

RESEARCH AND INVESTIGATION METHODOLOGY

By Karen Delise

In an effort to improve our understanding of the circumstances surrounding the rare instances of severe and fatal dog bite-related incidents, I have been researching such incidents for approximately twenty years. My conclusions are consistent with those of the Centers for Disease Control, the American Veterinary Medical Association, and virtually every animal welfare organization in America.



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I published *Fatal Dog Attacks: The Stories Behind the Statistics* in 2002. It was, at that time, the most complete discussion and analysis of the extremely rare instances of dog bite-related fatalities then available. But even that compilation was not enough. After five years of further research, I completed and published *The Pit Bull Placebo: The Media, Myths and Politics of Canine Aggression* (2007). *Placebo* is an historical discussion of changing America attitudes toward specific breeds of dogs, as well as a more sophisticated analysis of the factors that contribute to severe and fatal dog bite-related incidents.

In researching these two books, and in the years since, I have accumulated the most extensive data file of these incidents available anywhere. I have volumes of documentation (autopsy reports, crime scene photos, incident reports, etc.). I have interviewed police investigators, animal control officers, medical examiners, forensic pathologists, health department officials, dog owners, and eye witnesses. I have the names, dates and notes for every interview I have conducted. In my books, I provide much more information and detail than is available anywhere else. Each case is fully documented. I extensively footnoted both books. Both books include data sets in tabular form for easy reference.

A case study of my methodology is attached (see Appendix). As you will read, this particular complete investigation took more than a year. In the end, however, I had obtained what I believe is an instructive result.

My approach in both books was historical and investigative. Based upon my research, I specifically rejected a statistical/epidemiological approach. I have always concurred with the American Veterinary Medical Association Task Force on Canine Aggression and Human-Canine Interactions which stated, "Dog bite statistics are not statistics, and do not give an accurate representation of dogs that bite."

I have collected newspaper reports, and in some instances, spoken to the reporters who wrote the stories.

I have on file information concerning approximately 600 incidents. With respect to incidents that occurred prior to 1984, my records are limited almost exclusively to news accounts. After 1984, information began to be more accessible, as many law enforcement, medical examiner and animal control files were not old enough to be purged. Record-keeping was gradually being computerized. Also, an increasing number of the police officers, deputies and/or animal control officers who had responded to the scene or investigated a dog bite-related fatality were still employed in their respective offices.

My work is cited in academic and professional publications.

I have testified as an expert witness.

Print and electronic media have regularly cited both me and my information.

I stand by every word I have published, every statement I have given to the press, and every bit of testimony I have offered as an expert witness.

I also maintain an extensive file of academic papers published on the subject of dog bite-related injuries. As I have felt it necessary, I have spoken with and corresponded with, the authors of those reports. For the purposes of adding to the data in the frequently-cited study "Breeds of dogs involved in fatal human attacks in the United States between 1979 and 1998," (JAVMA, 2000) the lead author of that report, Dr. Jeffrey Sacks, was kind enough to give me a copy of his data set, which I have since added to and/or corrected, as needed. A summary of my result can be found in "Zoonosis Update: Animal Bites," by Gary J. Patronek and Sally A. Slavinski (JAVMA, 2008).

Dr. Sacks and his collaborators reported that they were uncertain of the breed attributions they had obtained, and were unsure of how to account for dogs that were reported as mixed-breed animals. Their study only covered a particular twenty-year period, 1979-1998; and they also reminded readers that the breeds identified in dog bite-related fatalities had changed over time.

The CDC has published a statement that the single-vector approach in "Breeds of Dogs" does not "identify specific breeds that are most likely to bite or kill, and thus is not appropriate for policy-making decisions related to the topic." The AVMA has published and distributed a comparable statement.

The AVMA Task Force went further: "An often-asked question is what breed or breeds of dogs are 'most dangerous'? This inquiry can be prompted by a serious injury inflicted by a specific dog, or it may be the result of media-driven portrayals of a specific breed as 'dangerous'... singling out 1 or 2 breeds for control... ignores the true scope of the problem and will not result in a responsible approach to protecting a community's citizens."

Dr. Randall Lockwood, one of the authors of the CDC's "Breeds of Dogs," as well as a member of the AVMA Task Force, submitted an affidavit in 2007 in opposition to the breed ban currently in effect in Denver, Colorado. He stated, in part: "Focusing on a single breed as the 'source' of the dog bite problem reflects a 19th century epidemiological mindset that attempts to identify the vector of a public health problem and eliminate that vector...the dog bite problem is not a disease problem with a single vector, it is a complex societal issue that must address a wide range of *human behaviors* [emphasis mine] in ways that deal with the irresponsible behavior that puts people and animals at risk."

In fact, all of the professionals involved in these earlier studies have come to the same conclusion: breed attributions yield no useful understanding of dog bite-related fatalities that have occurred, and do not offer a way to reduce such incidents in the future.

My study of dog bite-related fatalities occurring over the past five decades has identified the poor ownership/management practices involved in the overwhelming majority of these incidents: owners obtaining dogs, and maintaining them as resident dogs outside of regular, positive human interaction, often for negative functions (i.e. guarding/protection, fighting, intimidation/status); owners failing to humanely contain, control and maintain their dogs (chained dogs, loose roaming dogs, cases of abuse/neglect); owners failing to knowledgably supervise interaction between children and

dogs; and owners failing spay or neuter dogs not used for competition, show, or in a responsible breeding program. The interactions between dogs and humans are so numerous, complex and fluid that no one factor can be considered, in isolation from any other factors, to be the cause of what happened. (See Chapter 14 of *The Pit Bull Placebo*, "The Real Causes for Dog Attacks," for a more detailed discussion.)

Investigation of serious dog bite-related incidents that goes beyond a simplistic single-vector approach has necessarily entailed much more work than any researcher hitherto imagined. However, only an historical, relational approach such as I continue to employ can yield a true understanding of these rare tragedies, and produce the outcome that we all hope for: safer, more humane communities.

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APPENDIX: CASE STUDY
ILLUSTRATING RESEARCH METHODS

On March 29, 2004, the Bakersfield *Californian* reported that an elderly Delano man had died of injuries after being mauled by one of his own dogs earlier that month. No other details or information was published at the time. No report had been published at the time he was injured.

The next report of this incident is to be found in my book *The Pit Bull Placebo*.

I came across the *Californian* item in the spring of 2004. To research the circumstances surrounding this dog bite-related fatality, since the *Californian* had been reporting on the findings of the Kern County Coroner, I started with the Sheriff's office in Kern County. The Sheriff's office said that they had not handled the case. Since the dateline on the news story was Bakersfield, I contacted the Bakersfield Police Department. My contact with that department referred me to the Delano Police Department.

I spoke to the Delano detective who had investigated. He said that he had not done much on the case, as the man had not died at the scene. He referred me to the animal control department.

As animal control officers are usually on the road, it was some weeks before I was able to speak with the investigating officer, Veronica Torres. In the interim, I had been able to obtain from the Delano Police the incident report, photographs of the dog, and photographs of the victim.

Officer Torres was very helpful. She told me that, as is very unusual in these cases, there was an eyewitness. The victim's wife had been present.

Officer Torres also told me that Delano was a "bad place to be a dog." She said that they had a problem of people abandoning dogs and otherwise not taking good care of their animals.

The victim and his wife maintained five dogs on the premises: In the yard, there were two mixed-breed sub-adults, and a third older dog, the one that killed him, who was also a mixed-breed dog. Officer Torres told me that the older dog was a 2-3 year old intact male whom the victim had kept from a litter of a stray female.



Two additional dogs were later found secured in the garage on the property.

Both the victim and his wife were elderly. In her statement to authorities, the wife never referred to any of the dogs by name.

On the day in question, all three of the yard dogs were involved in a fence fight with the dog next door. According to the victim's wife, the victim went into the yard to chase the dogs away from the fence. As part of that effort, the victim took hold of the older of the three dogs in the yard, and attempted to pull him away from the fence. The dog turned around and bit him on the arm. The victim fell, and the dog then attacked his face and head. (The wife was not sure whether the dog had pulled or knocked him down, or he had fallen.)



The wife attempted to intercede, armed with a shovel, but there was nothing she could do on her own. She said, however, that the dog did not attempt to bite her. She sustained no injuries.



She reported that her husband said "I'm going to die, I'm going to die."



By the time the dog stopped his attack, he had severely damaged the victim's face.

The victim was still alive at the scene. He died three weeks later in a local hospital.

The authorities impounded the three yard dogs. The victim's wife later consented to their euthanization. The fate of the two dogs in the garage is not known, except that she did not surrender them to the authorities.