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Friends, status symbols and weapons: The use of dogs by youth groups and youth gangs.

Jennifer Maher and Harriet Pierpoint

Abstract Recent UK media reports and government responses evidence a rising concern over irresponsible dog ownership, particularly the use of so-called status or weapon dogs. Youth criminal and antisocial behaviour using these dogs has been widely reported in urban areas and associated with street-based youth groups, in particular, the growing phenomenon of UK youth gangs. This article reports on the findings and implications of a small-scale study, comprising interviews with 25 youths and seven animal welfare and youth practitioners, which aimed to identify the nature of animal use and abuse in youth groups and gangs. It found that over half of the youths belonged to a youth gang and the remainder a youth group, with the majority owning an animal which was most often a ‘status’ dog (e.g., bull breed). Analysis revealed that dogs were used mainly for socialising and companionship, protection and enhancing status. More than 20 types of animal abuse were described by youths and practitioners.

Keywords: status dog, dangerous dog, animal abuse, youth groups, youth gangs

Introduction

Concern over youth ownership of so-called status, weapon or bling dogs has entered both the United Kingdom [UK] public and political domain. This is evident in: a) increased negative media attention on youth dog owners and ‘dangerous dogs’ [40, 13], b) increased reporting of youth’s dog fighting by the public to the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals [RSPCA] [35], and c) current governmental discourse and policy which has led to - the development of the Metropolitan Police Status Dog Unit [SDU], a provision of the Policing and Crime Act 2009 (s.35) prohibiting gangs using ‘status’ dogs in public, and proposals to amend the Dangerous Dogs Act 1997. This status dog *problem* - which often refers to bull breeds, both legal and illegal types - has also been reported on by animal welfare agencies [34], criminal justice agencies [32], and community agencies [20] across the UK. Yet evidence to support the link made between youth dog ownership and criminality is vague and inconclusive. A body of animal abuse literature, predominantly from the US, demonstrates a link between youth animal abuse and interpersonal violence [3, 4], however, this largely focuses on the individual rather than the group or social context.

Disciplines other than criminology have often focused on the benefits to humans of human-animal interaction including companionship and development of empathy [41, see also Sollund this issue]. The substantial value of the Western World’s pet industry (20 billion pounds in the UK) [44] has given rise to a number of marketing studies investigating the motivation for pet ownership [24, 8]. Beverland et al. [8] suggests two main

types of ownership motivations – pets as companions to love versus pets as toys, status markers and brands; the latter termed the ‘dark side of pet ownership’. They also differentiate between intrinsic (innately satisfying behaviour) and extrinsic (behaviour that earns reward and acknowledgement from others) goals of ownership. Extrinsic goals are more likely to result in animal abuse, as evidenced by deformities bred into designer pets, the wide-scale abandonment of pets [36] and even, as discussed herein, in the day-to-day ownership of a status dog. Extrinsically-motivated dog ownership can prove fatal for the pet (e.g., ownership of a banned breed or abandonment of a dog can both lead to euthanasia, while dog fighting can result in death). Yet concern has largely focused on the negative impact status dog ownership on communities and society as a whole. The growing anxiety in the UK surrounding status dogs relates to extrinsically motivated dog ownership among youths; dogs being used for criminal and anti-social purposes. It has been suggested that this ‘problem’ has transferred from US ‘gangs’ and ‘gangsta rap’ [34] to UK inner-city youth street culture, along with other stylistic codes of machismo (e.g., gangs and weapon use) [23, 29].

It is important to establish whether there is a link between youth groups, gangs, their culture and their dogs. If a link exists, it is vital we explore it and for the following reasons:

- Although the problem of status dog ownership is predominantly human-focused (e.g., impact on society), fundamentally the dog is the victim and can - and does - pay the ultimate cost in this relationship by being abandoned, seized and euthanized [16, 32, 31].
- Available data suggests irresponsible status dog ownership has a considerable impact on community and society (see the setting the scene section below).
- The Government are increasingly using suppressive measures to control the status dog *problem* [15]. The evidence underlying this response requires much closer scrutiny to determine validity.
- The problematic nature of status dog ownership dominates current discourse and fails to consider the possible positive and beneficial relationship between youth and dog [15, 22, 41].

Ultimately, understanding the role of animals in youth gangs and groups further develops our insight into both youth involvement in animal use and abuse and the development of youth gangs and group dynamics and culture. While this research originally began by looking at the role of animals in groups and gangs, what concerns us here, in somewhat more limited scope, is the pet most commonly identified by youths - the dog. This paper aims to explore: (1) whether a relationship exists between dogs and UK youth groups and gangs (in the context of owners or abusers) and (2) the nature of any relationship in terms of dog use and abuse. In other words, do dogs play a role in the group dynamic and its activities; if so, what is the dogs’ role?

Defining Key Terms

Many of the terms used to discuss the relationship between youths and their dogs – such as status dogs, dangerous dogs, and weapon dogs - are often used interchangeably, particularly by the media and are often a source of confusion.

In previous decades, references to ‘status’, ‘accessory’ or ‘fashion’ dogs implied small dog breeds commonly linked to the rich and famous (e.g., the Queen’s Corgi, Paris Hilton’s Chihuahua), and conferred status to their owners [49]. More recently in the UK the term ‘status dog’ has referred to the use of certain ‘tough’, ‘aggressive’ and ‘illegal’ breeds of dog by youths and is defined by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs [DEFRA] as:

“the ownership of certain breeds of dogs which are used by individuals to intimidate and harass members of public. These dogs are traditionally, but not exclusively, associated with young people on inner city estates and those involved in criminal activity” [14:4].

This term will be used herein to refer to the perceived problematic youth-dog relationship in the UK.

Status dogs are often referred to as ‘dangerous dogs’, although this is not necessarily the case. Dangerous dogs are specifically defined in legislation as **any** dog that is “dangerously out of control...on any occasion on which there are grounds for reasonable apprehension that it will injure any person, whether or not it actually does so...” (s.10(3) of the Dangerous Dogs Act 1991). Separate to the definition of dangerous dogs (defined by deed rather than breed), this Act also identifies four banned¹ breeds: Pit Bull Terrier [PBT], Japanese Tosa, Dogos Argentinos and Fila Brazileros.² The status dog problem in the UK is closely associated with the PBT, sometimes referred to by covert names such as: red nosed staff, Irish staff, long-legged staff, blue staff, staff/boxer cross – reflecting its complex and colourful breed history. PBT’s are identified by type (rather than breed), which means a dog will be considered illegal if a number of its characteristics match the American Breeds Association Standard of Conformity [B]. Identifying breed types in this way has proved difficult and is prone to subjectivity [11].

The Animal Welfare Act [AWA] 2006 follows a welfarist approach when defining animal abuse; rather than making it illegal to kill your dog, it prohibits *unnecessary suffering*. It details abusive behaviour to dogs and indicates:

“A person commits an offence if: (a) an act of his, or a failure of his to act, causes an animal to suffer, (b) he knew, or ought reasonably to have known, that the act, or failure to act, would have that effect or be likely to do so” (s. 4 AWA, 2006).

¹ Exemptions may be made for dogs with ‘responsible’ owners to be placed on a register [14].

² These dogs, traditionally bred for blood sports, are banned due to their apparent high aggression drive - see Collier [11] for detailed criticisms of this assertion and the breed-specific legislation.

Some academic definitions of animal abuse include forms of abuse that are socially acceptable and that may be “direct, or indirect, intentional or unintentional” [1]. The distinction between direct and indirect has particular importance for the status dog *problem*; many of the behaviours (e.g., training and breeding) associated with this ownership are legal but as discussed herein, they are often abusive.

Dog fighting, prohibited under s.8 of the AWA 2006, has been closely linked to status dog ownership. It is defined as “an occasion on which a protected animal is placed with an animal, or with a human, for the purpose of fighting, wrestling or baiting” (s. 8). Organised dog fighting (which is largely covert, well organised and linked to serious criminality) is distinct from ‘dog rolling’ or ‘chaining’ (terms given to youth street-based dog fighting using status dogs) in that the latter involves “impromptu public scraps” and is less likely to be motivated by significant financial gain [33]. ‘Weapon dogs’ describes dogs “used in crime and as weapons for intimidation” – usually by gangs, replacing or in addition to traditional weapons such as knives [20:n/p]. These dogs are usually distinct from other trained attack/guard dogs used in many professions; they are unlikely to be professionally trained or kept under the strict conditions of the Guard Dogs Act 1975.

Although not without its critics [46], a widely used definition by the Eurogang Network was employed which distinguishes a gang from other youth groups by their being “durable, street oriented ...[and] whose own identity includes involvement in illegal activity” [28:129]. It is a broad definition which captures both elements of the status dog phenomenon: street-based youth involved in illegal activity. In our study, youths’ self-defined gang membership and then their behaviour were compared to the key characteristics of this definition to ensure some conformity in self-definition. For the purpose of this article, and in part because of the small sample, gang members and non-gang group members were not analysed separately. Interviewed gang and non-gang youths will be referred to collectively herein as ‘group’.

Setting the Scene

Unlike other criminal behaviour, late adolescence and early adulthood are common times for the perpetration of animal cruelty [4]. Pierpoint’s analysis of RSPCA data [45] reports that convictions for animal abuse are most commonly for abuse of dogs and that offenders are most frequently aged 18 years and over. This profile is consistent with findings from the US, where dogs are the most common victims and most of the alleged abusers were young males (27% under 18 years old; 56% under 30 years old) [18]. With the exception of the RSPCA, database, there are few national databases documenting the relationship between youths and animals abuse, and ownership. Currently, there are no compulsory requirements, in the UK, for dog licensing or registration, therefore, no official measure of the status dog problem. Instead evidence has been collected from national (e.g., dog bite statistics, animal abuse reports and dangerous dog prosecutions) and local (e.g., dog shelter populations and dangerous dog seizures) databases, used by the media and government to measure the status dog problem. For example:

- The National Health Service (NHS) [25] recorded an overall 119 percent increase in UK youth bite victims and, in London alone, a 63 percent increase in adult victims. This indicates a rise in dog bites for all ages except 0-9 year olds. This data is problematic and incredibly misleading as it counts a ‘strike’ (any injury resulting from contact with a dog) as a bite. Also, the breed and the circumstances of the attack are not recorded; this data should not be used as evidence of an increase in the status dogs *problem*.
- An increase in the number of abandoned status dogs is evident in dog shelter populations. The London Battersea Cat and Dog Home reports that bull breeds account for 47 percent of the dogs currently homed at the shelter (almost double that of five years ago) [20]. This increase, rather than finger neglectful youth owners, may simply indicate market saturation - due to over-breeding of bull breeds – or, sadly, moral panic fuelling wide scale abandonment of bull breeds.
- Animal abuse complaints made to the RSPCA about dog fighting, particularly youth dog fighting, suggest a significant rise since 2007 (see Table 1). This rise may instead imply increased public awareness of the status dog *problem* or, perhaps, an increased intolerance towards youth behaviour.
- The Metropolitan police identify a notable increase in the seizure of banned and dangerous dogs in the London area (see Table 1). This data is not broken down into owner or dog type or age, and the increase coincides with the creation of a police unit dedicated to identifying and responding to this problem. The reported increase should come as no surprise.
- Convictions under the Dangerous Dog Act – s. 1 and 3 - have also increased according to DEFRA (see Table 1). So too the number of seized dogs subsequently added to the Exemption Index; including banned breeds deemed safe and allowed to remain with a responsible owner under supervised conditions - suggesting neither dog nor owner match the vicious, fallacious stereotype created by the media. This increase in convictions is to be expected given the suppressive might of the dedicated SDU.

***TABLE 1 here**

Combined, this official data indicates a trend towards problematic dog ownership. However, as discussed, this is problematic and the scale of the status dog *problem* remains unclear and cannot be used to apportion blame to irresponsible youth.

Despite the growing body of animal abuse literature, mostly from the US, academic research has not focused directly on the use or abuse of dogs in youth groups. Nevertheless, some of these studies provide a good basis for situating dogs in criminology. Youth animal abuse is linked extensively to general criminality [3], human interpersonal violence [4, 5, 7, see also Flynn this issue] and gangs [12, 21]. Dog fighting is associated with organised crime,

violence and general deviance [48], while ownership of status dogs is connected to general deviance [5]. The main findings of these studies are summarised below:

- According to Ascione [4], youths involved in animal abuse share many characteristics with those involved in other types of violence. Young animal abusers were more likely than non-abusers to report violent offences. Adolescent animal abuse has been associated with serial and mass homicide [50] and as indicators of child abuse and victimisation [4, 17]. According to Ascione's [4] typology of youth animal abuse, adolescent abuse is a component of gang and group related activities (e.g., initiation rites).
- A UK study by McVie [30] indicates a tentative link between animal abuse and youth gangs and offending. She suggests abusers have seven characteristics distinguishing them from non-abusers - one of which is gang membership.
- According to Degenhardt [12], offenders in the US charged with animal abuse crimes (predominantly aged 18-24 years) were more likely than non-abuse offenders to 1) commit other violent offences towards human victims, 2) carry and use firearms in the commission of other offences, 3) be involved in the narcotics trade and 4) be in criminal street gangs.
- Barnes *et al.* [6] found dog fighting and the ownership of 'high risk' (e.g., status) dogs, in the US, is a marker for deviant behaviour; owners had significantly higher conviction rates than 'low-risk' dog owners. 'High-risk' ownership may be a marker for both general deviance and organised crime.
- A University of Chicago study [48] found dog fighting secondary to other street violence, used to work out gang conflicts and to earn money (see also [33] study on gangs and animal fighting).

A large body of academic literature exists on youth gangs - emerging from over a century of research on mostly urban US youth [28, 42, 27]. Although numerous UK studies into youth formations and youth delinquency exist, there is a notable gang literature deficit³. Gangs, perceived a recent development in the UK, are linked to concepts such as 'moral panic', and 'masculinity'. Cohen's [10] analysis of media escalation and moral panic surrounding UK youth subcultures is evident; the public fear and label youth groups as gangs, and now, blindly, label pets as monsters. Violence in the gang, like animal abuse, is largely a male phenomenon. Masculinity⁴, therefore, may be a useful dimension for understanding gang violence, specifically gang use of status dogs [31]. Violence allows gang members, in the absence of more traditional methods (e.g., employment), to construct and confirm their masculine identities [53]. Agnew [1:192] identifies that "animal abuse may be a mechanism

³ For an in depth discussion the sparse literature available on gangs in the UK -see Maher (2007) *Angles with Dirty Faces: Youth Gangs and Troublesome Youth Groups*. Unpublished PhD Thesis. University of Glamorgan.

⁴ Masculinity refers to the gender role attributed to males and the different ways of 'doing male'[31]. Crisis of masculinity refers to the conflicting pressures upon men, in modern society, to construct a masculine identity with limited resources (e.g. traditional role of being the breed-winner) – with many turning to violence as the means of doing so. It should be noted that theorists identify a spectrum of masculinities – which focus on various aspects of what it is to be male - see [26].

for ‘accomplishing masculinity’ in that this behaviour illustrates the valued male traits of aggression and power”.

Methodology

Our small-scale pilot project aimed to uncover any links between dogs and groups, in terms of the nature and purpose of their relationship. This project, uniquely, places animal abuse centrally within the group context and explores the attitudes and experiences of youths’ and their friends’ animal ownership. It also sought to test sampling, data collection, and analysis methods and instruments, for future research projects.

Detached youth workers⁵ were shadowed, in multiple localities across a South Wales city, to recruit and give voice to ‘hard-to-reach’ youth dog owners. Animal owners and non-owners were asked to participate in the research. Over a four month period more than 120 youths were approached on the street by Maher, the majority of whom agreed to be interviewed. However, due to researcher and gatekeeper time constraints and the unpredictable nature of conducting street-youth-based research, only 25 of these youths were interviewed. Twenty youths were interviewed in three groups and five individually. The final sample was predominantly white (88% white: 12% black minority ethnic), male (80% male: 20% female) youths aged between 11 and 25 (with a mean age of 17 years). Due to the noisy public locations used and the sensitive nature of the topic, the interviews were not audio recorded. Instead, hand-written notes were kept and analysed using NVivo 8 software; the data was categorised into recurring themes in terms of uses and abuses identified by the youths. To avoid leading, the interview questions were phrased so as not to use terms identified by the media, for example, ‘status’.

A purposeful sample of seven people, all working with dogs or youths on a day-to-day basis, gave semi-structured interviews, focusing on the nature of their encounters with youth dog owners. The sample of practitioners included: a vet and animal hospital director, a dog warden, two Dogs Trust representatives, a STU representative, an RSPCA representative, and a Youth Offending Team member. These interviews were conducted by Maher and/or Pierpoint and were mostly recorded, then transcribed and analysed in Nvivo 8.

Results

Dog ownership and group/gang membership

All youths identified themselves as being part of a group and over half belonged to a youth gang (Eurogang definition). The majority of youths were dog owners and reported their friends as being dog owners. Over half of the dogs identified were bull breeds (6 Staffordshire Bull Terriers or [SBT]/Cross, 3 Bull Mastiffs, 1 American Bull Dog [ABD]),

⁵ Also known as street-based (rather than linked to a youth provision centre) youth workers - focus on reaching and engaging with the most socially excluded and ‘hard-to-reach youths in their community.

followed by 4 cross-breeds, 3 Jack Russells and 2 Rottweilers. Of the 73 dog breeds identified as friends' dogs, 64 (88%) were bull breeds (including 19 SBT, 17 ABD, 20 Mastiffs, 8 PBT). In the localities frequented by the youths, the most commonly seen dogs were identified as bull breeds (10 SBT, 3 PBT, 1 ABD) or other types of 'tough' dogs (6).

A number of uses and functions for dogs were identified by youths – these involved both intrinsic and extrinsic roles. Intrinsic roles were most commonly identified, specifically, socialising with the dog and the dog as a loved companion. Using the dog as a weapon, as a status symbol and for fighting were the most common extrinsic roles identified and are behaviours closely associated with the status dog *problem*. The intrinsic and extrinsic roles of 'friend, status symbol and weapon' are discussed below and contextualised with interview extracts. First, the animal abuse described by interviewees is detailed in brief, with a particular focus on abuse caused to dogs, the main focus of this paper.

Animal Abuse

Analysis of youth, and animal welfare and youth practitioner interviews revealed more than 20 types of animal abuse, with just under half of the youths acknowledging having been involved in abusing or, as youths would say, 'hurting' animals: commonly small pets and non-domesticated animals/birds. Table 2 details abuses witnessed, observed or enacted by the youths on dogs specifically and on animals more generally.

*****TABLE 2 HERE*****

We can distinguish here between 'active abuse' and 'passive abuse' of animals. Active abuse, involves intentional and direct harm: the torture, maiming and killing of small animals and birds, chopping the tail off a dog and beating and stabbing dogs - examples of abuse identified by interviewees. Passive abuse refers to behaviour which results in abuse, but is not intended or direct. Abusers may not recognise certain behaviours as cruel – for example, drowning unwanted puppies, harsh discipline or training techniques, abandonment, and more general neglect, for example, withholding proper medical care or failing to adequately exercise their dog. While some of the dog abuses identified were clearly intentional and illegal (e.g., dog fighting), dogs were more likely to be victims of passive abuse.

"if a dog is too soft they will use it to train others, bait it instead cause it won't fight with bigger dogs" (RJ, male, non-dog owner, in group with dogs)

"the runt of the litter is thrown into a bucket of water...money is all it is" (MC, male, SBT owner)

Other animals were more likely to suffer active abuse.

"put a hamster in a microwave...one of the boys did it, he broke into a youth centre and the little children there had a pet hamster and it blew up" (Tom, male, non-dog owner).

“I tied a cat to a firework and it blew up...tied it onto his tail, see I saw this Egyptian cat, and no one likes Egyptian cat, so I blew it up...[with] a couple of my mates” (AK, youth aged 17).

While some of the youths’ behaviours towards their dogs (e.g., training dogs to be aggressive and general punitive training and breeding practices) may not be judged as causing “unnecessary suffering” and may even be socially acceptable, it is difficult for the researchers to accept that these animals have not suffered, at the very least, passive abuse. The nine youths who acknowledged that their friends and associates abused animals often referred to dog fighting and setting a dog on other animals as abuse. However, often these youths did not recognise their own behaviour as cruel: dog rolling was not, while organised dog fighting and ‘baiting’ a dog with a cat was. Most of the youths believed the use of (non-excessive) violence was required, when training a dog; essential for establishing leadership.

Friend, Status Symbol and Weapon

The reason that most youths gave for dog ownership was for companionship and/or socialising with friends. Fourteen youths used their dogs to socialise with friends:

“Like walking around together, enjoy having em” (Jack – male, Jack Russell owner)

“just something to do, company. We go to the fields, play, walk them” (David, male, ABD Owner)

One group suggested a dog was ‘shared’ amongst members. Another youth said a fellow group member housed three of the group’s dogs, alongside his own, as a result of arguments members were having with their parents around the keeping of the dogs. For example, one youth was expressly told to remove his dog from his parent’s house. For some groups, the dogs themselves were seen as integral members and central to the social function of the group:

“we just walk, play, hang out, walk to the park...[they are] part of the group, like, it feels good” (S & M – male, 3 SBT& SBT/cross owner)

S & M suggested his gang offered protection to his dogs; he has experienced other youths “setting their dog on my puppy” and is “scared when out walking with the dog alone”. For some of these youths and their dog(s), a close and somewhat unique bond existed, firmly rooted in mutual feelings of trust and loyalty, the youths compelled to protect and care for their ‘friend’ as they would another group member. Some even identified their dog as a “best friend”, suggesting that their dog is in fact the most important member of their group:

“she’s my best friend. I’ve had a hard time and she’s the one I want to spend time with, she’s always with me” (Jack, male, ABD Owner)

Curiously, practitioners did not discuss this function of dogs; perhaps they failed to observe this in their work or simply felt it unimportant. Despite this omission, some practitioners did acknowledge they have encountered youths who were responsible owners.

Four practitioners agreed that youths kept dogs as status symbols, whereby the dog is valued for perceived characteristics, for example, ‘big’, ‘tough’ and ‘powerful’ – in the hope that via a process of transference, the group or youths own status would be suitably enhanced and subsequently acknowledged by others.

“[the dog] is part your label, it’s part of your persona, it’s part of how you’re viewed within you” (RSPCA representative).

“...the dog is there more as a status symbol than as something they would care for” (YOT worker)

“The bigger and harder looking the better” (Animal hospital director).

Four youths reported the use of dogs to bolster status:

“status is important...some of my mates go for the dogs that look good... are tough” (Jack, male Mastiff owner).

“I want a blue staffie next...cause they are bad dogs, like... Like they are tough...Pit bulls, they’re crazy” (Zac, male, friends Mastiff-cross shared by the groups).

Four practitioners also gave examples of dogs being used as weapons: 1) reactively – where youths used dogs to defend themselves or repel would-be attackers:

“One of the gangs chased the other gang into the park...they let two dogs go and they did the straight police dog style chase, obviously been trained, took the kid out on the shoulder, the first one, brought him to the ground, the other dog piled in and then they piled in and they stabbed him to death. But they used the dog...” (Status Dog Unit representative)

2) proactively – when youths actively engaged their dogs in aggressive behaviour:

“...he was dealing from a kebab shop and his dog was actually chained up, you know like sort of like half stable door and he was actually chained up beyond there. If they were raided and the first thing they [the police] had to confront was the dog or get bitten. That is why a lot of times drug dealers and that keep em.” (Dog warden)

Eleven youths reported using dogs as weapons: 1) reactively:

“I don’t want her to be too friendly, like, she’ll play with my mates dog but she doesn’t like other dogs... I want to make sure if someone comes at me she will just lunge at them, like won’t let anyone get close to me. You need that when you live in a place like this, it’s dangerous” (David, male ABD owner).

2) proactively:

“I set me mates dog Diesel on a mate – remember he was up on a jeep’s roof, that high, and the dog was jumping this high, he’s a beast [Why?] It was a laugh...but it was fuckin bad, like...fuckin wicked...If he was here now I’d set him on you now, he just does what I

tells him, he like waits outside my garden and when I comes out he just follows me around...” (Zac, male, friends Mastiff-cross shared by the groups).

While the phrase ‘using a dog as a weapon’ may immediately suggest people as victims, dogs may also be used against other dogs and other animals, somewhat peculiarly, almost always for entertainment. The RSPCA vet indicated that dog injuries he treats - dogs belonging to youths – would lead him to believe that dog fighting, in particular rolling, had increased significantly. Perhaps in support of this assertion, five practitioners discussed dog fighting/rolling. It is worth noting that some practitioners were knowledgeable of the distinction between dog ‘fighting’ and ‘rolling’. One linked dog rolling to entertainment:

“they’ve filmed each other with their dogs rolling in the park, fighting each other in the park” (Status Dog Unit Representative)

Six youths were involved in dog rolling/fighting, all linking these encounters to entertainment, although youths do not use the term dog rolling as practitioners did. They do, however, clearly distinguish between serious organised dog fighting, often financially motivated, and spontaneous, opportunistic dog fighting – essentially: dog rolling. Some youths were approached by peers and offered money to fight their dog(s) but most described spontaneous dog rolling:

“mates talk about it a lot, some of them go to West Wales to fight, get the train up there...its organised” (TJ, male, SBT and Rottweiler owner).

“sometimes we get them to fight on chains, for fun, not serious, let them go, pull them back, let them go” (JZ, male, Mastiff owner).

“Everytime someone brings their dog out, they [rival group] bring their dogs out and they are like, ‘watch my dog fight, watch my dog fight’ ... so everytime they bring their dog out people gotta walk away [or fight]” (RJ, male, non-dog owner, but in a group with dogs).

Some of the dog rolling reports intimated fighting ‘just happened’ yet, at the same time alluded to the fact that some dogs were trained for these encounters, suggesting some element of organisation:

“for a laugh...there’s dog fighting in the park, it just happens [casual, adhoc]...some of the boys train them for fights... you put them into a cupboard and give them only red meat so they get the taste of blood. Then in a week or two after being in a dark room, it comes out wide eyed and they fight it [other dog]. A couple of the boys learnt it from the internet” (MC, male, SBT owner).

Discussion

This study has found a relationship between groups and the use and abuse of dogs. Each youth belonged to a group and the majority, along with their friends, owned a dog, many of these status dogs. Interviewees identified some key roles and a number of functions for dogs -

as friends, status symbols and weapons. However, the most frequently cited use of dogs by youths was an intrinsic one; dogs were considered companions and for socialising in the group. Although a small pilot study - the findings discussed here should be treated with proper caution - a number of issues merit further consideration:

1. Extrinsic/intrinsic motivations for ownership are useful descriptive categories for understanding the complex relationship between youths and their dogs. The main function of dogs was an intrinsic one whereby they were seen by youths as companions and as playing a role in socialising, in stark contrast to the suggested image presented by practitioners in this study, by current media and indeed by government responses. This intrinsic role has been neglected in criminological literature, however the implications are relevant. For example, 'social capital', according to French sociologist Bourdieu [9], generates life chances through social networks and has been directly linked to desistance [39]. Social capital is among the many documented positive influences of pet ownership on humans [52].
2. A secondary function of dogs was extrinsic in nature - using dogs as weapons or as status symbols and in fighting/rolling them for entertainment. Status dog ownership can be an extension of a youth's masculinity [53] – the dog can become a powerful weapon and a clear statement of aggressive intent and reflect an individual's status (hard, tough and to be respected). Unfortunately status is fragile: requiring one's masculinity and reputation be repeatedly proved; as the dog champions its owner both dog and owner are weighted with a constant burden of proof. In this way a youths' need to own a status dog escalates, his desire fanned by the pressure to ensure his dog can 'handle' street subculture and, of the utmost importance, both dog and owner evade ridicule and victimisation.
3. Although our interviewees cited examples of both positive and negative uses of dogs, the latter is central, and pretty-much exclusive, to current public debate flamed by the media, and by suppressive government responses. This debate is framed by the gangland narrative; a web of rhetoric around inner city estates and the 'underclass', their feral children and their feral pets. This follows on seamlessly from the perceived 'violentisation' and 'weaponisation' of youths. More broadly, dogs could be seen to be caught up in the moral panic and the demonization of youths (see [38]). This is most evident in the pre-emptive justice of the Dangerous Dogs Act 1991– often cited as one of the worst and most ineffective pieces of legislation to have been taken through parliament⁶ [11, 16] - which proposes the death penalty for four dog breeds, including PBT types. The Act's dishonesty and cruelty is movingly documented in the accounts of 'illegal' dog owners whose dogs were destroyed during the Liverpool Dog Amnesty in 1997, and more recently by the Metropolitan Police in London [16].
4. The government response to status dogs has had significant consequences for both youths and dogs. It is a barrier to youths wanting to own these breeds and, crucially, prevents them from reaping the many rewards associated with the human-animal

⁶ This legislation is currently under review in England and Wales.

bond. It has been proposed that direct contact with animals reduces stress [15] and can build empathy, and that by developing a bond with animals, empathy toward other living beings will be encouraged [41]. As Williams [51] notes:

“This is part of the problem of banging on about youths with dogs. They can have a really positive impact ... there are a multitude of benefits, from being good for the yep to learn responsibility, to helping them to socialise, mix with other people; a dog is a great tool for all of that”.

Secondly, the response focuses on the innocent dog as deviant somehow responsible for variables beyond their control – for example, training (to be vicious and to fight) and breeding (banned breed). It is unacceptable that the dog ultimately pays the price by being injured, abandoned or even euthanized [43]. The legal killing of dogs is a serious and increasing [36] problem, deserving attention irrespective of their relationship to humans.

5. Writers in other disciplines have pointed to the omnipresence of inconsistent human behaviour towards animals (see [37, 19]). Our findings constitute further proof of this – dogs as companions and part of a social group sadly also treated as inanimate objects (accessories and weapons), neglected and abused. While numerous examples of abuse were identified in the ownership of and encounters between young people and animals, dogs were most likely to experience passive abuse, rather than active abuse – which was focused on other animals. This may suggest that dogs are more valued than other pets and small animals/birds; which fails to recognise that in consequence, passive abuse is as problematic and suggests that much of the abuse may be linked to ignorance and conflict between the inconsistency in humans behaviour towards animals. In our study dogs served both intrinsic and extrinsic functions. Although inherently conflicting, youths did not recognise this paradox. As Sanders and Arluke [37] question: how is it that people can live comfortably with these contradictions and not even be aware of them? The reasons for this require further examination.

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TABLES

Table 1: Summary of statistics on dog fighting and dangerous dog offences

Year	i. RSPCA – All Dog fighting Complaints*	ii. RSPCA – % youth dog fighting Complaints*	iii. MET Police DDA 1991 seizures *	A. Persons Found Guilty under DDA s3**	B. Persons found Guilty under DDA s1**	C. Dogs added to Index (actual certificates issued)**
2004	24	n/d	n/d	547	17	6 (6)
2005	n/d	n/d	n/d	605	11	1(1)
2006	137	n/d	173	658	6	6(6)
2007	358	132	481	703	74	185(141)
2008	284	188	719	763	115	330(255)
2009	204	102	1152	n/d	n/d	396(314)

*(i), (ii) and (iii) [35].

**The number of convictions and sentences under s. 3 (ownership of illegal breed) and s.1 (dog being dangerously out of control) of the Dangerous Dogs Act 1991 and the numbers of prohibited dogs added to the Index of Exempted Dogs – 2004 to 2009 for England and Wales [14].

n/d – no data available for this period.

Table 2: Abuse of dogs and other animals by youths reported by the animal welfare/youth practitioners and youths interviewed:

Dogs:	Other Animals:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cruel training techniques – for fighting (including using a small dog as bait and using painful electrocution to enhance aggression), aggression or obedience. • Abandoning and tying up dogs to die. • Neglect (food, housing, water, medical treatment) - resulting in emaciation, disease and health issues • Withholding medical treatment for a sick or injured dog. • Poor breeding practices – congenital diseases form inbreeding or health problems from over-breeding – mastitis. • No exercise for dogs (kept in back garden) • Lack of socialisation with other dogs • Drowning the unwanted runt of the litter. • Kicking, punching, stabbing and beating dogs. • Chopping the tail off a dog. • Dog fighting/rolling 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Foxes, chickens and cats used as bait for dog fighting/training. • Neglect and starvation of small pets – rabbits and cats – and withholding medical treatment for injured/sick pets • Burn pets with a cigarette • Tying fireworks to kill small animals and amphibians • Killing birds with nail gun, air guns and corks (choking) • Scalding animals • Torching a sheep • Shooting horses with pellet guns • Biting the head off a fish • Placing cat & hamster in a microwave • Throw cat off the roof

