

Tough dogs not merely gang weapons

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Youths in groups or gangs choose to own dogs primarily for socializing and companionship. Dogs are also used for protection and enhancing status, but to a lesser extent, contrary to popular perception. The research by Jennifer Maher and Harriet Pierpoint from the Centre for Criminology at the University of Glamorgan in the UK, is published online in Springer's journal *Crime, Law and Social Change*.

There is rising concern in the UK over irresponsible dog ownership, and the use of so-called status or weapon dogs, by street-based youth groups. Youth criminal and [antisocial behavior](#) using these dogs has been widely reported in urban areas. However, to date, the evidence to support a link between youth dog ownership and criminality is inconclusive and fails to consider the possible positive and beneficial relationship between youth and dog.

Maher and Pierpoint explored the relationship between youth groups, gangs, their culture and their dogs and looked at the implications for [dog owners](#) and their community, as well as for the dogs themselves. In this pilot project, the authors shadowed youth workers in multiple locations across a South Wales city, to recruit and give a voice to hard-to-reach youth dog owners. They interviewed 25 youths in total and seven [animal welfare](#) and youth practitioners, including a vet, a dog warden, and a youth offending team warden.

All youths identified themselves as being part of a group and over half belonged to a youth gang. The majority owned a dog and over half the dogs were bull breeds. Companionship and [socialization](#) with friends

were the main reasons youths identified for their ownership. Interestingly, practitioners did not highlight these functions for dogs when talking about why youths kept dogs.

Both youths and practitioners also reported that dogs were kept for protection and enhancing youth's perceived 'tough' and 'powerful' status. Some youths also used dogs as weapons to either defend themselves or for dog fighting. The authors identified more than 20 types of animal abuse towards dogs and other small animals perpetrated by young people.

The authors conclude: "Dogs serve intrinsic functions - in other words, the dogs are companions and are part of a social group. But they also serve extrinsic functions - the [dogs](#) are used as accessories and weapons and are often neglected and abused. Although inherently conflicting, youths did not recognize this paradox."

More information: Maher J & Pierpoint H (2011). Friends, status symbols and weapons: the use of dogs by youth groups and youth gangs. Crime, Law and Social Change; [DOI 10.1007/s10611-011-9294-5](https://doi.org/10.1007/s10611-011-9294-5)

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