crime, therefore, is committed by a very small proportion of London’s overall population of nearly nine million people. The 115,000 phones reported as stolen to Met in 2023, for example, were not stolen by 115,000 different individuals.

If the Met proactively sought to track even a small percentage of the stolen phones and bikes reported to them, there is a very high possibility this would lead them to the gangs responsible for a significant proportion of the criminality being carried out across London. These criminals would, in all likelihood, not just be responsible solely for the single stolen item which led police directly to them, but also a high number of similarly stolen items and other criminality.

The Met’s current approach to tackling these crimes appears to assume that every high-volume crime reported exists in its own ‘silo’ and would require an equal level of investigation and resources to solve, with no link to similar criminality in the same area. The idea that officers or detectives would actively link cases together and use leads from one case to routinely resolve another seems entirely removed from the way the Met currently investigates (or does not investigate) crime.

Focusing specifically on the concentration of crime – the small percentage of locations, offenders and times that generate the majority of London’s overall criminality would be transformative for both the Met’s resources and the overall level of crime in our city.

We have finally started to see some proactive action in this area in the form of a targeted crackdown on phone theft announced by the Met in February 2025, the day of a Government roundtable focused on the issue. Two-hundred and thirty people were arrested across London and more than a thousand devices were recovered in the first



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week of the initiative. The Met also says it has deployed plain-clothed officers in "hotspot" areas, including the West End and Westminster, and is also using tracking technology to recover phones.

What this initiative demonstrates is exactly the point this report seeks to make around high-volume crime – two hundred and thirty people were arrested, but more than a thousand stolen phones were discovered by police. This very recent example is a particularly useful way of showing that those committing these crimes are not stealing a single phone in an isolated incident in one part of London, they are responsible for multiple crimes, usually in the same area and over a sustained period of time.

Rather than a brief PR-blitz launched in sync with the Government's phone theft roundtable, we must hope that the Met is committed to seeing this crackdown through into weeks and then months – not days. This recent action shows that if the will is there to tackle specific crimes, then they can be stopped, and the perpetrators can be brought to justice.

As important as doing this work is telling people it is happening – the Met needs to be proactive with its media and social media teams, including the use of newer platforms like TikTok, where videos relating to stolen phones in London have been viewed hundreds of millions of times. If those wishing to partake in this criminality saw others being caught and jailed, it would evidently act as a deterrent.

City of London Police have prioritised using their press office effectively, publicising successes widely and deterring others from committing crimes within the area of the Square Mile, because there is a very high possibility of being caught. It is now up to the Met to disseminate the same message across the city – if you are stealing phones in London, you should expect to be caught.

Removing those gangs and individuals committing the majority of 'low-level' crime would not only drastically reduce the number of offences recorded, it would also prevent a significant number of people from being the victim of a crime in the first place. Cutting the overall number of offences committed, while remaining highly alert to increases in specific crimes and in specific areas, would in turn allow officers to prioritise tackling violent crime across the city.



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Public Perception

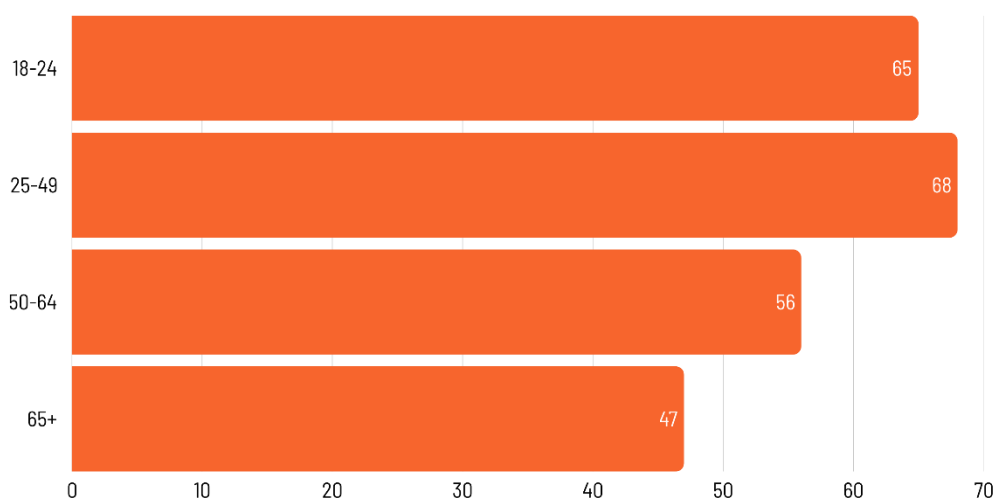
Exclusive polling commissioned by *City Hall Conservatives* and conducted by YouGov for this report reveals the views of Londoners on the city's theft epidemic, including perceptions around this type of crime and what the public believe the Met should be doing about it.

Of those 1030 Londoners polled, **56% believed that London is less safe now than it was ten years ago, with just 5% of respondents believing that London is now safer.** As the kind of crime set out in this report continues to grow, it is unsurprising to see a general sense of unease around safety in the city. London's relentless increase in high-volume crime, and the low probability that the perpetrators will be caught, will inevitably have consequences for how a city safe people feel London is.

When asked if they believed the Mayor of London took the issue of phone theft seriously, nearly **two-thirds of respondents believed the Mayor did not take the issue very seriously or seriously at all (63%)**. Even among those who voted Labour in the 2024 General Election, 48% believed the Mayor does not take phone theft very seriously or seriously at all. Given that the Mayor did not even reference this issue until August 2023, let alone do anything about it, and with little in the way of proactive or specific action since then, this perception among Londoners is no great surprise.

Focusing specifically on behaviour, **62% of respondents said they were now more cautious when using their phone** out and about in London than they were a year ago. Female respondents were more likely to say they have changed their behaviour in comparison to male respondents (67% to 56%), suggesting that women may feel phone theft is a crime they are more at risk from.

% OF RESPONDENTS WHO SAID THEY WERE 'MORE CAUTIOUS' WHEN USING THEIR PHONE OUT AND ABOUT IN LONDON COMPARED TO A YEAR AGO



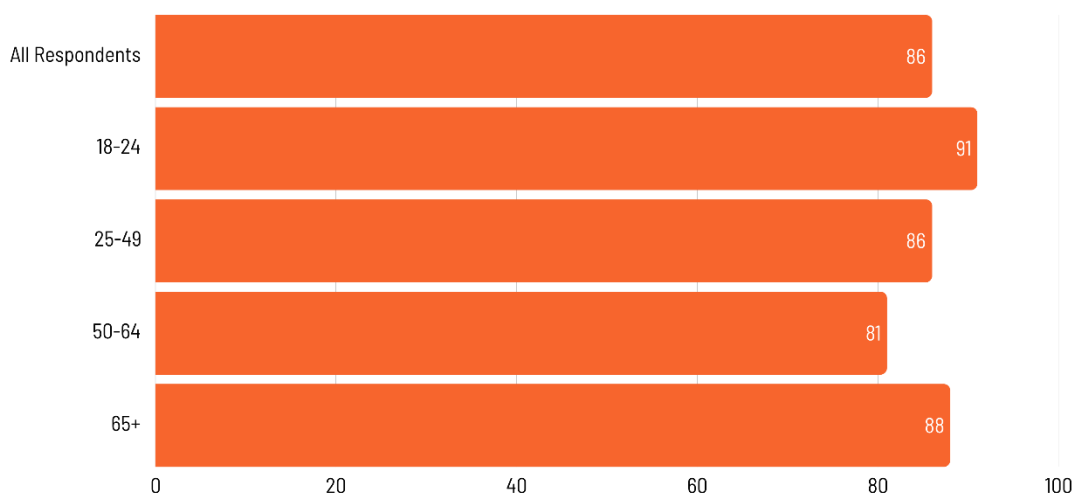
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The 18-24 and 25-49 age groups were more likely than their older counterparts to suggest they were now more cautious using their phone in London (65% and 68% to 56% and 47%). These age groups may have newer and more expensive devices than their 50-64 and 65+ counterparts, for example, and are more cautious as a result, or may be more attuned to the growing level of risk because they perceive their device as more essential to the running of their everyday life, in a way that might differ to someone who is 65+.

London's theft epidemic, therefore, has not only affected those who find themselves the victims of these crimes, it also appears to have changed the behaviour of the city's wider population. While it is sensible and reasonable to be conscious of the risk of crime in a city, the way this kind of criminality is arguably making us all more anxious and suspicious cannot be a good thing for our local communities or our quality of life.

When asked if phone theft as a crime was increasing or decreasing in London, **86% of those polled believed it was increasing**, either a little or a lot. **Among the 18-24 age group, this was 91%**. The prominence of this topic on platforms like TikTok, for example, where videos of individuals having their phone stolen in London, including while filming videos for that platform, have racked up hundreds of millions of views and appear to have influenced younger people and their awareness of this type of crime.

% OF RESPONDENTS WHO SAID PHONE THEFT WAS EITHER 'INCREASING A LITTLE' OR 'INCREASING A LOT' IN LONDON



Every age group, however, was of the majority opinion that this type of crime was increasing in London, and this was the same for Inner and Outer London. Female respondents were more likely than their male counterparts to be of the view that this the type of crime was 'increasing a lot' (72% and 63% respectively), showing a similar pattern to female respondents now being more cautious when using their phone in London.

The polling commissioned for this report also revealed a range of insights into Londoner's perceptions of their police service, and the ability of the Met to bring the perpetrators of



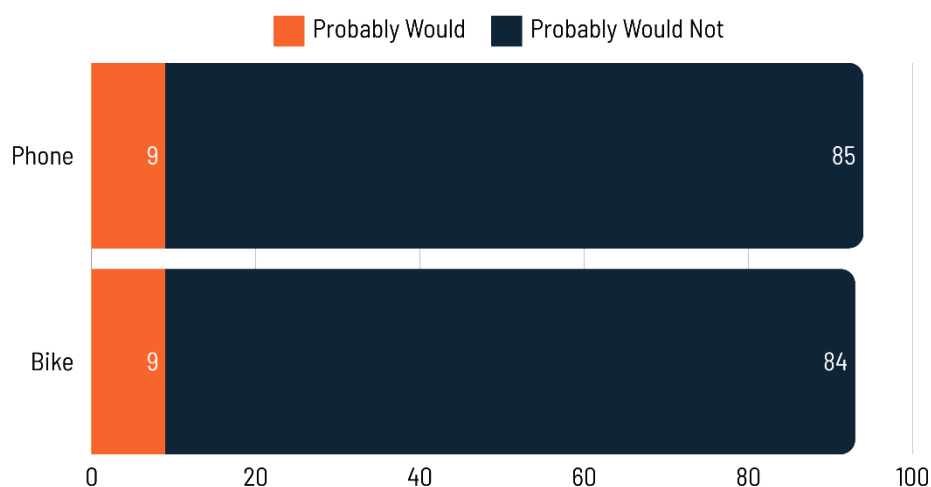
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crime to justice. Respondents were asked to imagine that their phone, and then separately, their bike, had been stolen. **A quarter of those polled said they would 'probably not' report their phone (26%) or bike (25%) as stolen.**

Such a figure raises the possibility that there may be a significant number of thefts in London each year which go unreported – either because the victim does not believe the item was valuable enough, the item was not insured and the victim does not need a crime reference number, or because of the perception that the person responsible will not be caught.

When respondents were again asked to imagine that they had their phone, and separately, their bike, stolen, **85% of those polled said they believed the police would 'probably not' investigate a stolen phone thoroughly, and 84% said a stolen bike would 'probably not' be investigated thoroughly.** There was very little difference in responses between gender, age group, or social class – suggesting there is something of a consensus among Londoners on a lack of faith in the police service to sufficiently investigate high-volume crime.

IMAGINE THAT YOU HAD YOUR PHONE OR BIKE STOLEN IN LONDON AND REPORTED IT TO THE POLICE. DO YOU THINK IT PROBABLY WOULD OR WOULD NOT BE INVESTIGATED THOROUGHLY?



Within the 18-24 age group, there was an interesting trend around bikes – 33% of respondents said they would 'probably not' report their bike as stolen, higher than the overall figure of 25%. **When asked if a stolen bike would be investigated thoroughly, 87% of this age group said it would probably not be,** higher than each other age group. This could suggest that younger Londoners are finding themselves the victims of bike theft at a higher rate than other age groups, but this is going unreported to the Met. Those in this age group, especially in London, are more likely to be on lower and entry-level salaries, meaning the theft of their bike is not only likely to be an inconvenience, but also a substantial cost too.



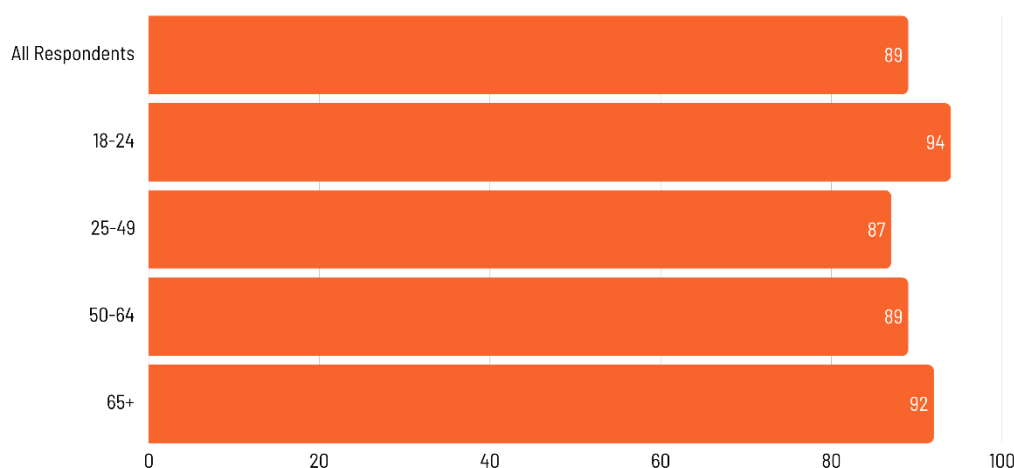
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What these nuances show is the importance of reporting and collecting accurate data, and encouraging every age group and demographic to report the crime they have been the victim of, regardless of how valuable the item is or whether the victim needs a crime reference number for insurance purposes. Whilst neither the Mayor or the Met would welcome a higher volume of reported crimes, this would in fact allow the Met to track crime trends more accurately, both in terms of location and type of offence, and to be more precise when launching targeted operations aimed at the small minority committing this criminality.

When respondents were again asked to imagine that they had reported their stolen phone, and then separately, their stolen bike, to police, **almost nine in ten respondents said the police 'probably would not' catch the criminal who had stolen their phone or their bike (88% and 89%)**, demonstrating a remarkably low level of confidence in those tasked with keeping us safe.

Given the same question around an imagined phone and then bike theft, respondents were asked whether the police should attempt to retrieve the stolen item if they could provide its GPS-tracked location, or if they should not.

% OF RESPONDENTS WHO SAID POLICE SHOULD ATTEMPT TO RETRIEVE A STOLEN PHONE IF ITS GPS-TRACKED LOCATION COULD BE SHARED



89% of respondents said the police should attempt to retrieve both a stolen phone and a stolen bike if GPS-tracked data is available. 94% of those in the 18-24 age group believed this should be the case for a stolen phone, demonstrating the importance of these devices to this age group.

There was consensus among men and women, both social grades, and whether the respondent was living in Inner or Outer London that police should attempt to retrieve items if they are provided with a GPS-tracked location. The common rebuttal to this is that it is not practically possible, or the best use of police resources to track items,



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especially as the data may not be accurate or may take officers to a block of flats, for example.

There is a very clear desire from Londoners here, however, for the police to actively start tracking and retrieving these items. As we have set out in this report, doing so would not only increase the chances of catching those responsible for individual crimes, but also those committing the majority of similar crimes in the same areas.

Overall, this polling points to an evident degree of frustration among those Londoners surveyed. There is a clear sense that crime has increased over the last ten years, and that London as a city is not as safe as it was under the previous Mayor. With substantial increases in high-volume crime, Londoners appear to be very much aware of the lack of action in this area on the part of the current Mayor.

As this kind of crime increases further still, the behaviour of those in the city appears to be changing for the worse as a result, with a more suspicious and anxious population. Among the existing stresses of everyday life, Londoners should feel safe and secure in their city – at present, it is clear they do not.

The results from this polling also point to a fundamental disparity between the views of Londoners, and the views of the Mayor and the leadership of the Met, when it comes to tackling this issue. The public do not have a particular desire to see changes to cloud services or technological solutions, they want to see the police service they pay for to crack down on the gangs committing the majority of this criminality, for officers and detectives to actively pursue leads and retrieve items where possible, and for criminals to be brought to justice, regardless of whether the Met considers their crime to be 'low level' or not.

Rather than placing the responsibility for this criminality onto phone manufacturers, the Mayor and Met must take responsibility for the incredibly low level of faith which Londoners have in their police service, and start being a proactive, targeted and visible presence for good in our city's communities.

All figures in this section, unless otherwise stated, are from YouGov Plc. Total sample size was 1,030 adults. Fieldwork was undertaken between 31st January - 5th February 2025. The survey was carried out online. The figures have been weighted and are representative of all adults in London (aged 18+).



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Recommendations

To tackle this epidemic of theft, both the Mayor and the Met must consider this type of crime to be a priority. At present, theft is treated as low-level crime at a time when sufficient resources do not exist to tackle the problem. This is the wrong approach.

Recommendation 1

The Met should be allocated £7 million of ringfenced funding for the creation of a dedicated Theft Reduction Unit. Officers should be recruited to work specifically in this unit, with the ability to concentrate their resources solely on organised crime groups directing theft in high volumes, the retrieval of stolen items where possible, and responding proactively to changes in crime trends.

Recommendation 2

The Mayor should include specific actions for him and the Met on tackling high-volume crime, and incorporating strategic thinking around the concentration of crime, into the final Police and Crime Plan for 2025-29. The Mayor's Office for Police and Crime (MOPAC) should use its resources to further our understanding of the concentration of crime, including the monitoring of trends in specific crimes and the locations of crimes.

Recommendation 3

The Met should design and implement a long-term strategy for tackling high-volume crime, setting out clear and practical steps on how our growing understanding of the concentration of crime should influence staffing and the allocation of resources across London. This strategy should be implemented in lockstep with the Mayor's final Police and Crime Plan for 2025-29.

Recommendation 4

The Met should launch a targeted, proactive operation for a set period to tackle high-volume crime, with the support of the Mayor. Such an operation should be concentrated in the areas where this criminality is highest, and the Met should actively pursue leads back to the gangs responsible. The Met's press office and social media teams should be proactive in the use of traditional media and newer platforms to publicise prosecutions, and make it clear that if you partake in this criminality in London, you will be caught.

Recommendation 5

Following the Government's phone theft 'summit', the Mayor and the Commissioner should publish a detailed Theft Reduction Action Plan before the attendees reconvene in three months' time. This document should set out the specific steps which the Mayor,



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Commissioner, and Government are committed to taking, including what was actioned from the first meeting.

Recommendation 6

Whilst manufacturers and mobile network companies should continue to explore technology-based solutions to this epidemic, this should not excuse the Mayor from doing his primary job – keeping the streets safe. The Met should be the Mayor's absolute priority for funding in the years ahead, including filling the funding challenges set out by the Commissioner.

Recommendation 7

The Met should implement tactics used successfully by City of London Police, who have a proven track record driving down 'low level' offences often committed by the same group of criminals. As City of London Police have demonstrated, it is both feasible and effective to pursue these cases. Doing so would significantly reduce the number of cases reported to the Met and allow it to focus on resolving serious and violent crime.

Recommendation 8

The Government should introduce stronger legislation and deterrents for organised crime groups overseeing operations which steal items in large quantities. Legal or legislative barriers preventing the ability to track and retrieve items should be removed, alongside any barriers preventing the ability of police services to use warrants effectively and proactively, and a robust system for identifying and blocking the resale of stolen phones and bikes should be established.

Recommendation 9

The Mayor, MOPAC and the GLA should support the Met in enhancing targeted policing and surveillance, particularly in the two council wards which account for 40% of phone theft. In addition to a visibly increased officer presence, the Met should deploy live facial recognition and other technology it has at its disposal. This would act both as a deterrent and allow for rapid response to thefts in progress.

Recommendation 10

The Mayor and Met should launch a public awareness campaign to encourage people to be vigilant around the risk from theft, including on public transport and in areas with high theft rates. This publicity campaign should emphasise the steps the Mayor and Met are taking and what the public can do, emphasising a partnership approach. Victims should also be encouraged to report their stolen item to help the Met track crime trends accurately as part of this campaign.



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Conclusion

The growing epidemic of theft across our capital was not inevitable, and it was preventable. The problems set out within this report have occurred because both the Mayor and the Metropolitan Police Service have not perceived 'low level', high-volume crime to be a priority over the last eight years.

As a result, we have effectively decriminalised vast swathes of crimes committed across London. If you have an item stolen from you, you will not get it back. The Met, in all likelihood, will not investigate the crime you have been the victim of. The perpetrator will then almost certainly not be caught. If you had a phone stolen from you, you will then spend many, many hours trying to resolve the complications which follow and protect yourself from fraud.

Londoners are right to be angry, because they should be. We fund both the Mayor and Met to keep us safe, and deliver justice when we have been the victim of a crime. When we need that system, however, funded by us all through Council Tax, it will close your case without any attempt to investigate and offer you a crime reference number, for you to deal with the consequences.

It is clear the Met's current approach to high-volume crime simply is not working. Every case reported appears to be considered as an isolated incident, without sufficient resource to investigate each one. What this fundamentally overlooks, however, is that the small minority of offenders, in a small minority of locations, are generating most of London's criminality.

Like many other major cities across the world, London's criminality is highly concentrated to a small group of offenders committing the vast majority of crime. By targeting this small group and removing those committing the most crime, the number of offences recorded would be drastically reduced. This would not only reduce the number of people who fall victim to a crime, it would in fact give the Met more time and resources to address violent crime and improve overall safety across London.

Rather than being treated as a lesser priority that could in theory be tackled if the resources were there to do so, this criminality should in fact be the very starting point when it comes to making our city safer. Changing our approach to tackling crime in this way, and for it to be truly successful, requires a significant level of leadership, determination and ambition from both the Mayor and the Metropolitan Police Service.

As we have seen, rising offence rates can be halted and those responsible can be brought to justice when the will is truly there to do so. For the sake of all those in our city who have been the victim of a crime, or become one in the near future, we can only hope the will really does exist to tackle this problem, because we know that when Londoners feel safe, our communities thrive.



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APPENDIX

Metropolitan Police Service, Phone theft by year – access via:

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The Times, Concentration of phone theft:

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London Assembly, Reduction in thefts under the previous Mayor of London:

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<https://www.intelligentfin.tech/2024/07/01/new-research-shows-that-poor-pin-hygiene-leads-to-62-of-phone-theft-victims-in-the-uk-facing-further-financial-loss-and-data-breaches/>

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<https://www.cityoflondon.police.uk/news/city-of-london/news/2024/february/two-members-of-a-bike-theft-gang-jailed/>

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