

A close-up photograph of a brown dog's face, likely a pit bull or similar breed. The dog has a sad and weary expression, with its eyes looking slightly away from the camera. The lighting is dramatic, highlighting the texture of its fur and the intensity of its gaze. The background is dark and out of focus.

LEAGUE  
AGAINST  
CRUEL  
SPORTS 

**Betrayal of Trust:  
The Tragedy of  
Dog Fighting**

# Introduction

Dog fighting was outlawed in the UK in 1835, yet it still persists today and some claim it is even on the increase. When more than 98%<sup>1</sup> of British people oppose this cruelty, how does it continue?

Criminologists Dr Simon Harding and Dr Angus Nurse examined the available data on this clandestine crime and provide the first comprehensive look at dog fighting in the UK including the practices, motivations and extent as well as the means to tackle it.

They concluded that dog fighting is cruel, with organised dog fights lasting up to five hours and horrific injuries sustained by the animals involved. Those that don't die during the fight are often patched up using crude methods including supergluing torn ears or stapling wounds closed. Cruel training methods, often using 'bait' animals, have changed little in over a hundred years.

Through assessing public records and by directly interviewing those who choose to fight their dogs they found a range of different levels of dog fighting from daily impromptu street fights to highly organised 'professional' fights with £100,000s wagered. Despite this, very few convictions for dog fighting take place.

Motivations for dog fighting vary but include generating 'street capital' and financial gain. There are strong indications that those involved with dog fighting are involved in other criminal activity, with links to gang behaviour and organised crime also present.

The following is a summary of their paper: *Analysis of UK Dog Fighting, Laws and Offences*, which can be viewed in full at [www.league.org.uk/dogfighting-report](http://www.league.org.uk/dogfighting-report)

<sup>1</sup> Ipsos MORI poll December 2015

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## Current legislation

**The specific offence of dog fighting does not exist in the UK; it is contained within the broader offence of animal fighting** prohibited under Section 8 of the Animal Welfare Act 2006 (AWA) with a maximum penalty of 51 weeks in prison. By contrast, in the US dog fighting is a felony offence in all 50 states with a maximum penalty of several years in prison (varying by state).

Section 8(2) of the Animal Welfare Act prohibits attendance at an animal fight. Section 8(3) prohibits supplying, publishing, showing or possessing a video recording of an animal fight although this does not cover recordings of fights that took place outside of the UK or before the Act's commencement. Under Section 4(1) of the Act it is a summary offence to cause unnecessary suffering to a domestic animal or to permit unnecessary suffering to be caused to an animal you are responsible for.

**Further offences are available under the Dangerous Dogs Act 1991 (DDA)** which bans the possession, breeding, sale or giving away of four dog breeds

commonly used for fighting: pit bull terrier; Japanese tosa; dogo Argentina and fila Brasileiro. Data from the Crown Prosecution Service shows that prosecutions for possession of a fighting dog are relatively common, though only a small number have been conclusively linked to actual dog fights (see Table 1 on pg 7).

## The cruel reality of dog fighting

**Organised dog fights can last between 30 minutes and five hours.** It ends either when one dog refuses to engage its opponent; when a dog is removed by its handler due to serious injury; or when a dog dies. Survivors are left exhausted with torn flesh and huge blood loss, and sometimes even disembowelled. Some fights have a 'street surgeon' present who tries to mend the dogs using crude methods such as supergluing torn ears or stapling wounds closed. **Dogs who survive the fight may die later from shock or from their injuries.** Others, particularly those that lose the fight, may be deliberately killed by their owners for bringing disgrace upon them or simply because the dog is so badly injured it is 'unsalvageable'.

The pit bull terrier is the fighting dog of choice – even here in the UK where it is listed as a banned breed under the DDA – and has been described as the '**most consistently exploited and abused breed of dog today**'. Other breeds used in modern dog fighting include: akita; Japanese tosa; fila Brasileiro; dogo Argentino; Staffordshire bull terrier; bull terrier; dogue de Bordeaux; bully kutta; Neopolitan mastiff and olde bulldogge.

Throughout the breeding process, dogs reared for fighting – particularly pit bulls – are engineered so that they do not respond to pain; to the extent that they will ignore their own suffering. They are also bred so they do not display typical animal signs of aggression such as raised hackles or baring of teeth, or respond to typical 'cut-off' signals from other dogs such as submissive postures or vocalising. **They are robbed entirely of their natural social behaviour and instead designed to fight regardless of the adversity, risk, injuries, pain or suffering.**



# Cruel training methods

Traditional training methods described in the old 'sporting' annuals of 'Dogmen' from the southern states of the USA often involve 'bait' animals such as small dogs, cats or rodents. **Training regimes have changed little in over a hundred years** and younger contemporary dogfighters often cite these older published works as definitive text or sacrosanct versions of practice.

**The dog being trained may be tethered to the wall and shown a 'bait' animal that is out of its reach.** The dog pulls on the tether in an attempt to get the 'bait' animal, thus strengthening its upper body muscles. Eventually the dog is allowed to kill the 'bait'. Another technique is to place a cat or small animal in a sock suspended from the ceiling with its paws jutting out. The dog being trained will repeatedly jump up to try and catch the swinging cat and in the end is allowed to kill the cat as a reward. Eventually the dog will jump up and catch any rope or sack, helping to strengthen the jaw muscles.

**Bait animals are often thought to be stolen from local neighbourhoods or otherwise illegally acquired.** Whilst such activity is entirely possible and is regularly alleged by local media, the actual firm evidence of this practice is almost non-existent. However, a recent report of a trial in Belfast (case study 4, pg 9)) described how evidence was presented showing local animals being used as bait animals for the preparation of dog fighting.

**Treadmills might also be used for training and the dog can be forced to run upon a treadmill for several hours a day.** This technique commences with short five minute sets before working up to one hour sets with no breaks. This technique aims to strengthen the heart and lungs rather than to lose weight. Dogs may also be required to swim in pools or to hang for hours from a tyre suspended on a tree branch. This is undertaken to strengthen the dog's upper body, in particular its neck and shoulders. Weights might be added to the dog's collar or harness.

# Types of dog fighting in the UK

**Based on direct interviews with those who choose to fight their dogs, as well as data from a wide range of sources** (public complaints and observations; observations and reports from park wardens and dog wardens; evidence of dog fighting in public areas such as parks and play areas; levels of arrests and prosecutions; match diaries seized when dogs are taken into custody; social media communications; reports from local veterinary surgeons and animal hospitals treating injured animals; animal welfare charities and rehoming centres), **a clear spectrum of dog fighting behaviour is evident.**

## Level One: Impromptu street fights or 'rolls'

- One on one fights in urban parks and housing estates
- Dogs may be tethered on a chain or taken off for the fight
- Arranged on the spot, no referee or rules, fight over in a few minutes
- Predominantly young urban males, may have gang connections, part of street culture
- Little or no money involved
- **Likely to occur somewhere in the UK every day**



## Level Two: Hobbyist

- Series of fights in abandoned buildings, garages or even living rooms/ bedrooms that have been converted into a 'pit'
- Operate on a localised fighting circuit
- Often gang affiliated with gambling involved
- Takes place in urban and urban fringe areas
- **Likely to occur somewhere in the UK every couple of weeks**

## Level Three: Professional

- Sophisticated dog rings with highly trained dogs of reputable bloodlines
- Always takes place in a pit
- Includes spectators, rules, referees, timekeepers
- Contracts drawn up between dog owners stipulating date, location, dog weight, referee and betting stake
- High stakes gambling with £100,000s wagered
- Travel around UK or internationally to enter dogs in fights or attend fights
- Highly secretive, invitation only
- **Likely to occur somewhere in UK every few months**

# Motivations for dog fighting

The motivations, whether they are latent or manifest, in choosing to fight your dog or to become involved in the world of dog fighting varies from offender to offender.

**It often takes place in poorer communities as a vicarious experience to overcome and defeat challenges and adversity** as it offers an opportunity to achieve success and wealth as well as power and control. Based on interviews with status dog owners in London, Harding (2012) argues that

young men in particular are often deprived of status and respect amongst their peer group and thus seek to generate 'street capital' through which they can reach elevated status and distinction. **Dog fighting, or even the possession of a large bull breed or status dog, might easily provide a mechanism for generating or building street capital.** This process is most evidenced in the street fighting Level One category of dog fighting where



bravado and street smarts are co-joined with violence and immaturity. Social media offers new and often inventive ways of building fast-tracked reputations amongst peers. When videos of dog fights are uploaded online such reputations can extend well beyond the immediate locality and live online forever.

**Dog fighting at Levels Two and Three occupies a private and often hidden 'world' where the abuse and cruelty is both normalised and rationalised by those within it.** Essentially it has become a world of altered states, where the dog is simultaneously lionised and venerated, but cruelly abused. The abuse perpetrated is both purposefully and instrumentally actioned by those who seek to advance their social status in this private world. These altered states relate to the normality of violence which in places can extend beyond the pit and the match into their social relations with family and others: **animal welfare workers in the USA often state that domestic violence and child neglect accompany dog-fighters in their domestic setting.**

**It seems also that the dogs used to fight in the pits become an embodied personification of their owners.** Kathy Strouse (2009) argues that this allows 'dogmen' to 'align themselves with qualities they will never have themselves'. Dog fighters will often refer to the fight as if they themselves were in the ring and performing for the crowd.

**Ultimately, some believe that the overriding central motivation for dog fighting is money.** Kathy Strouse (2009) cites one dog who managed to generate enormous income for his owner: In 2003, Barracuda, from Latin Force Kennels, USA, was a Grand champion with nine wins. He made over \$750,000 in winnings for his owners plus \$100,000 in stud fees and \$80,000 for sale fee.

## The extent of dog fighting in the UK

The extent of dog fighting is difficult to establish both nationally and regionally due to variations in recording practice. **Police have not traditionally been required to record wildlife and animal crimes**, and the specific offence of dog fighting does not exist.

The unreliability of official figures is partially negated by animal crime figures produced individually by animal welfare NGOs that are directly involved in prosecuting animal crime. The RSPCA produces figures relating to the number of reported incidents of animal fighting and also produces data on prosecutions they take for animal welfare offences (private prosecutions). The Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) produces data on public prosecutions.

Using a manual analysis of court records, cross-referenced against newspaper reports for dog fighting offences and data provided by the CPS and RSPCA, **it is clear that relatively few prosecutions are taken for the offence of animal fighting** (Table 1). This is likely due to the difficulty in proving that a person has knowingly taken part in an illegal fight. Prosecuting bodies are more likely to use 'lesser' offences which may be easier to prove such as 'causing unnecessary suffering' or possession of a fighting dog.

## Table 1 – Dog fighting Convictions

(Dog fighting offences convicted at Court)

Offence	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
Animal Fighting (Section 8 AWA) – <b>includes only dog fighting offences</b> (manually identified from court records)	1	2	2	0	1	2	1
Dangerous Dogs Act 1991 in respect of dog fighting	1	0	4	2	3	2	3
Causing Unnecessary Suffering (Section 4 AWA) in respect of fighting dogs	0	0	1	0	3	6	4
Duty to Ensure Animal Welfare (Section 9 AWA) in respect of fighting dogs	0	0	0	0	0	1	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>8</b>

(Source: Court and newspaper reports) **The true level of dog fighting activity is likely to be higher than the number of successful prosecutions.**

Analysis of the conviction data outlined in Table 1 identifies that a custodial sentence is the normative approach to dog fighting related offences. Of the 31 confirmed conviction cases we identified and analysed between 2008 and 2014:

- 27 resulted in a custodial sentence
- 7 resulted in the court imposing a ban on keeping dogs (and other animals where required)
- 2 resulted in a suspended sentence
- 2 resulted in community service

(Note: multiple sentences may have been given for a single conviction.)

The prosecution approach is, therefore, one based primarily on a punitive approach which marries detention with measures intended to prevent further offending, i.e. by denying individuals future access to dogs. However, this remains a primarily reactive approach and further data is needed to determine whether locally preventative mechanisms are employed that intervene in offending before it happens.



Injured dog from an organised fight

Photo © RSPCA



An organised fight in an improvised pit

Photo © RSPCA



Drugs paraphernalia confiscated from fight organisers

Photo © RSPCA



Treadmill used to train fighting dogs

Photo © RSPCA

## BETRAYAL OF TRUST - CASE STUDIES

### 1. Date: 7th June 2007

#### Location: Alum Rock, Birmingham

Three men were each jailed for four months following an RSPCA raid on addresses in Birmingham.

The men admitted keeping pit bulls but denied using the dogs for fighting. Magistrates were satisfied they had been used for this purpose.

During the raid the RSPCA seized 47 pit bull-type dogs, treadmills, veterinary kits and videos.

Source: BBC News

Photo source: Daily Mail 20/09/2007



### 2. Date: September 2011

#### Location: Macduff, Scotland

David Reid was jailed for six months and his brother Colin Reid received four months at Banff Sheriff Court. The brothers admitted charges involving bull terrier-type dogs fighting and were banned from keeping dogs for five years. It followed an undercover operation by the animal charity, Scottish SPCA. Six pit bulls were seized.

**It is believed that a number of dogs were killed and dumped to avoid the SSPCA bringing charges.** Local farmers also believed their cattle may have been attacked as part of a training regime to prepare the dogs for fighting. The brothers had filmed a number of videos of themselves fighting dogs. Videos of dog fights from Eastern Europe were also found.

Chief Superintendent Mike Flynn said: "During raids on the Reid brothers we discovered video evidence which not only proved their guilt but also clearly demonstrated their fascination in watching the poor dogs involved viciously fight each other. We also removed six dogs, including three pit bull terrier-type dogs which are illegal having been classified as dangerous, veterinary equipment and various paraphernalia associated with dog fighting."

Source: BBC News



Video of the Reid Brothers seized by police, an example of an impromptu street 'roll'. Photo source: Daily Record 22/09/2011

### 3. Date: February 2014

#### Location: Merthyr Tydfil, Wales

Kerry Evans was arrested after the RSPCA discovered five pit bulls in a kennel near his home and a sixth was later found at his house. Police seized first aid kits containing syringes and antibiotics allegedly used to treat dogs after fights. **Officers also uncovered 'break sticks' used to open dogs' jaws** along with dog fighting equipment and graphic books showing dog fighting.

Evans received a six month suspended sentence, a £1,000 fine and was ordered to do 200 hours community service. He was also banned from keeping dogs for eight years. Evans was also convicted of four charges of having equipment for use in connection with an animal fight. Clive Rees, defending, pleaded for Evans' liberty because he was about to become a father.

RSPCA chief inspector Michael Butcher told the court how organised dog fighting was thriving in underground leagues across the country. "It's quite a small fraternity with almost exclusively pit bull type dogs used, being bred for the purpose," he said. "They will meet any dog in a pit face-to-face and go through the pain barrier. The dogs will be trained - it is very organised."

Source: BBC News



Pit bull break stick sold on Amazon.com

Evans 'posing' with one of his pit bulls.

Photo source: Wales Online, 11/02/2014



### 4. Date: October 2015

#### Location: Belfast

A father, his two sons and a family friend, all from east Belfast, evaded immediate prison terms after admitting they trained dogs for fighting. Jeremiah Kirkwood (43), sons Chris (23), Wayne (20) and family friend Jamie Morrow (19) were each given six month suspended prison sentences and banned from keeping dogs for ten years.

Stormont justice committee member Jim Wells said: "The judge in this case has failed to send out a clear message that society will no longer tolerate the torture of animals. This sentence should be immediately referred to the Director of Public Prosecutions for review on the basis that it is too lenient given the very disturbing facts."

**Campaigners and police said it was among the most barbaric cases of cruelty they had ever encountered.** A major probe was launched after vile mobile phone footage was discovered showing cats and badgers torn apart by fighting dogs while sick onlookers were heard laughing in the background. In one scene, a man can be seen climbing a tree after a terrified cat, before dislodging it, causing it to fall and be slaughtered by waiting dogs.

**The cats – believed to be the pets of nearby residents – are thought to have been used to blood the canines for illegal dog fights and badger baiting.** In a search of the backyard of a property belonging to the Kirkwood family, officers discovered cages and dogs. A number of the animals bore scars consistent with having been in fights.

Those in court were told Jeremiah Kirkwood is married with four sons. He made 17 court appearances between 1984 and last year for 24 offences, mostly traffic-related, but also involving dishonesty and disorderly behaviour. He has been dependent on alcohol since he was in his 30s, the judge said.

Wayne Kirkwood has three previous convictions for causing actual bodily harm, making threats to kill and possession of an offensive weapon. Previous court hearings were told of the barbaric nature of the video footage which sparked the police investigation. The detective who headed up that investigation said it was the worst he had encountered during his career.

Source: Belfast Telegraph 14/10/2015



Cat trap and dog fighting equipment seized by police Source: Irish Mirror

## Regional and cultural variations

The issue of regional groupings or hotspots of dog fighting in the UK is often raised. It is possible to be led by the available data into quick conclusions which point to concentrations in south Wales, Lancashire, West Midlands, South and West Yorkshire, north east Scotland and parts of Northern Ireland. However, the reality is that such groupings are based not upon actual activity, but upon reports and convictions. These reports also vary depending upon the level of dog fighting which is being reported. **High volumes of reports of impromptu dog fighting rolls are most likely to come from urban areas,** notably those with large municipal parks which sit adjacent to large areas of deprived social housing. Under such conditions London has a high level of reports of this activity.

**Rural or semi-rural areas will feature more regularly in reports of Level Two and Level Three dog fighting,** i.e. the hobbyist and professional dog fighting rings. However, the nature of activity at this level denotes increased secrecy and covert activity, which in turn denotes lower levels of reporting. Hotspots may therefore be determined on the basis of arrests and prosecutions for dog fighting or suspected dog fighting. Hotspots may be temporary or short term as they may be determined by a coming together of like-minded individuals who link up to form effective networks and who have a ready supply of dogs for fighting and opportunities to fight. Such networks may be temporary.

**Lancashire, with its mixture of urban/rural landscapes, is one area where multiple investigations and prosecutions have taken place over the past several years.** The frequency of prosecutions might of course point to a highly efficient investigative animal welfare service, although it probably also indicates an above average level of dog fighting activity. This is perhaps notably so given that only a fraction of cases are reported and not all of these reach

the courts. In one recent case at Burnley Magistrates court in Lancashire where three men were fined a total of £40,000 for their involvement in animal cruelty offences, District Judge James Clarke claimed dog fighting had a role in 'creating a black market economy' in East Lancashire (*The Mirror* 22/04/15).

**Linked to regionality are issues of ethnicity and culture.** This is a tricky aspect of dog fighting upon which to comment and links to the fact that dog fighting is not illegal in several Asian countries, including Pakistan and Afghanistan. In UK communities which have a high number of ethnic inhabitants from those areas, e.g. Tower Hamlets borough in east London, dog fighting has recently surfaced, as it also has in some Asian communities in West Yorkshire, Lancashire and the West Midlands.

However, it should be stressed that there is no identifiable data in relation to the prevalence, or otherwise, of dog fighting in the Asian community with the issue remaining unresearched. Additionally, dog fighting in the UK and the USA has traditionally been practised by white, working class men, often from rural backgrounds.

Nonetheless, local investigators have voiced concern that dog fighting can have a high degree of tolerance in some Asian communities due to different cultural practices and beliefs. As a result there are a number of identifiable instances of dog fighting which involve young men from Asian backgrounds. BBC Radio Four journalist Amardeep Basse, (*BBC Radio 4* 30/07/09) investigated the involvement of young men from Pakistani and Afghan backgrounds in the West Midlands community. He identified a general acceptance of fighting with dogs and underlined the different cultural practices of rural Pakistan and Afghanistan where such activity is deemed both permissible as cultural tradition and widely endorsed as family entertainment.

Interviewed as part of the same Radio Four broadcast, Chief Inspector Ian Briggs of the RSPCA's Special Operations Unit commented that 'dog fighting is up 400 per cent in the past three years in the UK. Out of all the work we do, 98 per cent of the dog fighting work we do in our unit is to do with Asian gangs'.

# Links to other crimes

It is widely reported in the media that those who seek out status dogs and dangerous dogs are themselves linked to, if not involved in, various forms of criminal behaviour.

From analysing the data provided by the Metropolitan Police in policing operations in three London boroughs, Harding (2012) identified that **young men who owned dangerous dogs or status dogs (as defined under the DDA 1991 Section 1) were widely associated with or involved in an extensive range of criminal activity**, including:

- Actual Bodily Harm (ABH)
- Assaulting the Police
- Robbery
- Breach of Bail
- Common Assault
- Threats to Kill
- Theft from Person
- Drug Possession

Whilst those analysed in this data set had not specifically been involved in dog fighting, each list of offenders had a substantial history of criminal offending. Links to gang behaviour and organised crime were also present.

These issues are not restricted to the London area. Further research in Merseyside and the West Midlands confirmed the findings, with 23 out of 25 Merseyside dangerous dog owners having 87 convictions amongst them; and 79 of the 126 dangerous dog owners in the West Midlands evidencing other criminal convictions.



## Conclusions and Recommendations

A core question of this research is whether legislation and enforcement policy has kept pace with developments in dog fighting and the evolution of its linked criminality. The difficulties inherent in the recording of dog fighting offences and the manner in which dog fighting as a specific crime appears to be under-prosecuted suggests that it has not. The research identifies that dog fighting has extended beyond its pit-based origins to encompass a range of other activities including dog fighting as street crime. Yet the response to dog fighting is still primarily a reactive one, based on limited data on the scale of the problem. Accordingly we make the following policy recommendations:

1. **Dog fighting should be recorded as a specific offence** in order to improve data quality and correctly assess the scale of the problem as well as providing intelligence and information that could be used to identify the required policing resources and cultural/regional specific problems. For the sake of clarity we consider that the existing offence of animal fighting should be retained and do not necessarily make the case for dog fighting to be made a separate offence, unless this is the only mechanism through which local and national recording of dog fighting offences can be achieved.
2. **The penalty for dog fighting and dog fighting offences should be brought in line with similar legislation in other European countries** in order to achieve consistency. Currently the maximum sentence for animal fighting is a term of imprisonment of up to 51 weeks (for Animal Welfare Act 2006 offences). But in some European countries it is two years (e.g. France) or three years (Germany, the Czech Republic). **We would argue for raising the tariff to two years** on grounds of consistency, noting also that the Law Commission's (2015) approach to other animal (wildlife) offences recommends extending the penalty for the most serious offences from six months to two years in prison.
3. **The Government should ensure that the police and other agencies have adequate resources** and support to respond to dog fighting problems, including appropriate resources to develop multi-agency approaches.
4. **The Government should initiate and fund research** into the prevalence, nature and enforcement of dog fighting.

The full report and all references are available at [www.league.org.uk/dogfightingreport](http://www.league.org.uk/dogfightingreport)

We work to expose and end the cruelty inflicted  
on animals in the name of sport

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AGAINST  
CRUEL  
SPORTS 

League Against Cruel Sports,  
New Sparling House, Holloway Hill,  
Godalming, Surrey, GU7 1QZ

Telephone 01483 524 250

Email [info@league.org.uk](mailto:info@league.org.uk)

[www.league.org.uk](http://www.league.org.uk)

 /LeagueAgainstCruelSports  @LeagueACS