

Welfare indicator: The number of organised animal fights in the UK

RSPCA concern

Often viewed as one of the most barbaric areas of cruelty, organised animal fighting remains a major area of concern to the RSPCA. Although animal baiting and fighting legislation was first introduced in the UK in 1835¹, and has been subsequently updated^{2,3}, such activities still continue with new areas of animal fighting developing. Organised animal fighting activities are deliberate, calculated, and by their very nature cause a great deal of unnecessary suffering to the animals involved.

The RSPCA and other agencies are working to combat these barbaric and illegal activities in an attempt to see the eradication of all forms of organised animal fighting within the UK.

Background

Organised animal fighting tends to be clandestine and covert, and ultimately causes an incredible amount of suffering to the animals involved. The three species that are used in organised animal fighting are dogs, badgers and cockerels.

Traditionally, dog fighting involves a large group of people coming together to 'pit' one fighting dog against another. Large sums of money are placed as bets on the illegal fight's outcome. The dogs used in organised fights are bred and trained to be aggressive against other animals. They are selected for their stamina and their strength and are almost exclusively American pit bull terriers, a breed that is banned in the UK by the Dangerous Dogs Act 1991⁴. A pit is constructed to a size and standard recognised by the dog fighting fraternity, with the dogs being fought according to strict rules enforced by a referee. Fights vary in length from a matter of minutes to a couple of hours causing dogs to suffer a large number of bite wounds. The owner of the dog will probably treat these injuries and any subsequent infection themselves with 'DIY' vet kits. It is unlikely the dogs will be taken for veterinary treatment due to the breed of dog involved and the nature of the injuries inflicted.

Cockfighting also involves a large number of people watching and betting on fighting cockerels in a pit area with a referee enforcing strict rules. The birds are conditioned to fight and may have the natural spurs on their feet sharpened so as to inflict the maximum damage to their cockerel opponents. Alternatively the natural spurs may have been removed and replaced with sharpened 5cm steel spikes, which are fitted and bound to the birds' legs. Bouts may last anything from a few seconds to one hour. Often one of the birds is killed and many others receive severe injuries.

Unlike organised dog fighting and cock fighting, badger digging and baiting involves setting one species against another – a dog against a badger. Badger digging involves terrier dogs, wearing electronic transmitter collars, being sent into setts to locate and corner badgers deep in the tunnels. When a dog has cornered a badger the signal from the collar will become stationary and the 'diggers' can then dig down to where the dog and badger are located, irreparably damaging the badger sett in the process. At this time both the dog and the badger are likely to receive severe bite injuries because a badger will fight fiercely when cornered. Once the diggers reach the dog and badger, both will be removed from the sett. The badger may then be killed or it may be set free on the surface and several dogs set upon it to kill it, with the badger often suffering a slow and painful death.



INSUFFICIENT DATA ARE AVAILABLE.

More organised baiting of badgers takes place with badgers taken away from the sett and baited in a pit with several dogs attacking it at once – the badger and dogs suffer horrific injuries. As with organised dog fighting, the terriers used in badger digging and baiting are unlikely to receive treatment from vets.

The participants and organisers of animal fighting, especially organised dog fighting, are often involved in other areas of serious criminality. Due to their criminal background and knowledge of investigative techniques, the perpetrators are difficult to trace and track, requiring investigators such as members of the RSPCA's special operations unit to employ specialist skills and techniques to bring them to justice. There are many factors that make investigating animal fighting extremely difficult. Those involved are prepared to travel long distances to participate, making it difficult for the different enforcement agencies that are required to coordinate investigations, as police, county and international boundaries are crossed. Suspects crossing police force boundaries who are stopped/arrested are unlikely to be linked to any previous offences in other police force areas. The animals that have been/are used in organised fighting will often have distinctive injuries that are likely to be treated by their owners rather than a vet, as taking the animals for veterinary treatment may raise suspicion about the source of the injuries. Even though there is legislation, and prosecutions are taken against animal fighting participants, the current penalties/sentences do not seem to be a deterrent, as the fighting continues and there are many repeat offenders.

Worryingly, more impromptu dog fights have recently started to take place. Fighting usually takes place in public areas such as streets or parks and is less organised and different to the traditional fighting of pit bull terriers in a pit. The injuries inflicted from these 'rolls' or 'chain fights', as they are sometimes known, are also distinctive and tend to occur to the front of the dog's body and again it is unlikely the dogs will be taken to the vets for treatment. The dogs involved tend to be so-called 'status' dogs, a term often used by the media to refer to dogs associated with young people who use them in aggressive or intimidating ways towards other animals and the public. The dogs involved tend to be big, tough-looking, powerful dogs such as bull breeds and mastiffs. The use of status (and dangerous)

dogs is an important issue for animal welfare and its links to anti-social behaviour, crime and human safety.

The indicator figures

Unlike many other areas of animal cruelty that are reported to the RSPCA, relatively few complaints are received from the general public about animal fighting. With other types of animal cruelty, reporting issues to the RSPCA can be seen as a good indication of how big the problem is. Unfortunately, in the case of fighting this is not a definitive way of identifying the extent of the problem because of the criminal and covert nature of the activities and lack of reporting. Due to the secretive nature of these activities it is unsurprising that compared to other reports of cruelty to the RSPCA the figures are fairly low.

To put these figures into context, during 2009, as with previous years, the RSPCA received more than one million telephone calls to its cruelty and advice line and investigated over 140,000 cruelty complaints. Yet as Figure 12 demonstrates, between 2005 and 2009 calls concerning animal fighting were extremely low with the largest number received in 2007. In 2009 just 489 calls were received. Reports of cock fighting and badger/digger and sett interference have remained consistent and relatively low over the past five years, however there was a huge rise in the number of reports to the RSPCA about badger sett interference in 2009. In 2005, 59 reports of sett interference were received – this has risen to 166. There was also a large increase between 2008 and 2009, with 95 and 166 reports respectively.

The increase in reporting of sett interference could be due to more crimes against badgers taking place or more people knowing who to report the incidents to. The rise in calls, for whatever reason, is of concern as it indicates that not only is badger crime continuing, it is also increasing.

In 2005, 36 reports of dog fighting were received. Calls peaked in 2007 with 358 reports of dog fighting incidents and then dropped in 2008 and 2009 (284 and 204). There are a number of reasons why more calls were received in 2007 including the widely publicised death of five-year-old Ellie Lawrenson who was killed by an illegally owned pit bull-type dog. In addition, two pit bull amnesties in Northern Ireland

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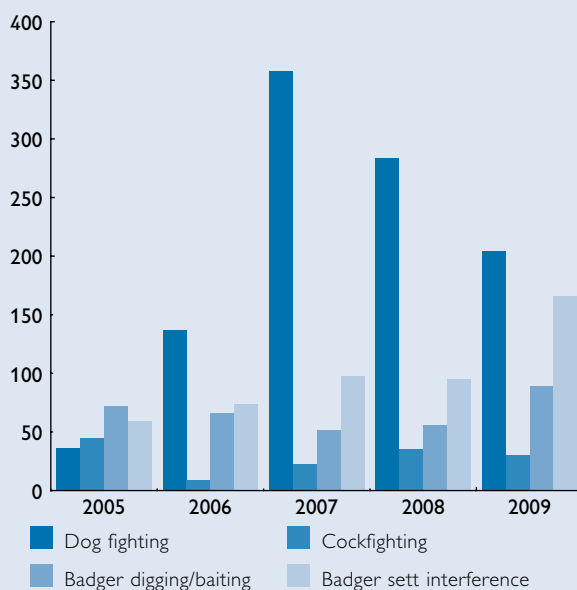
and Merseyside during January 2007 and two high-profile dog fighting cases in the West Midlands area may have prompted more reports as the public became aware of dog fighting and dangerous dog offences.

In addition to organised dog fighting, there is a growing concern about status and dangerous dogs being used to intimidate and cause injury to people and other animals. Dangerous dogs are powerful animals of any breed or type. Often victims of cruelty themselves, these animals can be encouraged to be aggressive and maybe forced to fight other dogs in public places. Therefore, reports of dog fighting to the RSPCA have subsequently been broken down to identify instances that relate to dogs that are being fought in open spaces or public areas such as streets or parks – Figure 13. Overall, reports to the RSPCA of dog fighting have fallen since 2007 whereas the incidence of young people fighting dogs has increased. In 2007, 37 per cent of reports concerned dogs and street fighting. The following year two-thirds of all calls related to this and 55 per cent in 2009 were about dogs fighting in public places. In October 2009, one RSPCA animal hospital treated 22 dogs for dog fighting injuries, indicating that there is a problem with dog fighting, as this figure is for a single establishment, in one area of London during one month.

Figures produced by the Metropolitan Police show a massive increase in the number of dogs seized in London under the Dangerous Dogs Act 1991. Between 2003 and 2006, the numbers averaged out to 38 dogs a year. This increased to 173 between May 2006 and April 2007 and leapt to 719 between May 2008 and April 2009. Between May 2009 and April 2010 1,152 dogs were seized by the Metropolitan Police. Of the total figures, about 80 per cent of the dogs are pit bull-types, with the remainder being dogs that are dangerously out of control⁵. In response to this growing problem, the Metropolitan Police set up a status dogs unit.

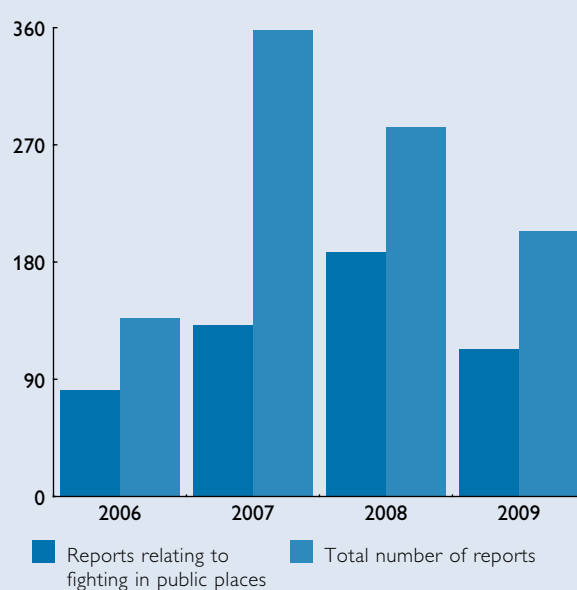
In 2006, the RSPCA produced a leaflet and poster encouraging owners of status dogs to provide adequate care for their dogs and highlighting the legislation that protects dogs such as the Animal Welfare Act 2006 and the Control of Dogs Order 1992. The RSPCA is extremely concerned that more reported incidents of dog fighting seem to involve young people in public places and in February 2008, the Society became involved with an education initiative, the People With Dogs Project⁶, which aims to reduce intimidating and anti-social behaviour on London's streets. More recently, the police, local authorities,

Figure 12: Reports of animal fighting given to the RSPCA, 2005–2009



Data source: RSPCA.

Figure 13: Reports of dog fighting to the RSPCA, 2006–2009



Data source: RSPCA.

social landlords and the RSPCA are working together to educate local communities about responsible dog ownership and to encourage the effective enforcement of dog control legislation. The RSPCA, and Battersea Dogs and Cats Home are working with the Metropolitan Police to develop targeted approaches in London boroughs to tackle these problems including providing advice and encouraging microchipping and neutering. In spring 2009 the RSPCA hosted its first Status Dogs Summit bringing together police, local authorities and other frontline enforcers to discuss and develop practical responses for dealing with irresponsible dog ownership. In November 2010 the second conference will take place.

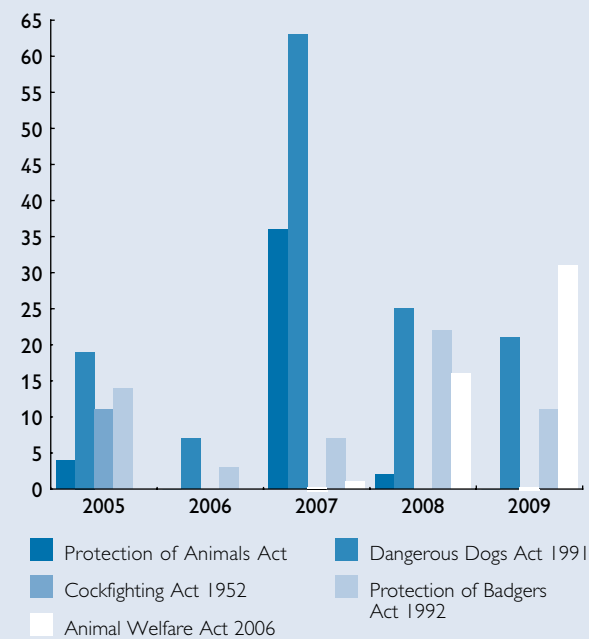
Another way to try and identify the scale of organised animal fighting is to look at the number of successful animal fighting convictions over the past five years. Although useful, because it demonstrates that animal fighting is still taking place and perpetrators are being caught, it does not clearly represent the true scale of the problem. An increase in the number of convictions in a given year does not necessarily mean the problem is worsening, it could mean more people were caught or numerous people were involved at one event and subsequently convicted. Conversely, if the number of convictions drops, this isn't necessarily a sign that fighting is occurring less, as it could simply mean those involved are not being caught. With regard to dog fighting convictions, there can be a big difference between the number of cases reported and the number of convictions because of the delays in bringing the cases to court. It is possible for a large number of convictions to take place in one year but the relevant arrests will have occurred the previous year.

Figure 14 shows the number of convictions obtained by the RSPCA over the past five years. During this period, the largest number was obtained in 2007 with more than 100 convictions. Subsequently convictions have been lower with 65 and 63 in 2008 and 2009 respectively. Although it is difficult to draw any firm conclusions from the number of convictions, the fact that people are still being convicted for animal fighting clearly demonstrates that there is an ongoing problem with these illegal activities.

With new types of dog fighting appearing, more incidents reported, a consistent number of convictions and reports of badger sett interference nearly trebling in the past five years, it must be concluded that organised animal fighting is increasing.

For many reasons this is an important animal welfare indicator; the intentional cruelty, the suffering that is inflicted on the animals

Figure 14: Successful convictions for animal fighting obtained by the RSPCA, 2005–2009



Data source: RSPCA.

that are forced to fight and the fact that long-established laws are still being broken. Many countries around the world have their own animal fighting problems and look to the UK, with its long legislative history and status as a nation of animal lovers, to help solve the problem. Yet in 2010, the problem still exists within the UK as it does in other parts of the world.

FOOTNOTES AND REFERENCES

- 1 An Act to consolidate and amend the several laws relating to the cruel and improper treatment of animals and the mischiefs arising from the driving of cattle (Pease's Act) 1835.
- 2 The Protection of Badgers Act 1992. (Consolidating the Badgers Act 1973, the Badgers Act 1991 and the Badgers [Further Protection] Act 1991).
- 3 Animal Welfare Act 2006, s8.
- 4 Dangerous Dogs Act 1991, s1.
- 5 Metropolitan Police figures refer specifically to the year this number of dogs left the police system.
- 6 The project brings together three animal charities (Battersea Dogs Home, The Blue Cross and the RSPCA), the Greater London Authority, the Metropolitan Police and Wandsworth Council.