

Hospital admissions for dog attacks jump five-fold in 20 years

Illegal owners pump animals full of steroids as dogs become key commodity among criminal gangs

The study found that dogs such as mastiffs, pit bulls and akitas were being bred as a business asset
Rex Features

Hospital admissions for dog attacks have jumped five-fold in the last two decades as illegal owners pump their animals with steroids to make them more aggressive, according to new research published today.

Dr Simon Harding will present the results of a three-year study into dangerous dogs at the British Sociological Association annual conference today, showing that these animals have now become a key commodity among criminal gangs with prize pit bulls fetching as much as £10,000.

The report comes just ten days after 14-year-old Jade Lomas-Anderson was mauled to death by dogs in Greater Manchester.

Dr Harding, a Middlesex University criminologist, is calling for tougher action on dangerous dogs, insisting his research uncovered a clear link between violent crime and an increasing trade in such animals. "This issue has been talked about extensively without resolution. The Government and authorities need to get their fingers out and resolve the issue. No more excuses, more needs to be done proactively and we can't just wait for more victims of aggressive dog attacks," he said today, adding: "I found there was an increase in public anxiety, people are using parks and public spaces differently where these dogs are found, and these concerns are valid." His study, which involved more than 100 interviews, including with gang members, found that dogs such as mastiffs, pit bulls and akitas were being bred as a business asset.

The research indicated that most aggressive dogs could be sold for more than £400, with owners building up their pet's muscles with vitamin supplements and even injecting them with steroids for fights. "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?'," said Dr Harding, who found that a litter of six dogs could fetch £1,000 while a prize pit bull could have a price ten times higher.

He added that "through their reputation for aggression or ability to intimidate", bull breeds "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 criminologist uncovered a strong link between dog owners who have been arrested or had their dog seized, with previous criminal convictions ranging from drug dealing to attempted murder.

"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," said Dr Harding, author of *Unleashed: The phenomena of status dogs and weapon dogs*. He said the growth in numbers raised the risk of attack, particularly on children, as his study found there has been a rise of 551 per cent in hospital admissions for dog bites since 1991.

"Dogs are what we make them, it is humans that are responsible for making dogs either sociable or aggressive."