

Dangerous dogs are ‘business asset’ for owners, says research

Embargoed until 0001, Friday 5 April 2013

Dangerous and aggressive dogs are increasingly used as a business asset for their owners, helping them with image branding, debt collection, security and income generation, research says.

The British Sociological Association’s annual conference in London heard today [Friday 5 April] that entrepreneurship was one of the main reasons young men were buying and breeding more mastiffs, pit bulls, Akitas and other aggressive dogs.

Dr Simon Harding, of Middlesex University London, told the conference his research involved interviews with owners of legal and illegal aggressive dogs, and gang members.

Dr Harding said: “For many young people, dogs are increasingly viewed as a commodity which can be traded up or down like a mobile phone. It has become less about whether the dog will fit into family life and more about, ‘what will this dog do for me, how much will it make me?’”

Dr Harding said that bull breeds “through their reputation for aggression or ability to intimidate are also used in drug deals, gambling debts and loan-sharking, where their owners do not have recourse to law if the money owed is not paid because his business is illegal”.

“The dog says ‘I am here to be taken seriously’ – it acts as a ‘minder’ and a ‘heavy’ when collecting dues. People believe that possession of an aggressive dog means that the threats posed by such men will be carried out”.

Just as company logos try to sum up the aspirations of organisations, the dog was there to represent the owner’s business activities, which included the use of violence, he said. This potential for violence was sometimes visually represented - for example dogs’ muzzles could be decorated with studs, violent graphics, gang colours or bling.

Aggressive dogs were also products of a demand-driven marketplace, said Dr Harding, in that they were bred and sold for profit, with prices for puppies from the strongest and most aggressive dogs fetching over £400. Mature dogs that fought well were traded at higher prices.

“Owners are in a free enterprise competitive market”, said Dr Harding, “and that leads to specialised breeding of dogs to make their offspring even heavier, stronger and more vicious, presenting a spiral of increasing aggression.”

Owners would try to maximise their assets by training their dogs to be aggressive, building up their muscles with vitamin supplements or even injecting them with steroids and filing their teeth so that they could win in fights against other dogs.

This demand-led market was supplied by an increasing number of backstreet breeders who 'scatter-breed' and cross-breed the animals, often producing unhealthy and aggressive qualities in dogs. The dogs were then sold in pubs or on the internet.

A 16-year-old told Dr Harding: "It's not just a dog, it's a half bull mastiff and half pit bull. I'll probably get another - we are looking to breed it - and we would get about £2,000 per dog."

One 17-year-old boy said about pit bulls: "People know that if you are breeding you are making money from them."

This increase in backstreet breeding had in turn generated increased visibility of such dogs in parks and open spaces. The number of seizures of illegal dogs rose from 40 in 2005/06 to 719 in 2008/09, and there had been a 12-fold increase in reports of dog-fighting between 2004 and 2008, according to the RSPCA.

The increased presence of bull breed dogs in open spaces and owners' homes had led to an increase in dog attacks - since 1991 there has been a rise of 551% in hospital admissions for dog bites. From 2011-12, 6,447 people were hospitalised as a result of a dog attack, though not all were by dogs considered aggressive breeds. But, said Dr Harding, the growth in numbers raised the risk of attack, especially for children. Seven children in the last eight years had died from dog attacks, usually in the home.

Dr Harding, a lecturer in criminology and sociology, also analysed police records in his research. He visited 40 parks in south and west London, and in 34 (85%) park users reported the regular presence of aggressive dogs. Seven police authorities in the UK had told him that dog-fighting took place in their areas.

He has called for closer work between animal welfare agencies and police departments to tackle the problem more effectively.

Noting that not all bull breed dogs were mistreated, he said: "Dogs are what we make them, it is humans that are responsible for making dogs either sociable or aggressive."

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Notes: The 2013 British Sociological Association annual conference is being held at the Grand Connaught Rooms, Holborn, London, from 3-5 April. Over 400 social scientists will present their latest research, and 700 people will attend. The British Sociological Association's mission is to represent the intellectual and sociological interests of its members. The BSA is a Company Limited by Guarantee. Registered in England and Wales. Company Number: 3890729. Registered Charity Number 1080235 www.britsoc.co.uk