

Who do we fear more – the dogs or their owners?

Scaremongering about pets being used as weapons is displaced prejudice against (usually) young men with staffs and bull terriers

Zoe Williams, The Guardian, Wednesday 25 January 2012



Illustration by Matt Kenyon

On Saturday a six-year-old girl in a park in Chingford, north-east London, was attacked by a dog and lost part of her ear. The animal's owner took off, but gave himself up the next day and was charged yesterday.

On Tuesday the BBC screened *Death Row Dogs*, which was not related to this case – rather, it purported to be an exposé of the injuries caused by dogs, which are "at a record high and rising". The press release continues: "Sadly fatalities are not uncommon", which is directly contradicted by the NHS, extrapolating from hospital episode statistics (this is some very macabre reading). "Reports of serious dog attacks, usually involving young children, receive a lot of media coverage. However, such cases are very rare in England" – so rare, in fact, that since 2008, when the child death review process was introduced, no mention of dogs has been made in any guidelines; air rifles are a greater threat to safety.

In the broader context of dangers posed by dogs, underground but professional fighting is a small but stubborn problem, essentially only a threat to the dogs. Ad hoc, chaotic fighting (these are reported as "youths with dogs/ fights in parks"), has increased a lot over the last five years, but the numbers are still pretty small – 358 in 2007, which was a boom year. To put that in perspective, there were 305

human bites last year that presented at A&E, so that's not even counting the human bites that were dealt with at home.

It is not done to quibble over what counts as "uncommon", especially in preventable deaths among children. To the parents, and to anyone with an imagination, one is too many. But there is a political subtext – as is so often the case – to the presentation of risk here, and it's not just because bulldog breeds are unusually tenacious and have powerful jaws.

People talk about "weapon dogs" without needing anything as coarse as evidence that the dog might be used as a weapon – all that really means is a burly staffordshire bull terrier with brass chest furniture in the company of young, ideally black, men. Animal charities often point out how much teenagers benefit from having something to care for, how it bolsters their independence and maturity – that puts no dent in the belief that these dogs must be weapons because those are the kind of people who would want a weapon.

It has always been the work of politics to beef up some risks and minimise others – so, for instance, John Mueller's book, *Overblown*, has a graph that shows the number of US deaths caused by lightning strike has always been higher than that caused by terrorism, except in 2001. Road traffic is so much greater a threat to children than anything apart from sudden infant death syndrome, that it's hackneyed to point it out. But flying up the mortality charts is the "accident while texting" (there were some good statistics, albeit from America, on BBC Radio 4's *Inside Health* this week). Generally speaking, risks that proceed from decisions made by individuals are played down, while risks that emanate from groups of people are overstated.

Despite the rhetorical mileage in it everybody knows this is hysterical, and that it is relatively rare for this irrationality to get its own legislation. Indeed, the Dangerous Dogs Act 1991 is held up as an example of how not to make laws. It was hurried through in response to tabloid pressure, and the results are frankly tragic. "Really sociable, healthy dogs do get caught up in it, and there's nothing you can do," said an officer from the West Midlands police dangerous dogs unit, about to kill a beautiful tan pitbull that any dog lover would have rehomed in a heartbeat.

The law serves no purpose in public protection, has not reduced the number of dog bites, and hasn't even reduced the number of pit bull-type dogs on the streets. But this doesn't mean it hasn't had an impact: it has given a legislative framework to neighbours prosecuting grudges against one another. The dogs investigated on *Death Row Dogs* were local tip-offs, and all the dogs, on examination, were being mistreated by their owners. But a neighbour worried about animal cruelty would have called the RSPCA; the choice of the police as their authority of first resort suggests malice. None of the dogs was dangerous.

Furthermore this law has made young people with any bull breed type the legitimate focus of disapprobation – in the London borough of Lewisham, the local paper, the *News Shopper*, ran

a campaign last year to "shop a dog". No incident was required – you just saw one you didn't like the look of and shopped it. It suffices to say that spaniels didn't count.

It would never be OK to say: "I'm afraid of young men, especially large groups of them, especially the ones without much money" – so in order to articulate that, these people are broken down into their constituent parts.

It's not them you're afraid of, it's their dogs, or their hoods. And each rationalisation is justified on some generalised pretext – a criminal might wear a hood, ergo hoods suggest criminality; staffs have strong jaws, ergo all staffs are weapons. And that in itself is usually syllogistic – but it also has the effect, in reducing a person to his accessories, of dehumanising the person. Intellectually, it's interesting to watch how prejudice works, the circuitous routes it takes, its iatrogenic consequences. But as the owner of a staffie crossed with a ridgeback, it's not interesting, it's annoying.

Link to article: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2012/jan/25/dangerous-dogs-prejudice-against-owners>