What Is a Dog Bite?

NCRC National Canine Research Council
Preserving the Human-Canine Bond

The question seems simple enough. Most of us would describe a dog bite as an incident where a dog deliberately inflicts an injury on a person. Animal control and public health departments, however, consider any incident in which a dog's tooth or nail breaks a person's skin, regardless of the circumstances or any characterization of the dog's intention, to be an animal exposure that merits their notice. Therefore animal control and other public health departments classify all of the following animal exposures as dog bites:

- Nips from playful puppies
- Scratches from a dog's nail
- Scrapes from a dog's tooth
- Accidental bites from dogs
- Good Samaritans bitten trying to assist injured dogs (e.g. dogs hit by cars)
- Bites by working K-9 dogs in the performance of police duties
- Bites to canine professionals that may have occurred under extreme duress, such as when the dog was in pain or otherwise unable to control its behavior (e.g. a vet tech bitten while removing intubation tube from a dog's throat)

"Animal control and public health departments do not collect data on 'animal aggression'."

What About Dog Bite "Statistics" or Dog Bite Numbers?

Dog bite statistics (that is, animal exposure totals) do not give an accurate picture of which dogs bite, why dogs bite, or the frequency of canine aggression.

One of the primary functions of animal control continues to be determining whether domestic animals involved in biting incidents have up-to-date vaccinations for rabies. Hence their interest in animal exposure, regardless of the circumstances.

However, a form used to record an animal exposure, probably called a bite report, will usually include space for a description of the circumstances. Did a dog scratch his owner during a playful romp? Did a dog chase and bite a child riding a bicycle?

Unfortunately, when animal exposures are tallied up, they are released to the public as simple bite numbers. The circumstances of the incidents have been stripped away. In consequence, bite numbers are not an accurate representation of canine aggression, which is, in itself, a general term that is applied to a range of different behaviors.

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Bite numbers become even more misleading when subdivided by breed descriptors. Recent research has confirmed that it is impossible to breed label dogs of unknown history and genetics solely on the basis of appearance. And at least half of the dogs in the United States are mixed breed dogs! Nevertheless, animal controls and shelter workers continue to assign single breed descriptors to mixed-breed dogs.

Even if visual breed identifications were accurate , dog bite tallies still would not provide evidence that some breeds bit more frequently than others. Specialists who analyze dog bite tallies have pointed out that breed populations within a given jurisdiction are not known; therefore, incident rates cannot be calculated.

However, the most serious flaw with dog bite tallies remains that incidents evidencing different canine behaviors are assigned the same statistical value.

For instance, a report that four dogs assigned breed descriptor "A" inflicted bites may actually be a condensation of the following:

- Dog One jumps up and scratches a child with its nail.
- Dog Two is hit by a car and critically injured and bites the hand of a rescuer.
- Dog Three chases a child on a bicycle and nips the child's ankle.
- Dog Four lunges and inflicts a serious bite to a child's face after the child comes too close to the dog's food bowl.

Even if the breed descriptor were accurate, which a recent study points out is unlikely, each of these incidents involves distinct canine behaviors that animal experts would not describe in the same terms.

The Myth of the Dog Bite Epidemic

The definition of epidemic is: extremely prevalent; widespread, or a rapid spread or increase in the occurrence of something.

There is no national system in the United States for tallying reports of dog bites. The often-repeated estimates used to proclaim a dog bite "epidemic" are derived from telephone surveys, the first of which was conducted in 1994. From among the 5,328 persons who responded to this survey, interviewers obtained reports of 196 dog bites believed to have occurred within the 12 months prior to the interview. (Only 38 of those sought medical attention.)

These survey estimates are not corroborated by reports from public health agencies across the United States. In fact, communities from coast to coast report the good, less publicized news that, contrary to the estimates, actual reports of dog bites are decreasing, and have been for years

In fact, as strange as it sounds, during a period when reports from public health agencies showed declines, the estimated totals were being increased.

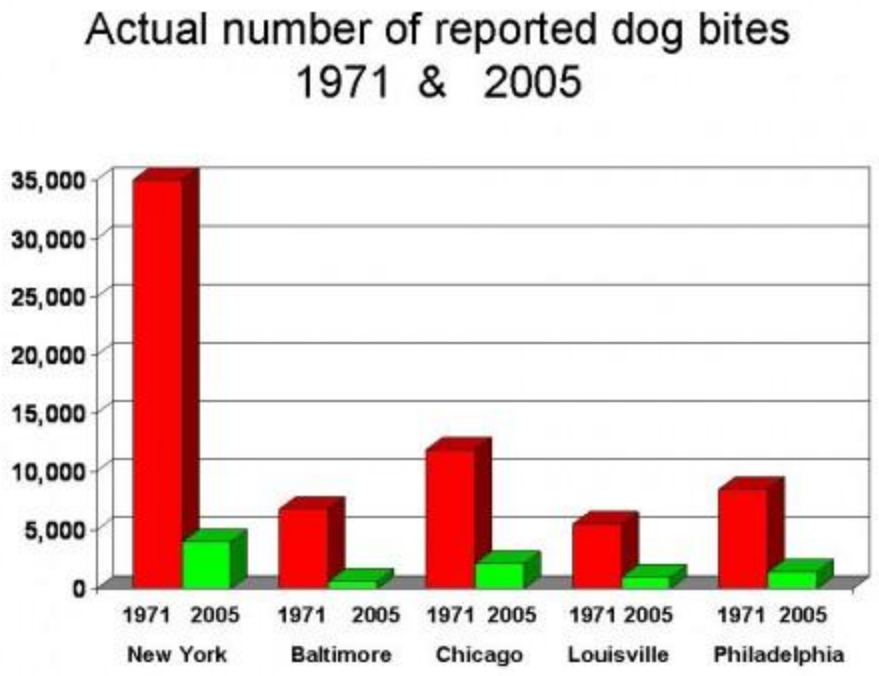
In the 1970s, when major American cities were reporting tens of thousands of dog bites annually, epidemiologists and public health officials estimated the number of reported and unreported bites nationwide to be between 1 and 2 million.

Today, when these same cities report declines in reported bites by as much as 90%, some academics and organizations now insist that there are 4.7 million reported and unreported dog bites in the U.S. annually.

How can this be? How can there be one reported dog bite for every 2,000 New Yorkers and one for every 1, 365 Chicagoans, according to their public health reports; yet at the same time one bite for every 64 Americans nationwide, according to telephone surveys? (300 million Americans divided by 4.7 million dog bites = 1 in every 64)

What are we to believe? Are dog bites increasing or decreasing?

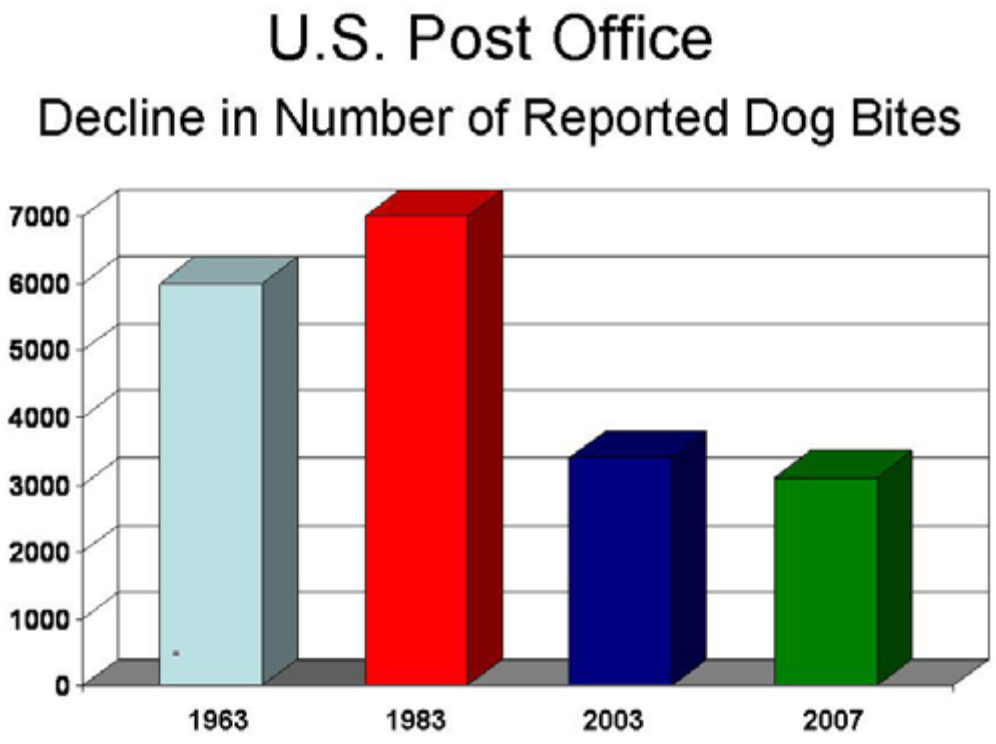
We can choose to believe an estimate* from a telephone survey
OR
We can choose to believe actual numbers from Animal Control Reports:



Source: Animal Control and /or Public Health Department for each city.

United States Post Office Statistics on Dog Bites

The United States Post Office has been dealing with dogs and dog bites to its employees since the first "mailman" walked onto a dog owner's property. Corresponding with other dog bite data from throughout the nation, the number of OSHA-recordable injuries to mail carriers bitten by dogs over the past three decades has significantly decreased:



Source: United States Post Office.