

At the coalface - comparing problems faced by two councils from different socio-economic areas

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ABSTRACT

The two councils compared were the City of Burnside (classified as a middle to upper class area with a population of 39,950, an unemployment rate of 3.5% and 4,600 dogs registered) and the City of Salisbury (classified as a low to middle class area with a population of 115,000, an unemployment rate of 10% and 20,000 dogs registered). It was found that the type of dog problems were the same for both councils but that dog attacks in Salisbury were more severe than in Burnside whilst residents of Salisbury were more tolerant of noisy dogs. However it was concluded that a person's socio-economic circumstance had little influence on their ability to look after a dog and that both councils had problems with irresponsible dog owners. It was further concluded that care must be taken to ensure that the 10% of irresponsible owners do not monopolise resources to the extent that the 90% of responsible dog owners are disadvantaged.

The City of Burnside is situated east of Adelaide and generally speaking would be considered a middle to upper class area with a population is 39,950 and an unemployment rate of approximately 3.5%. The city has 4,600 dogs registered.

The City of Salisbury is situated north west of Adelaide and generally speaking is considered to be a low to middle class area. Salisbury has a population of 115,000 with an unemployment rate of 10% and has 20,000 dogs registered.

The type of dogs in each council area varies considerably, with Burnside having mainly pedigree dogs and Salisbury having a larger percentage of crossbreeds.

The type of dog problems found in the two councils are the same. Both councils have wandering dogs, dog attacks etc. In the majority of cases the difference is the amount of reported breaches of the Act based on the dog population in each area. When considering dog attacks, the severity of the attacks in Salisbury are of a more serious nature.

It would appear that residents in Burnside are considerably less tolerant of noisy dogs. 660 complaints were received this year from a dog population of 4,600. Salisbury received 250 complaints for the same period with 20,000 registered dogs.

COMPARISON	SALISBURY	BURNSIDE
Population	115,000	39,950
Dwellings	40,200	17,787
Registered Dogs	20,000	4,540
Percentage of Dogs Per Houses	One registered dog per 2 houses	One registered dog per 4 houses
Wandering Dogs	2,100	490
Dogs Impounded	1,300	89
Noise Complaints	250	660
Dog Attacks	120	18

During the research of this paper I found that my belief, that a person's socio-economic circumstances influences their ability to look after a dog, was questioned. I found that my opinion has changed and that a person's social standing has little influence on their habits. It is also worthy of note, that as a Council Officer I deal with approximately 10% of the residents in the area that own dogs - the other 90% of residents with dogs are responsible owners that register their dogs, provide adequate care and control them at all times. It is with this in mind I offer the following observation.

There appears to be an ever increasing gap between responsible dog owners and people who have dogs because they feel that they have a right or perhaps a need. It is ironic that our time and efforts are spent dealing with irresponsible dog owners while the majority of responsible people rarely, if ever, meet with us. The attitude of irresponsible owners will never cease to amaze me. How can you expect a person to act responsibly with their dogs when in most cases they have little or no regard for anything at all? This situation is not unique to Salisbury, most areas in the country have a percentage of irresponsible owners.

I spoke with a person, who I consider to be an irresponsible dog owner recently, their name must for obvious reasons remain confidential. They own a medium sized crossbreed dog in Salisbury which they acquired as a 'give away' from a nearby owner. They explained they needed the dog to protect their property as there had been several break-ins in the area. When I enquired as to whether or not they exercised the dog, as the dog had become noisy and upset the neighbours, they replied, " no, its here to do a job and I am too busy". I then asked if the dog was registered and they replied " no, it never leaves the yard". I am sure that everyone could tell stories such as this from your own experiences, so I won't go on. The person I am referring to in this story is of a middle class background with a good job and a large disposable income. Unfortunately they spend the income on other things such as 'Foxtel' and the good old amber fluid, rather than providing adequate care for the dog.

By now you are no doubt wondering what all this has to do with a comparison of two councils with different socio-economic circumstances. The answer to that is nothing - but equally I do not believe that there is a great deal to compare. Both have responsible and irresponsible dog owners that make the comparison irrelevant. For too long now we have dealt with the problems of dog behaviour after the fact, picking up strays, resolving disputes over noise and so on. The South Australian Dog and Cat Management Act is one of, if not the best legislation in the country, and has gone a long way in helping us control dogs, yet councils spend millions of dollars annually dealing with what amounts to a very small proportion of the dog population. It is time to balance the ledger.

I am not suggesting that councils do nothing for responsible dog owners. As we all know if councils did not control dogs, all dog owners, responsible and irresponsible, would be disadvantaged. But for one moment think about the amount of resources put into each side of the ledger and you will find that so much of our resources go to controlling so few dogs that responsible dog owners are missing out.

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