

Increase in the number of dog attacks on guide dogs in the UK

March 3 2016

Reported dog attacks on guide dogs have risen significantly over a five year period, finds a study published online in the journal *Veterinary Record*.

A total of 629 attacks were reported between 2010 and 2015, with an increase from an average of three per month in 2010 to eleven attacks per month in 2015. The authors say it is not clear whether this reflects higher levels of reporting or a real trend.

There are around 4,900 working guide dogs in the UK. They provide mobility and support for blind and partially sighted people. Each dog is supported by the charity 'Guide Dogs'.

Dog attacks on guide dogs are common, and these can have a significant impact on the dog, and the owner's mobility, independence and social and emotional well-being.

Attacks are treated as an aggravated offence with sentences of up to three years imprisonment for the attacking dog's owner, under the 2014 Anti-Social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act.

In this study, a team of researchers from Guide Dogs and the University of Nottingham examined data on all dog attacks on Guide Dogs' stock between June 2010 and February 2015. They examined the characteristics of the attacks, impact on the dog and owner, as well as the financial implications for the charity.

A dog attack was defined as "when a dog sets upon another dog in a forceful, violent, hostile or aggressive way, involving physical contact."

They found that a total of 629 attacks were reported during the 56 month period. A total of 97% of attacks occurred in public areas and 55% of victim dogs were working in harness when they were attacked. Owners of the aggressor dogs were present in 77% of attacks.

Attacks were described as being unprovoked in 19% of cases, caused by the aggressor dog in 22% of cases, and caused by a lack of control in 29% of cases.

"The guide dog harness is designed to be visible and should have been apparent to the owners of aggressors who were present," explain the authors. "It is feasible that a proportion of these attacks could have been avoided if the aggressor was put on a lead when the owner saw the guide dog in harness."

Guide Dogs' stock were injured in 43% of attacks and related veterinary costs were estimated to be £34,514.30. Injuries received were most commonly puncture wounds, and veterinary attention was required for 76% of dogs with injuries and a further 5% needed a check up.

Over 40% of qualified guide dogs' experienced a negative impact on working ability, and less than 20% of qualified guide dogs were unable to work for a period of time.

Twenty dogs were permanently withdrawn from the Guide Dogs' programme as a result of the attacks. Thirteen were fully qualified and working with guide [dog owners](#), and this resulted in a financial cost of more than £600,000 to the charity.

Dog attacks resulted in physical injuries to 13.8% people, of which 68%

were guide dog owners, and 47% required medical attention. The victim dog handlers also reported that their emotional well-being had been affected in 70% of attacks, including 39% feeling anxious, 35% feeling shaken and 30% feeling upset.

The authors say that the overall costs of veterinary treatment and replacement dogs are "estimated to be more than £650,000, but the impacts of the attacks on the guide dog owner are more important."

They conclude the impact "for the guide dog owners of these dogs are likely to be long-term and complex affecting not only their mobility and physical health, but also their social and emotional well-being."

More information: "The incidence and impact of dog attacks on guide dogs in the UK: An update," *Veterinary Record*
veterinaryrecord.bmj.com/content/016/03/03/vr.1034333

Provided by British Medical Journal

Citation: Increase in the number of dog attacks on guide dogs in the UK (2016, March 3)
retrieved 23 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2016-03-dog-dogs-uk.html>

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