Co-occurrence of potentially preventable factors in 256 dog bite-related fatalities in the United States (2000-2009)

Gary J. Patronek, VMD, PhD; Jeffrey J. Sacks, MD, MPH; Karen M. Delise; Donald V Cleary, MD; Amy R. Marder, VMD

Objective—To examine potentially preventable factors in human dog bite-related fatalities (DBRFs) on the basis of data from sources that were more complete, verifiable, and accurate than media reports used in previous studies.

Design—Prospective case series.

Sample—256 DBRFs occurring in the United States from 2000 to 2009.

Procedures—DBRFs were identified from media reports and detailed histories were compiled on the basis of reports from homicide detectives, animal control reports, and interviews with investigators for coding and descriptive analysis.

Results—Major co-occurrence factors for the 256 DBRFs included absence of an able-bodied person to intervene (n = 223 [87.1%]), accidental or nonfamiliar relationship of victims with dogs (218 [85.2%]), failure to neuter dogs (215 [84.4%]), compromised ability of victims to interact appropriately with dogs (198 [77.4%]), dogs kept isolated from regular human interactions versus family dogs (195 [76.2%]), owners' prior mismanagement of dogs (86 [33.5%]), and owners' history of abuse or neglect of dogs (64 [21.1%]). Four or more of these factors co-occurred in 256 (80.5%) deaths. For 631 dogs described in various media accounts, reported breed differed for 124 (30.9%); for 364 dogs with both media and animal control breed reports, breed differed for 139 (40.2%). Valid breed determination was possible for only 45 (16.7%) DBRFs: 20 breeds, including 2 known mixes, were identified.

Conclusions and Clinical Relevance—Most DBRFs were characterized by coincident, preventable factors; breed was not one of these. Study results supported previous recommendations (for multidisciplinary approaches, instead of single-factor solutions such as breed-specific legislation, for dog bite prevention, J Am Vet Med Assoc 2013;243:1726-1736).

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The National Canine Research Council supported the efforts of Karen Delise from 2006 to 2011 for assembly of case reports and data extraction and Kea Gibbons, JD, for assistance with data abstraction and validation from case reports.

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Abbreviations

| BEL | Breed-specific legislation |
| DBRF | Dog bite-related fatality |

ascertainment but still relied on media reports, which may be impossible to verify for completeness and accuracy, to characterize DBRFs during the periods 1979 to 1988, 1989 to 1994, 1995 to 1996, and 1997 to 1998.

Of the factors related to dog bites reported in the media as well as in scientific literature, the breed of dog has come to dominate public policy discussions about prevention and control. The undue emphasis on breed has contributed to a lack of appreciation of the ownership and husbandry factors that more directly impact dogs and the complex genetic factors that work in concert with husbandry to influence a dog's behavior and responses to a given set of stimuli. This is unfortunate because even studies that relied on media accounts and described the reported breeds reemphasized the importance of a more nuanced understanding of the circumstances leading to DBRFs and dog bites in general. More recently, the advent of commercially available DNA technology along with studies demonstrating the unreliability of visual breed identification of mixed-breed dogs of known parentage and dogs of mixed breed.
American Bar Association, 25 the National Animal Con­

spect to their keeping) as dog-bite prevention strate­

gies. It has been shown mathematically that BSL is un­

likely to be effective 29 ; moreover, in a recent Canadian

study,30 there was no significant reduction in hospital­

ization rates for dog-bite injury in communities before

and after BSL was introduced. Nevertheless, BSL has

been promoted as an effective single-factor solution to

factors and diverting resources from more effective pre­

vention measures.

In an effort to understand the accuracy of news ac­

tounts and published reports that either prohibit dogs

on the basis of presumed breed or appearance or that

impose additional requirements and expense with re­

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been promoted as an effective single-factor solution to

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vention measures.

To improve the evidence base for understanding

and prevention of dog bites, the purpose of the study

reported here was to examine potentially preventable

factors in DBRFs on the basis of data from sources that

were more complete, verifiable, and accurate than media

reports used in previous studies. Our intent was to ana­

lyze data from previously unused sources (ie, in-depth

investigations based on police reports and homicide in­

vestigations as well as coroner reports, animal control re­

ports, and photographs); examine previously un­

same behaviorally relevant and potentially policy-relevant

factors associated with the victim, the dogs, the hus­

bandry of the dogs, and the situational factors attendant to

these incidents; describe the co-occurrence of these factors; and characterize the reliability and accuracy of breed at­

tribution in media accounts of DBRFs.

Materials and Methods

Case ascertainment and definition—We attempt­
ed to identify all DBRFs in the United States during the

10-year period from 2000 to 2009. A DBRF was defined

as a death resulting from the mechanical trauma of a
dog bite. Persons dying of causes such as infection

following a dog bite or other trauma associated with

a dog-related incident (eg, a fall) were not consid­
ered DBRFs. DBRFs arising from criminal intent (eg, cases identi­

fied through media reports via a daily Internet search) with the following terms: dog bite, dog mauling, dog

mauled, dog attack, dog bite injuries, dog bite death,

and fatal bites. Investigation of cases and collection of

data commenced as soon as a case was identified and

data continued prospectively beginning in 2000 with

follow-up on existing cases continuing through Decem­

ber 2013. In approximately 20 cases involving dog bites

where the cause of death was not clearly identified in

the media reports, we contacted the relevant medical

examiner or coroner to confirm the cause of death.

As a completeness check for DBRFs occurring from

2000 to 2009, we used national death data, searching for

deaths with the International Classification of Disease

Revision 10 (ICD-10) code W54 (bite or struck by
dog) as the underlying or contributory cause of death.

For deaths identified in media reports but missing from

the national death data (ie, not coded as W54 [presum­

cably]), we used confirmation from the coroner or

medical examiner as the criterion for inclusion. When

cases were listed in the national death reports but not

identified in media reports, we contacted the investi­

gation was closed. In cases where the investiga­

tion resulted in criminal charges, the investigator could

only be interviewed after the case was closed. When

law enforcement investigators were unable to provide

information through interviews, attempts were made to

obtain police reports or to locate or interview other

sources. Attempts were made to obtain all other docu­

mentation that might be relevant to the case (eg, ani­

mal control reports, autopsy reports, crime scene

photos, and photographs of the dog). Because a DBRF

may involve criminal liability on the part of a person

or persons, investigators initially determine whether

criminal charges are not applicable, in which case the

investigation closes quickly (eg, weeks to months),

or that criminal charges may be applicable, in which

case their investigation is more protracted (months to

years). Contact with the investigator was maintained

for the duration of the case, and new facts were ob­

tained as they became available. During the study,

information was compiled over a sufficiently long period

for the entire range of available facts surrounding an

incident to have come to light.

Definition of variables—With respect to the de­

cence relationship of a dog (or dogs), an owner was de­

fined as an adult with an established relationship with

a dog who provided care and maintained custody of the
dog for 50 days. A familiar relationship was defined

as an established positive relationship with the dog

other than owner or primary caretaker (eg, someone

who is regularly present and familiar to the dog, such

as a spouse, parent, child, other relative, or roommate,

and who regularly interacts with the dog in positive and

humane ways); an incidental relationship was defined

as an association with the dog other than owner or pri­

mary caretaker (eg, someone who is regularly present

at the home, such as a spouse, parent, child, other rela­
tive, or roommate, and who does not regularly inter­

act with the dog in positive and humane ways); and no

established relationship was defined as a visitor to the

home, an in-tether to property, or a passersby. Victims

of DBRFs were defined as adults, children, or elderly

persons.
were deemed unable to interact appropriately with the dog if they were < 3 years of age or they had limited mental or physical capacity that increased their vulnerability (eg, dementia, alcohol intoxication, impairment from drugs, or uncontrolled seizure disorders).

The status of a dog in a household was differentiated as either a resident dog or family dog. A resident dog was a dog, whether confined within the dwelling or otherwise, whose owners isolated them from regular human interactions. A family dog was a dog whose owners kept it in or near the home and also integrated them into the family unit, so that the dogs learned appropriate behavior through interaction with humans on a regular basis in positive and humane ways.

Evidence that an owner allowed the dog to be a danger to others (eg, previous bite incidents and running at large) was classified as mismanagement. A history of neglect by the owner included instances of dogs not given access to shelter, food, water, or shade and dogs with untreated medical conditions. More extreme events (eg, severe starvation, seemingly more deliberate than simple neglect; an owner witnessed beating a dog previously; an owner sexually abusing a dog; an owner using a dog for dog fighting; or evidence of deliberate physical punishment or deprivation) were classified as owner abuse. For example, an owner bragged that after his dogs had eaten food off the stove, "as punishment he fed the dogs dish soap for a week; no dog food, just dish soap."

Coding and verification—A standardized instrument for abstracting information from the case report narratives was developed after a review of scientific literature and extensive discussion, with the intent to capture basic human and dog demographic information as well as environmental and situational variables that would be behaviorally relevant from a dog’s perspective. Categories were defined and coded as follows: victim’s age (< 90 days, 3 to < 12 months, 1 to 4 years, 5 to 9 years, 10 to 14 years, 15 to 69 years, or > 69 years); victim’s gender (male or female); victim’s relationship to dog (none, familiar, incidental, owner or primary caretaker, or unknown); duration of ownership on date of incident (< 90 days, > 90 days, or unknown); occurrence of bite in presence of owner or primary caretaker (yes, no, or unknown); presence of able-bodied person able to intervene on behalf of the victim at the time of the incident (yes, no, or unknown); victim’s vulnerability increased on the basis of age or limited mental or physical capacity (no, ie, victim able to assist in the interaction via perception or communication between a dog and a human; person ≥ 13 years of age), yes [ie, children < 5 years of age; cognitive impairment due to age, mental disability, physical disability, alcohol or drug-related intoxication, or seizures], possibly [ie, victim possibly unable to interact appropriately (eg, children ≥ 5 to 12 years of age or persons with cognitive impairment due to age or other mental disability, physical disability, alcohol or drug-related intoxication, or seizures)], or unknown); evidence of animal abuse or neglect (yes, no, or unknown); owner mismanagement of dog (yes, no, or unknown); criminal charges filed against owner, parent, or primary caretaker in connection with incident (yes, no, or unknown); status of dog in household (resident dog, family dog, or undetermined [evidence of human-canine relationship not available or inconclusive]); typical housing of dog (chained, confined [kennel, shed, or pen in yard], loose in fenced yard, loose in an fenced yard, indoor isolation [basement, garage, porch, laundry room, or crate], regular roaming loose off owner’s property, inside home and not in isolation, indoor and outdoor, or unknown); location of incident with respect to property where dog normally resided (off property, on property, both [ran off property to attack victim], or unknown); duration of dog’s residence on property if incident occurred on resident property (< 90 days, > 90 days, unknown, and not applicable [ie, off-property incident]); number of dogs known to have been involved in incident (1 dog, 2 dogs, 3 dogs, 4 dogs, or unknown); sex of dog or dogs involved (male, female, both male and female, or unknown); reproductive status of dog or dogs (spayed or castrated, sexually intact, both spayed or castrated and sexually intact, and unknown); breeding status of sexually intact dog or dogs involved in incident (not applicable [ie, dogs that are neutered or do not match other categories], female in estrus, pregnant, or with puppies; both sexually intact female with puppies; sexually intact female with subadult offspring; sexually intact male in vicinity of female in estrus, pregnant, or with puppies; both sexually intact male and female; or unknown).

To verify the coding categories and definitions were understandable and repeatable, 2 individuals (RMD and Kara Gilmore, JD) separately coded 20 case reports and compared results. Based on discrepancies and possible errors identified, the form was revised and the same 2 individuals recoded the same 20 case reports, plus an additional 30 new cases. For the 19 variables coded with 3 to 9 possible assignments of value, there was exact agreement in value assignment in 915 of 355 (96%) cells. A third person (ARM) coded a sample of 20 case reports, and there was exact agreement in value assignment in 355 of 380 (93%) cells. The final coding of the remaining case narratives was done by 1 person (RMD).

Reliability and accuracy of breed identifications—It should be noted that the source of breed descriptors in media reports is usually unknown, potentially being neighbors, first responders, or other witnesses who may or may not have any first-hand knowledge of the dog or dogs involved in an incident. Homicide detectives typically made no independent determination of breed for inclusion in their reports. We defined a valid determination of breed as documented pedigree, parentage information, or results of DNA analysis. With the understanding that the number of such cases would be limited, we also allowed for agreement of news accounts, animal control assessment, and the photographic evidence for a given dog involved in a DBRP to conclude that it was reasonable to identify the dog as a purebred dog. In cases without pedigree information, parentage, DNA test results, or photographic evidence, validity of breed attributions could not be determined. As a second level of analysis and to provide additional information about the reliability of media reports, the concordance of the reported breed descriptors among...
Concordance was defined on the basis of both a strict and expanded definition. First, for the strict scenario, concordance was defined as an exact match in the reported breed descriptor between 2 accounts. Therefore, if one account reported a purebred dog (eg, Rottweiler) and another reported the same dog as mixed breed (eg, Rottweiler-German Shepherd Dog mix), the reports were considered discordant (not a match). For the expanded definition of concordance, breed descriptors did not need to be exact matches. For example, if one account reported a purebred dog (eg, Rottweiler) and another reported the same dog as a mixed breed that included that pure breed (eg, Rottweiler-German Shepherd Dog mix), it was considered to have an overlap of 1 breed descriptor and was therefore concordant by the expanded definition.

Pit bull-type dogs posed a special challenge because this colloquial designation is not a breed per se but a descriptor of a heterogeneous group whose membership includes various purebred dogs and presumed mixes of breeds; this descriptor varies according to the definition used in various statutes and ordinances and the opinions of the observer. The 3 breeds most commonly grouped under the term pit bull in US BSL are American Pit Bull Terrier, American Staffordshire Terrier, and Staffordshire Bull Terrier. Thus, for our strict definition to be concordant, the terms used to differ in reporting reports had to be: pit bull, pit bull terrier, American Pit Bull Terrier, American Staffordshire Terrier, or Staffordshire Bull Terrier (without the term mix). Thus, pit bull and American Staffordshire Terrier would be concordant, but pit bull and pit bull mix would be discordant, as would American Staffordshire Terrier and American Staffordshire Terrier mix. For the expanded definition, concordance related to pit bull-type dogs were considered when reported as pit bull, pit bull terrier, pit bull mix, pit bull terrier mix, American Pit Bull Terrier, American Staffordshire Terrier, Staffordshire Bull Terrier, or any alleged mix therein.

Single dog incidents and multiple dog incidents were analyzed separately. For multiple dog incidents, other mental disability, physical disability, intoxication or persons with cognitive impairment due to age or other mental disability, physical disability, intoxication (alcohol or drugs), and seizures.

Among the 143 DBRFs where the victim was deemed unable to interact appropriately with the dog, this inability was due to age (< 5 years) in 116 (81.1%) cases. However, of the remaining 27 victims whose ability to interact was compromised, 24 were persons 2 to 12 years. Most of these older individuals (16/24 [66.7%]) were adults compromised as a result of drug or alcohol intake. Five others were compromised because of Alzheimer’s disease, dementia, or an uncontrolled seizure disorder. Increased vulnerability as a result of β-
dogs, whereas over half the deaths (63.9% [65.6%]) in persons > 15 years of age involved multiple dogs. Regardless of whether all or most of the dogs participated, there was > 1 dog kept either on the premises or in the immediate vicinity of the incident in 210 (82.1%) cases; in 19 DBRFs, there was only 1 dog kept on the premises or in the immediate vicinity of the incident, and for 27 DBRFs, the number of dogs kept on the premises or in the immediate vicinity of the incident was unknown.

Most cases (216/256 [84.4%]) involved dogs, whose owners had not had them spayed or castrated. Of the nearly one-third (76/256 [29.7%]) of DBRFs involving both male and female dogs, almost all involved a sexually intact dog (70/76 [92.1%]). Only 18 of 256 (7.0%) DBRFs involved only dogs that were neutered. Spayed females were known to be involved in only 2 (< 1%) DBRFs. Among the 195 DBRFs involving resident dogs, their owners had failed to have the dogs neutered in 182 (93.3%) cases. Among the 40 DBRFs involving family dogs, the owners had failed to have the dogs neutered in 24 (60%). In 81 cases, owners maintained dogs in reproduction (eg, a female in estrus, a pregnant female, or a female with nursing or young puppies present) or in circumstances conducive to reproduction (eg, a sexually intact male being kept with a sexually intact female). Not all of these dogs were deemed by the investigators to be involved in the DBRF despite being in the general vicinity; however, the presence of dogs with these reproductive issues could have influenced the behavior of the dogs involved in the bite.

Table 1—Victim-related and situational factors involved in 256 DBRFs in the United States (2000-2009).

Table 2—Dog-related factors involved in 256 DBRFs in the United States (2000-2009).
In only 37 of the 256 (14.6%) DBRFs did the owners know or were investigators able to determine with any degree of reliability the age of the dog. In only 39 of the 256 (15.2%) incidents was it possible to assign a single, distinct function to the dog. Therefore, given the extent of missing data for these 2 variables, detailed results for categories of age and function are not reported.

It was not possible to precisely determine the total number of dogs involved in these 256 DBRFs because, in some cases when multiple dogs were present, the total numbers were not reported or it was simply unknown exactly how many dogs were involved. Conservatively, we estimated at least 455 individual dogs.

Determination of breed—To examine breed of dogs, we used media reports, animal control reports, pedigree, parentage information, or results of DNA analysis, when available. To evaluate the reliability of breed determinations reported by the media, we attempted to use concordance among reporting sources of breed descriptors, recognizing that even with concordance, sources could still be in error, particularly when dogs were of mixed breeding. For single dog incidents (148 incidents), on the basis of the strict definition (exact match), breed descriptors in media reports were discordant for 12 of 148 (8.2%) dogs; animal control or local law enforcement assessment of breed differed from the media account for 45 of 129 (35.0%) dogs. On the basis of the expanded definition (any agreement between alleged breeds and mixes), breed descriptors among media reports were discordant for 19 of 148 (12.8%) dogs; animal control or local law enforcement assessment of breed differed from the media account for 45 of 129 (35.0%) dogs. For multiple dog incidents (96 deaths involving 256 dogs), on the basis of the strict definition (exact match), breed descriptors in media reports were discordant for 92 of 256 (36.4%) dogs; animal control or local law enforcement assessment of breed differed from the media account for 94 of 253 (37.1%) dogs. On the basis of the expanded definition (any agreement between alleged breeds and mixes), breed descriptors among media reports were discordant for 92 of 256 (36.4%) dogs; animal control or local law enforcement assessment of breed differed from the media account for 129 of 253 (51.0%) dogs.

Breed was inaccurately represented in the media in other ways. For example, 7 deaths were originally reported by the media as involving multiple dogs. Further investigation revealed that 6 dogs were not involved and the deaths were actually single dog incidents. For another 9 deaths reported by the media as involving multiple dogs, further investigation revealed that although multiple dogs were involved, 13 media-reported dogs were not involved. Thus, 16 of 256 (6.3%) deaths involved inaccurate media reporting of the number of individual dogs involved, yet all of these dogs had media-reported breed descriptors.

With respect to pedigree or tests of DNA analysis for single dog cases, pedigree documentation, parentage, or DNA information was available for 28 dogs. These data were discordant with media reports for 7 of 28 (25.0%) cases on the basis of the strict breed definition and 0 of 28 (0%) cases on the basis of the expanded breed definition. On review of photographs of 95 other dogs, the veterinary behavioralists could confirm the media report of purebred status for only 3 of 95 (3.2%) dogs but did not attempt to guess breed mixes when a dog did not appear to conform to the breed standard for purebred dogs. It should be noted that 354 of 393 (90.1%) dogs that were assigned a breed descriptor were assigned a single breed descriptor (ie, not reported as a mixed breed) in at least 1 media report.

Table 3—History-related and other factors involved in 256 DBRFs in the United States (2000–2009).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>N (%) of DBRFs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Disease of ownership</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&lt; 90</td>
<td>22 (18.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>90</td>
<td>20 (17.9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>23 (19.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Status of dog</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In household</td>
<td>195 (76.2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outside</td>
<td>51 (19.8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>7 (2.8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Location in which dog was last</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Home</td>
<td>74 (29.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indoors and outdoors</td>
<td>72 (28.1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indoors</td>
<td>37 (14.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Location of dog at time of incident</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In or near property</td>
<td>108 (42.2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Off or not on property</td>
<td>96 (37.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>32 (12.6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evidence of mismanagement by owner</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>98 (38.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>112 (43.8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>48 (18.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>History of neglect or abuse by owner</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>62 (24.1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>123 (47.9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>51 (19.8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Owner present at time of incident</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>4 (1.6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>32 (12.6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>158 (62.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Owner present at time of bite</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>74 (29.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>22 (8.6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>177 (69.4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Criminal charges filed</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>2 (0.8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>96 (37.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>195 (76.2)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*"A resultant dog was a dog kept isolated from regular, positive human interactions. Evidence that an owner allowed the dog to be a caretaker to other(s) (eg, previous bite incidents and running at large) was classified as mismanagement. Examples included instances of dogs not given access to shelter, food, water, or shade and dogs with untreated medical conditions, which were classified as more extreme evidence of neglect and abuse than keeping a dog in a home with a yard. A resultant dog was a dog that an owner allowed the dog to be a caretaker to other(s) (eg, previous bite incidents and running at large) was classified as mismanagement. Examples included instances of dogs not given access to shelter, food, water, or shade and dogs with untreated medical conditions, which were classified as more extreme evidence of neglect and abuse than keeping a dog in a home with a yard."
Overall, breed status was assigned for dogs involved in 45 of 256 (17.6%) DBRFs from documented pedigrees, parentage information, or DNA test results or on the basis of concordance among media breed description, animal control breed descriptor, and the veterinarian-assigned breed from a photograph. These 45 DBRFs involved 20 recognized dog breeds, including 2 dogs of known mixed breed.

Husbandry-related factors—Most DBRFs involved dogs known to be owned > 90 days (200/256 [78.1%]), and only a small proportion of involved dogs known to be owned ≤ 90 days (28/256 [11.3%]). Table 3. Over three-quarters of cases (199/256 [77.6%]) involved dogs kept by their owners as resident dogs rather than as family dogs. In incidents involving resident dogs, those dogs were kept in a manner that isolated them from the humans in the family; such as chained (74/195 [37.9%]); kept isolated in a fenced area, an outdoor pen, or an isolated indoor area (69/195 [35.4%]); or allowed to roam (30/195 [15.4%]). There were no instances in which resident dogs and family dogs were jointly involved in a DBRF.

In 96 of 256 (37.3%) DBRFs, there was evidence that the owner or caretaker had foreknowledge of either prior dangerous action by the dog or had repeatedly allowed the dog to run loose. In 54 of 256 (22.1%) cases, there was evidence of prior abuse or neglect of the dog. Nearly three-quarters (199/256 [77.6%]) of the deaths occurred on the owner’s property, and only 51 deaths occurred entirely away from the owner’s property. In 32 of 112 (28.6%) on-property incidents, there was a history of mistreatment of dogs by owners. Past mistreatment was also associated with the number of dogs involved in an incident. That is, where there had been past mistreatment by the owner, multiple dogs were involved in 34 of 96 (35.4%) DBRFs, where there had been no documented prior mistreatment, multiple dogs were involved in 27 of 112 (24.1%) DBRFs.

Criminal charges for misdemeanors or felonies (in addition to animal control violations) were filed for 57 of 256 (22.1%) DBRFs. Nearly half (29/57 [49.1%]) of owners with a history of dog mistreatment were criminally charged, compared with only 13 of 112 (11.6%) owners without such a history. Of the 67 criminal charges, legal proceedings resulted in convictions (sentences of 1 to 15 years) for 34 and dismissed charges, dismissal of the complaint or 1 year for 33.

Many of the factors described regarding the victim, dog, and husbandry were co-occurrent in a large number of DBRFs (Figure 1). In 92/256 (36.1%) DBRFs, there was evidence of at least two of these factors being present in more than three-quarters (206/256 [80.3%]) of cases.

Discussion

These study data were obtained over many years of investigation and collection from multiple sources (eg, interviews with and police reports from homicide investigators, animal control personnel, and multiple sources of written documentation). In our opinion, these data likely represent the most comprehensive analysis of factors—behaviorally relevant factors in particular—associated with dog bites to date. Personal interviews with credible witnesses were successfully conducted in 221 of 256 (86.3%) cases during data gathering process, after law enforcement personnel provided relevant information not reported in the media and often identified errors of fact in the media reports.

In the present study, the most striking finding was the co-occurrence of multiple factors potentially under the control of dog owners: isolation of dogs from positive family interaction and other human contact; mistreatment of dogs by owners: abuse or neglect of dogs by owners: dogs left unattended with a child or vulnerable adult who may be unfamiliar to the dog; maintenance of dogs in an environment where they are trapped, neglected, and isolated and have little control over the environment or choice of behavior.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Breed</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>German Shepherd</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Labrador Retriever</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boxer</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Golden Retriever</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 1: Breeds of Dogs Involved in DBRFs (N=256)*
The most preventable incidents involved very young children left alone with dogs to whom they were unfamiliar or toddlers allowed to wander off and encounter unfamiliar dogs. In at least 19 DBRFs, authorities considered the lack of supervision in such incidents so negligent that criminal charges were filed against the parent or caretaker.

When interpreting these incidents, it is critical to keep in mind what factors may be behaviorally relevant from a dog's perspective and how human decisions to maintain, confine, and treat the dogs may predispose them to inflict a severe bite. Dogs that have not developed a close relationship or bond with humans (ie, resident dogs) generally act without relying on input from a human. Tople et al46 reported that dogs living in homes (in contrast to dogs living outdoors) developed bonds with people and were more dependent on their owners when solving tasks. In agreement with other studies,52,53 those authors concluded that the individual past experiences of dogs strongly influence their later social behavior with people.46 Appropriate, humane, and clear interactions with people provide dogs with information about how to interact with humans in ways that are neither scary nor injurious to the dog or human. This can occur through daily interaction but cannot occur when dogs are reared apart from daily, freely offered (not while chained) human interactions. The effect of that bond is that dogs that interact frequently with humans read human signals well and are encouraged to act on them accordingly. Dogs that are deprived of human interaction or direction are denied access to accurate information about appropriate behaviors with humans. Consequently, dogs in stressful, potentially dangerous situations or when maltreated may behave in ways primarily to protect themselves.

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tion of whether individual dogs are even involved in a death, which by our estimate occurred in at least 6% of the cases. By use of the strict definition of discordance, combination of single dog and multiple dog DBRFs revealed that for the 401 involved dogs described in > 1 media account, reported breed differed for 124 (30.9%); for 346 dogs with both media and animal control breed reports, breed differed for 139 (40.2%). By use of the expanded definition of discordance, reported breed differed for 62 of 401 (15.5%) dogs described in > 1 media account and 42 of 346 (12.1%) dogs with both media and animal control breed reports. Which ever definition of concordance is used, disagreement occurs with sufficient frequency to cast doubt on the reliability of these reports as a source of information about presumed breed. It is also important to remember that, even when concordance was documented, this does not mean the assessment of breed was valid (ie, correct); it simply means that 2 sources reported the same information. According to media reports, 90.1% of the dogs were characterized in at least 1 media report with a single breed descriptor and not as a mixed breed. This distribution is in contrast to the known distribution of breeds in the general population of dogs; population-based studies indicate that a large (approx 46%) proportion of dogs are mixed breed, suggesting either that in media reports and perhaps animal control reports, designation of breed is done very loosely without regard to mixed-breed status or that purebred dogs were heavily overrepresented in DBRFs. The latter conclusion seems unlikely to us, particularly in light of the photographic evidence available. The lack of concordance among breed descriptors was not surprising because identification of the breed composition of a dog of unknown heritage has been shown to be unreliable; this may reflect the diverse appearance of offspring even from deliberate breeding of known parents6 on, as revealed in more recent studies,7–11 the fact that opinions (even those of animal professionals with years of experience) correlate poorly with each other and with results of DNA analysis. Enforcement of BSL must therefore grapple with inprecise and subjective identification of dogs presumed subject to regulation. Breed-specific legislation must also be viewed in light of study findings8–11 that indicate a lack of correlation between behavior and physical phenotype. This imprecision in breed assignment also brings into question the reliability of the breed information used in previous studies8–11 of DBRFs, which were based solely on media reports of breed. The coding system used for abstracting information from official reports and interviews, despite being repeatable among different coders, nevertheless requires subjective assessment. The information available for each case varied, depending on officials’ interest in conducting an investigation and pursuing a criminal prosecution. Some information that might be highly relevant to an animal professional might not be reported by police investigators (eg, animal abuse or neglect); therefore, those situations may be underreported. Most detectives had little knowledge about dogs and relied on what owners or animal control personnel told them. If the case detective could not document a previous bite history or acts of aggression, he or she may have had no further interest in pursuing a more detailed history. We were not able to contact or obtain an interview with the lead investigator for all DBRFs in the present study. Photographs of the scene and the dogs were of variable quality. Media reports were collected primarily as a trigger to pursue information from primary sources such as local law enforcement, and no attempt was made to comprehensively and systematically collect every media report associated with each DBRF; thus, the discordance among media reports of breed, discordance in determination of breed, and the number of dogs erroneously reported as being involved in a DBRF were all likely underestimated. Finally, it was not possible to explore owner-level socioeconomic characteristics because these data were not contained in this study. Persons of all socioeconomic levels are able to be responsible dog owners, although it is possible that animal control enforcement efforts and access to veterinary care and other resources available to support responsible ownership could well be different in different neighborhoods. Results of the present study were derived from new and more extensive sources of data than those used in previous studies8–11 of DBRFs. However, these data have fully supported the recommendations in those study reports8–11 and of experts on the subject of dog-bite related injuries, including the AVMA Task Force on Canine Aggression and Human-Canine Interaction12 and the CDC,13 who have consistently stressed the complex composition of a dog of unknown heritage has been shown to be unreliable; this may reflect the diverse appearance of offspring even from deliberate breeding of known parents6 on, as revealed in more recent studies,7–11 the fact that opinions (even those of animal professionals with years of experience) correlate poorly with each other and with results of DNA analysis. Enforcement of BSL must therefore grapple with inprecise and subjective identification of dogs presumed subject to regulation. Breed-specific legislation must also be viewed in light of study findings8–11 that indicate a lack of correlation between behavior and physical phenotype. 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have never received dog bite prevention education.61 and lack of supervision is common in reports of dog bites.62 As a review63 indicated, children cannot be expected to show good judgment in their interactions with dogs until at least 6 years of age. Thus, veterinarians, pediatricians, child care workers, and any other professional interacting with the parents of young children should take the opportunity to remind them that children <6 years of age should not be left unattended with a dog in supervision by an adult or an older child who is capable of correctly reading and responding to the dog is necessary to ensure safety.

The present study data collected over a 10-year period support the conclusions of a considerable body of previous work, including empirical investigations and expert recommendations, which all stress the multifactorial nature of dog bites. These data shed additional light on how co-occurrence of factors may promote the occurrence of a fatal or serious bite, when individually those factors may be less relevant. The coding form used in the present study could be a model for enhancing the quantity and quality of information collection in future investigations of dog-bite-related injuries. Finally, this information could help human health professionals who may not be familiar with dog behavior to appreciate the importance of collaborating with professionals in animal behavior when attempting to understand and prevent dog bite-related injuries to humans.


c. A copy of the coding sheet posted with the article at avmajournals.ava.org.


References


