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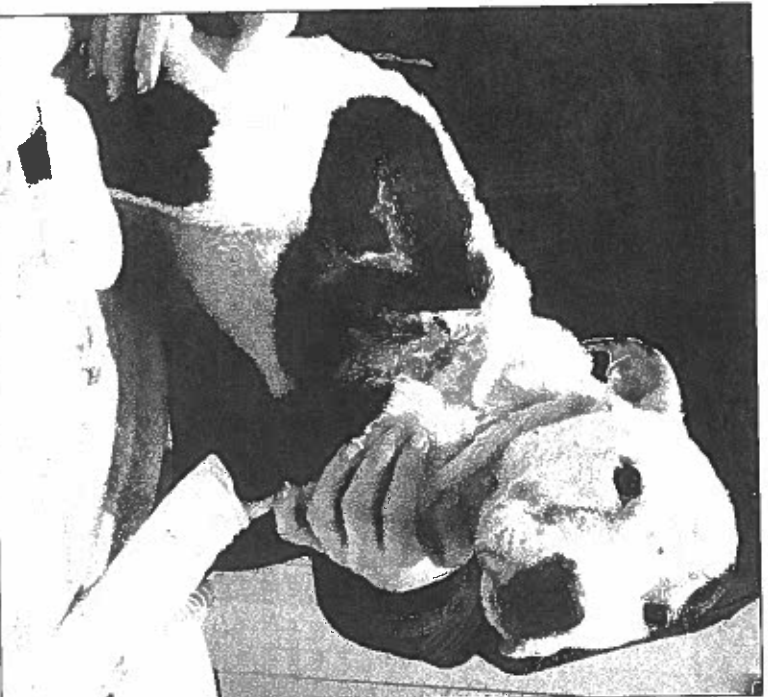
Why dogs are the new knives

Canines increasingly seen as weapons and status symbol

EXCLUSIVE

by Tom Lawrence

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Beth the Staffordshire bull terrier puppy was not seen as a pet. She is thought to have been used to train fighting dogs, and was dumped with horrific injuries after being mauled by other dogs. Picture contributed.

AGGRESSIVE dogs are the new weapons of the street, according to a front-line police officer. PC Simon Underwood of Brent Police, says pit bull terrier-type breeds are seen as the legal alternative to guns or knives and a symbol of power among gangs.

Speaking exclusively to the Observer, the officer, who heads up Brent Action For Responsible K9s – an initiative to stop the irresponsible use of dogs – spoke of a marked increase in dog fighting and animal cruelty in the last year.

He said: "You can't walk around with a gun or a knife but you can walk around with a big, aggressive dog.

"Dogs are becoming the new weapon on the street that you are allowed to carry."

"They are linked to the gang mentality of status, so whoever has the biggest, most aggressive dog has the most respect."

PC Underwood said the problem was

youths participating in low-level dog fighting to see whose animal was stronger, rather than organised dog fighting rings. "It is mainly kids on street corners having what they call a 'roll'."

"In the past few weeks we arrested two local youths, who were caught on CCTV chain-fighting their dogs on John Billam playing fields."

"This is when the animals are kicked and thumped so they become aggressive and go for each other, but are kept on a lead so they don't get too embroiled in the fight."

The officer said he had also come across instances of youths setting their dogs on other youths.

Animal charities have seen a massive rise in dogs being found with sickening fight injuries.

In December, The Mayhew Animal Home, in Kensal Green, rescued a Staffordshire bull terrier puppy called Beth who was close to death, having been mauled by a pack of fully grown dogs.

Animal welfare officer Claire Harper said: "We found Beth dumped in a garden in Kingsbury in a terrible state.

"She was starved, weak and covered in bites and scars. She also had scalds on her body as a result of someone throwing

burning water or caustic liquid over her. Because of her small size and injuries it is believed Beth was used to train other fighting dogs."

Miss Harper added: "The breed become a status dog and this means they are often in the hands of people are not equipped to care for them, also have no real regard for their welfare."

The RSPCA says the number of attacks has quadrupled in the past years and the number of youths shot up with dog bites at hospital has nearly doubled. Last year the charity received 183 complaints in London about fighting.

PC Underwood added: "It is always poor dog who ends up on the receiving end."

"These street corner rolls could be start of something more organised sinister, so is something we are looking closely."

In November, Akim Adelaja, 22, found guilty of running a dog-fighting factory from his cramped basement in Elms Lane, Wembley.

Police found 11 dangerous dogs in squalid property, along with strengthening equipment and boot dog training.

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