

WHAT IS A DOG BITE?

What is a Dog Bite? The question seems simple enough. Most people would describe a dog bite as a dog deliberately clamping down on a person's arm or hand. Animal control and public health departments, on the other hand, consider any incident in which a dog's tooth or nail comes into contact with a person's skin and in which the skin is broken, regardless of the circumstances, to be a "bite." Therefore, animal control and public health departments classify all of the following incidents as "dog bites:"

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- Nips from playful puppies
- Scratches from a dog's nail
- Scrapes from a dog's tooth
- Accidental bites by dogs
- 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)
- 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

What About Dog Bite “Statistics” or Dog Bite Numbers?

Do they 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 was, and continues to be, determining the vaccination status of domestic animals involved in “biting” incidents, in order to control rabies. Animal control also responds to cases of domestic animals that owners have abandoned or have otherwise allowed to become a nuisance or danger to the public; to cases of human neglect or cruelty to domestic animals; and to cases of injured or diseased animals.

Animal control and public health departments do not collect data on “animal aggression.” Animal control and public health agencies collect data on “animal exposures.” Animal exposures include any incident in which a dog’s tooth or nail has come into contact with a human and in which the skin was broken. An actual bite report will often recount the circumstances of the incident: a dog that scratched his owner during a playful romp, or a dog that chased and bit a child riding a bicycle. However, when animal exposures are tallied up and released as “bite numbers,” the circumstances of the incidents that are so vital to understanding the dynamics of canine-human interaction are stripped away. The resulting bite numbers offer little useful information and are not an accurate representation of canine aggression.

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Bite numbers become even more misleading when attempts are made to divide the total number of bites into subtotals by “breed.”

It is impossible to breed label dogs of unknown history and genetics solely on the basis of their appearance. Additionally, dog bite numbers are hopelessly flawed due to the data entry requirement to pick a single identifying breed in cases of mixed breed dogs. Even if visual breed identifications were accurate, and if the breed “responsible” for an incident could be isolated, these tallies still could not be used as evidence that one breed tended to bite more than another breed. Breed populations within

a given jurisdiction are not known, therefore, incident rates cannot be calculated. However, the critical flaw with “dog bite” numbers is that all the following incidents are assigned the same statistical value:

- Breed “A” jumps up and scratches a child with its nail.
- Breed “B” is hit by a car and critically injured and bites the hand of a rescuer.
- Breed “C” chases a child on a bicycle and nips the child’s ankle.
- Breed “D” lunges and inflicts a serious bite to a child’s face after the child comes too close to the dog’s food bowl.

Each of these incidents constitutes completely distinct canine behavior, including non-aggressive scratching, aggressive biting, and “aggressive” defense.

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 numbers that inspired some to declare a dog bite “epidemic” were estimated on the basis of a telephone survey conducted in 1994. From among the 5,328 persons who responded to this survey, interviewers obtained reports of 196 dog bites within the previous 12 months. (Only 38 of those sought medical attention).*

Alarmists quote the numbers extrapolated from this 14-year-old telephone survey as evidence that dogs are a growing threat. However, communities across the country report the good, less publicized news that actual (not estimated) reports of dog bites are decreasing, and have been for years.

In the 1970s, when major American cities were each reporting thousands of dog bites annually, epidemiologists and public health officials estimated the number reported and unreported dog 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 insist that there are now 4.7 million reported and unreported dog bites in the U.S.

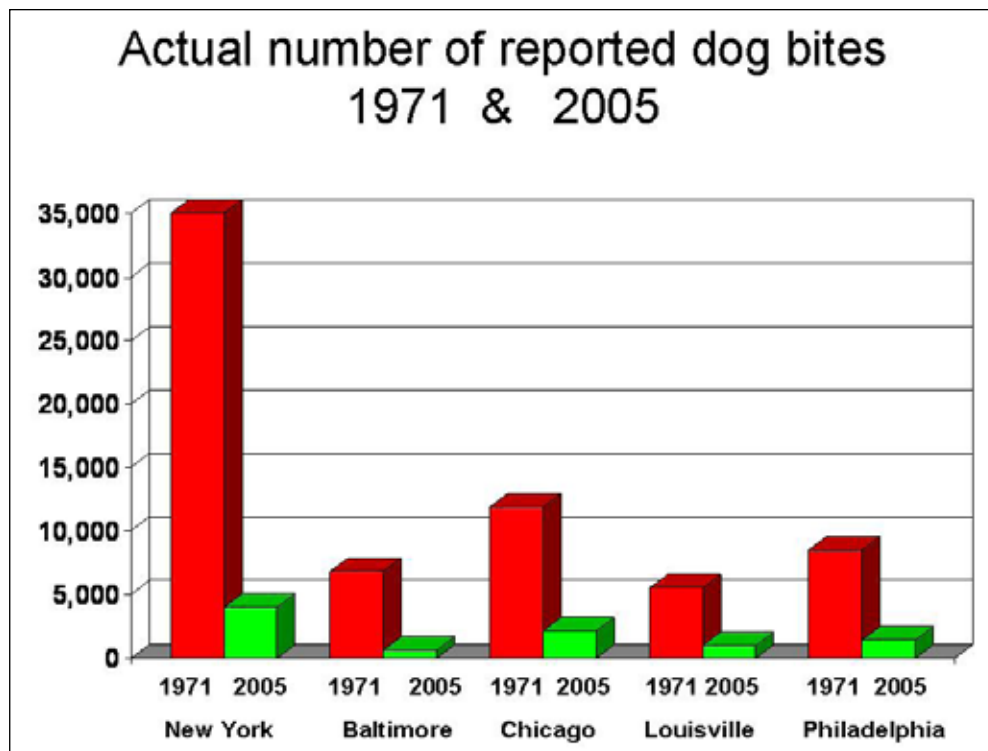
How can this be? How can there one reported dog bite for every 2,000 New Yorkers and one for every 1,365 Chicagoans, according to public health reports; yet at the same time one bite for every 64 Americans nationwide, according to the telephone survey? (300 million Americans divided by 4.7 million dog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

So what are we to believe? Are dog bites increasing or decreasing?

We can choose to believe that an estimate* from a telephone survey conducted in 1994 describes the situation in 2009.

or

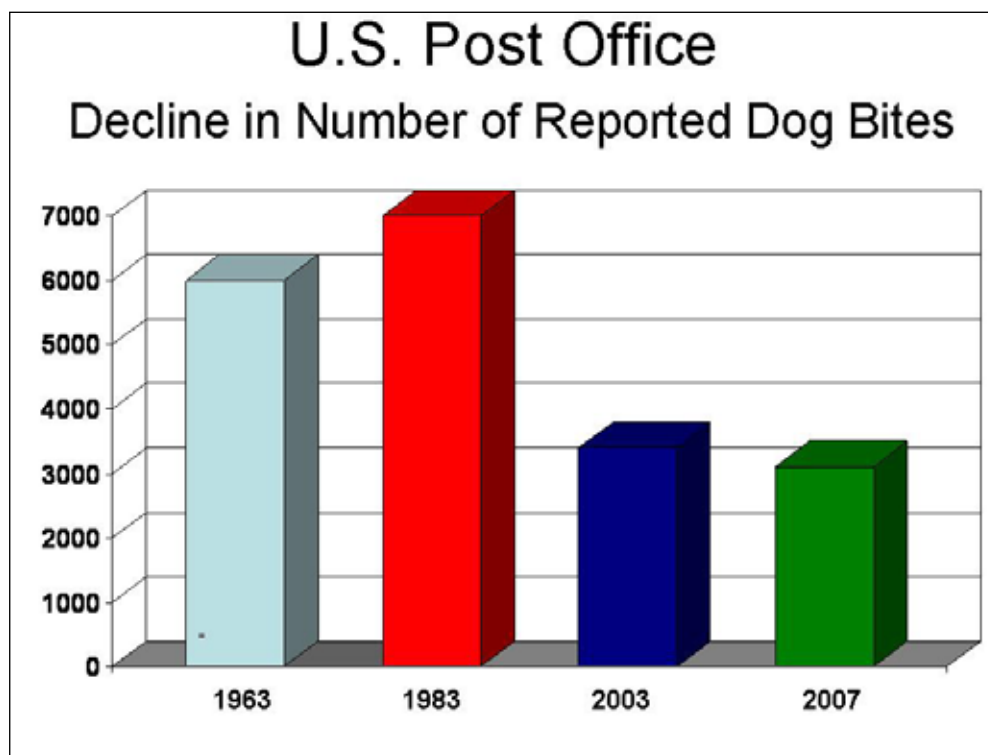
We can choose to believe actual, up-to-date numbers from public health departments and animal control agencies across the country which document dog bites numbers have been steadily decreasing:



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

*The single source from which the number " 4.7 million dog bites" originated: dog-bite-estimates-injury-prevention

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. Dog bites to mail carriers are an occupational or work-related injury. Therefore, the number of dog related-injuries cannot be considered “under-reported” and U.S.P.S. data on the number of mail carrier reporting dog bites is to be considered consistently reliable. Corresponding with other dog bite data from throughout the nation, the number of mail carriers bitten by dogs over the past three decades has significantly decreased:



Source: United States Post Office