

Dog Fighting and Serious Crime:

THE FACTS AND THE WAY FORWARD

A dog fight takes place in the UK every day. The League Against Cruel Sports revealed this in 2015 as part of a ground-breaking academic report, so we decided to meet the problem head on. To get to a national solution for dog fighting, we must first understand the challenges at a local community level. We instigated an in-depth local investigation – Project Bloodline – which used collaboration, intelligence gathering and covert operations to discover the truth about dog fighting in the UK.

Crucially, dog fighting is not purely a matter of animal welfare. Evidence from this country and abroad points to dog fighting being a 'gateway' crime to serious and organised offences such as drug use and violence. Links between animal abuse

and human abuse are also clear. In the United States, dog fighting is recognised as a Grade A felony by the FBI and the practice of tackling dog fighting to prevent other crimes is well established.

What the academic report also highlighted is a severe lack of information, data and consistency when it comes to those organisations dealing with dog fighting. This inconsistent and flawed approach means that dog fighting cannot currently be tackled in an effective way.

This Special Briefing summarises the full Project Bloodline report, focussing on the extent and causes of dog fighting in this country – and on the way we can tackle it.

Key Findings

Project Bloodline is based on the methodology used by Projects Kraken and Griffin, tried and tested models used by police dealing with terrorism and criminal activity at a community level. The location, the Bedfordshire urban areas of Luton, Bedford and Dunstable, was chosen for a number of reasons, not least because it is a 'normal' area when it comes to dog fighting – prevalence of the activity was judged to be average compared with similar areas.

Initial steps included initiating and building relationships with 60 relevant organisations, groups and individuals ranging from the council and police to animal welfare charities and rescue centres, taxi drivers, shop keepers and community centres. This was followed by both overt and covert operations to gain intelligence as to the scale of the problem, information about those taking part, and insights into how to deal with it.

Among the intelligence gathered was:

- A feral cat colony was being kept to supply 'bait' for dog fighting.
- Dogs are trained for fighting by being 'body slammed' and 'head slammed', techniques involving punching or hitting the dog's head against a wall to toughen them up.
- The bodies of dead dogs, which have been used for fighting, are being dumped near farmland.
- A Staffordshire Bull Terrier which had been used for 'bait' had its teeth ground down so that it could not defend itself.
- Lower-level dog fighting – so-called 'street rolling' - continues in a number of locations within the towns, despite the councils having worked hard on the issue within recent years.
- Prohibited breeds continue to be bred in the area in order to supply the dog fighting and status dogs market. Prohibited breeds are also crossbred with other breeds to make them more suitable for dog fighting.
- There is a significant clandestine market in the trade of potential fighting dogs – our investigators were offered dogs by a masked man during the operation. Pitbull 'type' puppies were being sold for £1,000.
- Those taking part in dog fighting come from different cultures and backgrounds which in the pilot area included white British, Eastern Europeans, travellers and British Asian.

Additional related issues also need to be taken into account:

- A 76% rise in UK hospital admissions due to dog bites or strikes over a 10-year period to 2015 needs to be analysed more closely.
- Identification of dogs deemed to be 'dangerous', under the Dangerous Dogs Act, is also problematic – during 2014/15, just 5% of dogs seized by 13 police forces in relation to responsible dog ownership were prohibited types.
- Of 623 'banned' dogs seized in the same period, almost a quarter were later found not to be on the prohibited list.



PUP – Proposed National Dog Fighting Action Plan

Intelligence and learnings from Project Bloodline reveal that dog fighting is thriving in the UK. If results across the UK mirror those in the pilot area, then it is safe to say that dog fighting, and the resultant serious criminal activity, exists on a major scale across the country.

Based on our experience and expertise, The League Against Cruel Sports proposes a detailed National Dog Fighting Action Plan which can be rolled out in any area where dog fighting is prevalent.

The Plan comprises many elements, and is based around the three areas of Prevention, Understanding and Prosecution (PUP).

Recommendations include:

- The formation of a National Task Force, led by a senior figure in Government, to ensure sufficient collaboration and action takes place to tackle dog fighting across the country
- Dog fighting should be recorded as a specific offence separate to animal fighting in order to enable the scale of the problem to be more accurately assessed.
- Legislation and penalties for offenders must be clarified and strengthened to ensure those found guilty are punished appropriately. The League would like to see a minimum tariff of three years for convicted dog fighters. Sentencing should reflect the spectrum of offending in relation to dog fighting (from street level dog fighting to organised crime). Rehabilitation programmes should be offered as part of the sentencing mix.
- Details of individuals banned from keeping dogs should be held on a national register by statutory agencies. This would help to prevent those already convicted of animal cruelty offences from being able to commit further offences as well as increasing opportunities for enforcement action.
- Tackling dog fighting should be seen in the context of dog fighting being a gateway crime. Dealing with dog fighting can lead to other crimes such as drugs and gun crime being solved.
- Strategies to deal with dog fighting should follow counter terrorism strategy – engage and prevent.
- The detection of animal fighting offences should become a performance indicator for police forces to add incentive to dealing with the crime, and they should be resourced adequately to enable them to do so.
- The League will work with partners to ensure that dogs trained for fighting and 'bait' animals that survive are properly rehabilitated.
- Breed specific legislation is fundamentally flawed. The Dangerous Dogs Act should be reviewed as a matter of urgency.
- More research should be undertaken into the links between dog fighting and other crimes, including child abuse and domestic violence.
- Community engagement is vital both in terms of gaining intelligence but also in understanding how to prevent young people becoming involved.





Talk to us. For more information on this report or on any aspect of dog fighting, please contact the League's Animal Crimewatch service by telephone on **01483 361 108**, by email **crimewatch@league.org.uk** or visit **www.league.org.uk/crimewatch**



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