# Petrol thefts hit record high as cost-of-living crisis drives drivers to flee without paying



Petrol thefts in the UK have reached alarming levels, with data revealing that these incidents are now at an all-time high. In the past year alone, two leading fuel security firms reported issuing a staggering 110,000 charges for alleged "pump and dash" thefts—an increase that represents a twenty-fold rise over a span of just six years. This spike has been attributed at least partly to the ongoing cost-of-living crisis, which has evidently pushed some drivers to flee forecourts without settling their bills.

Industry experts assert that the surge in theft reports reflects a genuine escalation in such offences, particularly as petrol prices have climbed sharply, with filling a typical family car now exceeding £100. This has led to an estimated 1.5 million incidents of non-payment each year, according to the British Oil Security Syndicate. Such incidents have significant repercussions: the average filling station faces an annual loss of approximately £10,500 due to fuel theft. The Petrol Retailers Association estimates that bilking costs petrol station owners around £100 million per year, heightening the urgency among retailers to combat this rising trend.

However, many drivers report being unfairly accused of theft, facing demands for hefty "admin fees" after what they believe were honest payment errors. Common scenarios include situations where card transactions are declined unnoticed, or when clerical mistakes misidentify purchases as unpaid. One such case involved Chris Mullen from Norfolk, who was unjustly charged £60 for allegedly failing to pay for petrol despite having filled up his diesel vehicle. His experience highlights the frustrations faced by numerous motorists, many of whom share similar stories on social media and forums.

As efforts to tackle these rampant thefts continue, technological advancements such as number-plate recognition systems have been deployed by security firms like Forecourt Eye and BOSS to track offenders. Last year alone, these companies sought driver details from the DVLA on nearly 113,000 occasions, a significant increase from the mere 5,500 requests made in 2018. Despite these strategies, police resources remain stretched, with a mere 5 percent of theft-related cases resulting in identified suspects, indicating a significant challenge in policing this type of crime.

The increasing incidence of fuel theft may not only frustrate retailers but also impact law-abiding customers as well, forcing an increase in prices across the board. Steve Gooding, director of the RAC Foundation, has emphasised the societal implications of these crimes, which, while often viewed as low-level offences, can damage businesses and lead to higher costs for every driver. He urged that offenders must be made aware of the potential legal consequences, which include fines and imprisonment under the Theft Act of 1978.

While measures are being put into place to curb this rising trend, fears abound that without concrete action, the situation could worsen, leaving some areas underserved by petrol stations due to the financial strain of thefts. With rising fuel prices and systematic criminal behaviour becoming increasingly prevalent, the pressure is on for both retailers and authorities to address the issue effectively.

### 📌 Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-14764629/petrol-pump-dash-crime-thefts-figures.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490), [[3]](https://www.itv.com/news/2023-10-19/sharp-rise-in-drivers-leaving-petrol-pumps-without-paying-as-fuel-prices-soar)
* Paragraph 2 – [[2]](https://www.racfoundation.org/media-centre/fuel-thefts-surge-77-in-a-year), [[4]](https://www.standard.co.uk/business/business-news/surge-in-number-of-drivers-stealing-fuel-b1118580.html)
* Paragraph 3 – [[5]](https://news.sky.com/story/amp/petrol-thefts-number-of-drivers-stealing-fuel-more-than-quadruples-in-four-years-13002093), [[6]](https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2023/11/07/fuel-thefts-soar-petrol-stations-britain-shoplifting/)
* Paragraph 4 – [[1]](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-14764629/petrol-pump-dash-crime-thefts-figures.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490), [[3]](https://www.itv.com/news/2023-10-19/sharp-rise-in-drivers-leaving-petrol-pumps-without-paying-as-fuel-prices-soar), [[5]](https://news.sky.com/story/amp/petrol-thefts-number-of-drivers-stealing-fuel-more-than-quadruples-in-four-years-13002093)
* Paragraph 5 – [[2]](https://www.racfoundation.org/media-centre/fuel-thefts-surge-77-in-a-year), [[6]](https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2023/11/07/fuel-thefts-soar-petrol-stations-britain-shoplifting/)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-14764629/petrol-pump-dash-crime-thefts-figures.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.racfoundation.org/media-centre/fuel-thefts-surge-77-in-a-year> - In the third quarter of 2023, fuel thefts from garage forecourts in Britain increased by 77% compared to the same period in 2022. The Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency (DVLA) received 39,563 requests for vehicle keeper data related to fuel thefts, up from 22,335 in 2022. This surge is attributed to 'drive-offs', where individuals fill up their vehicles without paying. The British Oil Security Syndicate estimates that fuel theft costs filling stations an average of £10,500 annually. Offenders can face up to two years in prison and/or an unlimited fine under the Theft Act 1978. Steve Gooding, director of the RAC Foundation, expressed concern over the rising trend, suggesting it may indicate more systematic criminal activity. He urged motorists to ensure they can pay before refuelling to avoid legal consequences and prevent higher fuel prices for all consumers.
3. <https://www.itv.com/news/2023-10-19/sharp-rise-in-drivers-leaving-petrol-pumps-without-paying-as-fuel-prices-soar> - ITV News reports a significant increase in drivers leaving petrol forecourts without paying, known as 'drive-offs'. The British Oil Security Syndicate estimates approximately 1.5 million non-payment incidents occur annually, costing each site an average of £7,500. Criminal techniques such as 'double tanking', where thieves use multiple fuel containers, and the use of false number plates are becoming more prevalent. The rise in fuel thefts is linked to soaring petrol prices, with the average cost of filling a typical family car exceeding £100. Retailers and industry experts express concern over the impact on businesses and communities, with some predicting that more garages may close due to high crime losses, potentially leaving certain areas underserved.
4. <https://www.standard.co.uk/business/business-news/surge-in-number-of-drivers-stealing-fuel-b1118580.html> - The Standard reports a significant rise in fuel thefts from filling stations in Britain. Data obtained by the RAC Foundation indicates that between July and September, forecourt owners attempted to trace offenders over 39,563 incidents, a 77% increase from 22,335 during the same period last year. This surge represents more than a fourfold increase compared to 8,558 incidents in the same quarter of 2019. The RAC Foundation suggests that the rise could be due to 'systematic criminal activity'. Most incidents are likely related to 'drive-offs', where individuals fill up their vehicles with no intention of paying. The British Oil Security Syndicate estimates that these thefts cost filling stations an average of £10,500 each per year. Offenders convicted of making off without payment can face up to two years in prison and/or an unlimited fine under the Theft Act 1978.
5. <https://news.sky.com/story/amp/petrol-thefts-number-of-drivers-stealing-fuel-more-than-quadruples-in-four-years-13002093> - Sky News reports a sharp increase in petrol thefts in Britain, with the number of drivers stealing fuel more than quadrupling in four years. Figures from the RAC Foundation show there were 39,563 incidents between July and September this year, a 77% rise from 22,335 over the same period last year. This also marks a fourfold increase from 8,558 incidents in the same quarter in 2019. The British Oil Security Syndicate estimates these incidents cost filling stations an average of £10,500 each per year. Most incidents are likely related to 'drive-offs', where someone fills up their vehicle without paying and leaves. Offenders convicted of making off without payment can face a maximum penalty of two years in prison and/or an unlimited fine under the Theft Act 1978. RAC Foundation director Steve Gooding expressed concern over the rising trend, suggesting it may indicate more systematic criminal activity.
6. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2023/11/07/fuel-thefts-soar-petrol-stations-britain-shoplifting/> - The Telegraph reports a significant increase in fuel thefts from petrol stations in Britain, mirroring the rise in shoplifting incidents. New research by the RAC Foundation found that between July and September, petrol forecourt owners requested driver registration details on 39,563 occasions, marking a 362% increase from the same period in 2019. The sharp increase in fuel theft comes as retailers face big increases in shoplifting across the country. The British Oil Security Syndicate estimates that fuel theft costs filling stations an average of £10,500 each per year. Offenders convicted of making off without payment can face up to two years in prison and/or an unlimited fine under the Theft Act 1978. Steve Gooding, director of the RAC Foundation, expressed concern over the rising trend, suggesting it may indicate more systematic criminal activity.
7. <https://www.autoexpress.co.uk/consumer-news/361437/forecourt-fuel-theft-surges-77-cent-latest-figures-suggest> - Auto Express reports a surge in forecourt fuel thefts, with the latest figures suggesting a 77% increase. Data released to the RAC Foundation by the DVLA shows that in the third quarter of 2023, it received 39,563 requests for the names and addresses of vehicle keepers believed to be guilty of fuel theft from forecourts. This is a 77% rise compared to the same period in 2022, when just 22,335 requests for data were made, and a 362% increase on pre-Covid levels. The British Oil Security Syndicate estimates incidents of unpaid fuel cost UK forecourt operators millions of pounds annually. Offenders convicted of making off without payment can face up to two years in prison and/or an unlimited fine under the Theft Act 1978. Steve Gooding, director of the RAC Foundation, expressed concern over the rising trend, suggesting it may indicate more systematic criminal activity.