

MEDIA REPORTING OF CANINE AGGRESSION

Fact vs. Fiction

FICTION: Some breeds of dogs are more likely to seriously injure people than other breeds of dogs.

FACT: The American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA), in an open letter, states “. . . the data contained within this report **CANNOT be used to infer any breed-specific risk for dog bite fatalities** [emphasis in the original]. . .”

FACT: The Centers for Disease Control (CDC), on its website, states: “It [same study mentioned above] 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.”

FICTION: Whatever the AVMA and the CDC say, a search of newspaper archives for stories about dog bite-related incidents will produce a statistically valid sampling that can identify which breeds of dog are more likely to injure people.

FACT: The AVMA Task Force on Human-Canine Interaction reported: “An often-asked question is what breed or breeds of dogs are ‘most dangerous’? This inquiry can be prompted by a serious attack 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.”ⁱⁱ

FACT: News outlets are in the business of reporting singular events. Statistical validity is not their job. They do not select stories for publication on the basis of random sampling techniques. Editors promote stories they believe to be of interest to their audience. Most incidents involving dogs, good, bad or indifferent, are not reported at all.

FACT: NCRC research shows that media accounts over-represent incidents involving dogs presumed to be of breeds already trapped in the media headlights, and under-represent (or ignore) incidents involving dogs presumed to be of other breeds or types.

FICTION: A newspaper archive would be valid insofar as it includes all serious incidents involving dogs and humans.

FACT: No newspaper log or archive includes all serious incidents. For the 25-year period 1982-2006, a media log recorded 246 dog bite-related fatalities in the U.S. and Canada. The CDC single cause mortality tape system recorded 477 for the same period, in the U.S. alone. NCRC does not consider any single source comprehensively reliable. NCRC may initiate an investigation based upon news accounts, because of a finding in the CDC's mortality tapes, or because of information reported to the Director of Research.

FICTION: News stories invariably include accurate breed attributions of the dog or dogs involved.

FACT: News accounts regularly disagree about breed identifications. The breed attribution associated in the popular imagination with a particular incident will depend on which news stories dominate the coverage. At least half of the dogs in the U.S. are of mixed breed ancestry. A reliable breed identification requires documentation of pedigree, or photographs clearly showing a representative member of a known breed. Such evidence is rarely available.

FACT: Visual breed identification of a mixed breed dog is likely to be contradicted by a DNA test. A study by scientists at Western University points to a substantial discrepancy between visual identifications of dogs by adoption agency personnel and the breeds identified in the same dogs through DNA analysis.

FICTION: Tabulating serious incidents by breed represents the most forward-thinking approach, and holds the most promise for reducing serious incidents.

FACT: CDC researchers have not attempted to correlate dog bite-related fatalities with breed attributions since 1998. "Many practical alternatives to breed-specific policies exist and hold promise for preventing dog bites."
[from CDC website]

FACT: NCRC's investigation into 40+ years of dog bite-related fatalities has identified poor ownership/management practices involved in the overwhelming majority of these incidents. Humane care, custody and control of all dogs represents the most forward-thinking approach and holds the most promise for safer, more humane communities.

FICTION: We should be concerned that dog bites are a growing problem in the United States.

FACT: Health departments in major cities across the country report dramatically FEWER dog bite incidents than they did thirty years ago.

FACT: The Centers for Disease Control's database shows that, between the 1990s and the 21st century, the rate of serious injuries by dogs has FALLEN. In 1994, 5991 Americans were hospitalized for dog bite injuries. In 1994 the U.S. human population was 265 million and the canine population was 52 million. In 2007 that number of Americans decreased slightly, to 5771. But the human population had grown 13.5% to 301 million and the canine population had increased by 38%, to 72 million.

FICTION: Americans are in immediate danger of being killed by dogs.

FACT: Severe incidents involving dogs are exceedingly rare. Each year, our nation records one dog bite-related fatality for every 10-12 million of us. That works out to 25-30 fatalities, out of a total of 2.5 million deaths. More Americans die in their swimming pools than are killed by dogs.

ⁱ Sacks, L. Sinclair, G. Golab, et al, "Breeds of dogs involved in fatal human attacks in the United States between 1979 and 1998," JAVMA, Vol 217, No. 6, Sept. 15, 2000.

ⁱⁱ B. Beaver, et al, "A community approach to dog bite prevention: American Veterinary Medical Association Task Force on Canine Aggression and Human-Canine Interactions," JAVMA, Vol 218, No. 11, June 11, 2001.