

# DANGEROUS

# DOGS

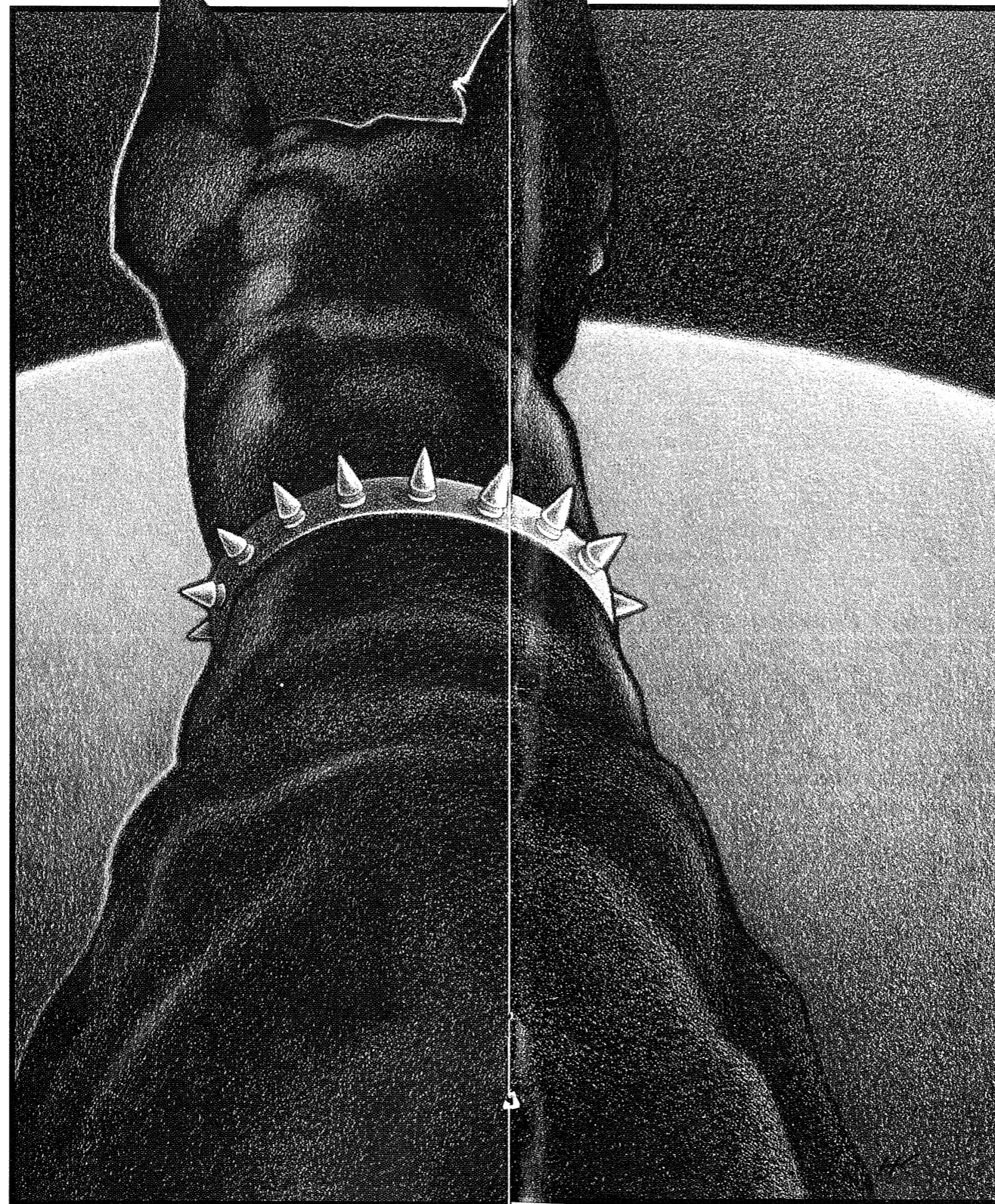
REVISITED

Six years ago The HSUS was among the first organizations to recognize and respond to growing concern about dog attacks and the problems posed by irresponsible owners of dangerous dogs (see the Winter 1986 *HSUS News*). At that time we noted that many dogs were being bred and sold with little or no regard for their temperament. Dogfighting continued to be widespread, and fighting breeds, including but not limited to pit-bull-type dogs, were increasingly popular among owners who were unable or unwilling to handle them responsibly. Existing animal-control laws in most areas had been designed to control rabies but not to deal with the human problems of irresponsible ownership.

The year that followed was one that saw vicious-dog hysteria in the media, as well as in state and local governments. The HSUS responded to thousands of requests for information from the press, legislators, and the general public. More than five thousand copies of the *HSUS Guidelines for Regulating Dangerous or Vicious Dogs* were distributed. That publication urged communities to assess the nature of dog-bite problems in their areas and determine the weaknesses of their current laws. The HSUS advocated—and continues to advocate—strong, well-enforced, non-breed-specific dangerous-dog laws that hold *pet owners* responsible for the actions of their dogs. We also urged increased efforts to stamp out dogfighting. Finally, we called on everyone who provides pets to the community, including breeders and animal shelters, to recognize their responsibility to provide safe and healthy companions to responsible owners.

Where do we stand six years later? How far have communities progressed toward solving the problem of dangerous dogs? Clearly the issue is still one of great public concern. A front-page story of the May 7, 1992, *Washington Post* carried the headline “Dangerous Dogs Are New Fear on the Block.” Dog attacks continue to be a serious problem. There is no nationwide tracking of dog bites, but various experts, extrapolating from emergency-room admissions or from statistics provided by communities with good record keeping, estimate that 500,000 to one million dog bites are reported to health authorities each year, the same figure that has been reported annually for the last decade.

The HSUS has worked with the Centers for Disease Control to carefully track fatal dog attacks since 1986. In 1991 there were thirteen such attacks, only one fewer than in 1986. In 1990 there were twenty-four deaths in the United States from dog attacks, an all-time high. What *has* changed in the last few years is the nature of the dogs involved. In 1987, 82 percent of the dogs impli-



cated in human fatalities were pit bulls or pit-bull mixes, but by 1991 that percentage had fallen to less than 10 percent. In contrast, we have seen an increase in the number of Siberian huskies, malamutes, chows, rottweilers, and wolf-dog hybrids involved in fatal attacks.

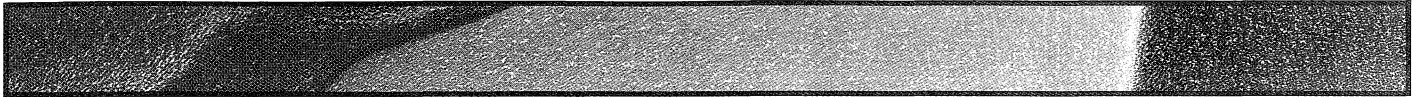
Today many communities are trying better to understand their dangerous-dog problems through more precise tracking of bite incidents. For example the Palm Beach County, Florida, Animal Regulation Division has analyzed animal bites each year since 1986 and recorded important information, such as the breed, sex, and spay/neuter status of the animals involved. Their records show that severe dog bites in that community have increased 25 percent since 1986, with bites from chows and rottweilers having tripled and those involving pit bulls having fallen by 32 percent.

After 1986 the growing public concern about dog bites was reflected in widespread legislative action. The HSUS called for tougher laws against dogfighting; since 1986 thirteen more states have made dogfighting a felony, bringing the total to forty-two. In addition twenty-five states now have vicious- or dangerous-dog laws. Twenty of these have been passed since 1986, many of them based on suggestions from HSUS guidelines. Only one state law, in Ohio, has breed-specific provisions.

Local dangerous-dog ordinances have also proliferated. According to the American Kennel Club, 154 municipalities have enacted breed-specific dangerous-dog laws, most of them targeting pit bulls. An additional 137 communities considered breed-specific laws but chose to pass generic dangerous-dog laws instead. Forty-five cities had breed-specific regulations overturned or killed before passage. Some of these regulations would have restricted ownership of chows, Akitas, German shepherds, or rottweilers, in addition to pit bulls. Many other areas have passed new dangerous-dog regulations without considering controversial breed-specific provisions.

Despite this flood of dangerous-dog legislation, very little effort has been made accurately to assess the impact of such laws. One of the few areas to have evaluated carefully its response to the dangerous-dog problem is Multnomah County, Oregon. In 1986 the killing of a five-year-old boy by a pit bull in Portland led to a toughening of the county's dangerous-dog laws. A task force of veterinarians, health officials, dog clubs, and animal-control officials made recommendations to the county commissioners. The resulting generic ordinance set up procedures whereby incidents involving potentially dangerous dogs could be investigated and restrictions could be imposed on owners of such dogs.

According to Mike Oswald, director of Multnomah County Animal Control, a powerful measure of the effectiveness of law-enforcement programs is the recidivism rate, the proportion of people who are repeatedly found guilty of simi-



lar offenses. Animal-control agencies frequently deal with chronic offenders of leash laws and other ordinances, so recidivism is a good measure of the impact of such laws. Prior to Multnomah's revised dangerous-dog law, 25 percent of all biting dogs had bitten someone else within one year. Under the new regulations, that rate fell to 7 percent. The number of bites in the community has dropped by about 8 percent since 1987 and the number of dangerous-dog cases presented to animal-control officers has dropped by 18 percent. Mr. Oswald notes that the program has also been an outstanding vehicle for educating the public and community leaders to the need for responsible pet ownership and responsive animal control. He observed, "We were facing a 75 percent cut in funding, but being able to document the effectiveness of our program helped lead to full reinstatement of our budget in a very competitive fiscal arena."

Despite the dramatic rise in awareness of the problems caused by dangerous dogs, the widespread adoption of dangerous-dog laws, and continued successes against dog-fighting, there seems to be little evidence in most areas that the dangerous-dog situation is improving. What is preventing effective solutions?

We know from the experience of Multnomah County and others that strong dangerous-dog laws with good enforcement can work. However as cities are increasingly facing fiscal crises, animal-control budgets are usually among the first to be cut. John Snyder, past president of the National Animal Control Association, said, "In the last year, I have heard many horror tales about governments taking away what little resources these agencies have. The public demands and expects animal-control services, but they have no idea of what is needed to do it right."

Perhaps the main reason why progress has been limited is that animal-control agencies and local humane societies, with sparse and often diminishing resources, are attempting to deal with dangerous-dog problems that have very deep *human* roots. The underlying causes are the ways *people* breed, raise, train, socialize, and supervise their animals. It is time to look at what *individuals*, rather than governments, can do to end the dog-bite epidemic.

Puppy mills and many other breeders continue to engage in widespread breeding of dogs without concern for their inborn temperament. As more people have ac-

quired dogs primarily for protection, there has been a rapid rise in the number of questionable animals from guarding and fighting breeds finding their way into naïve or irresponsible hands. The result has been an increase in problems associated with protective breeds such as chows and rottweilers that have traditionally shown few problems in the past.

Not all bite problems can be blamed on those people seeking or breeding animals for protection. For example the traditional "family" dog breeds—Labrador and golden retrievers and cocker spaniels—were involved in more than 12 percent of the severe attacks in Palm Beach County, Florida, in 1991. This may be in part due to breeding that ignores temperament, but aggression problems can also result from improper socialization, training, and care.

How can individual dog owners, as well as shelters and humane societies, prevent the dogs they love from becoming part of the dog-bite problem?

If you are among the growing number of people seeking a dog for protection, you should seriously assess your needs and motives. Few people really need a guard dog. For most families an "alert" or "image" dog who will sound the alarm or look intimidating without actually showing aggression can provide protection without the risk. Nearly any dog provided with love, care, and proper training can develop the kinds of bonds to people that allow him/her to fill this need while remaining a safe family companion, so follow the HSUS suggestion to "adopt one" from your local shelter.

Be sure your pet is spayed or neutered. Statistics show that unsterilized animals make up a majority of the biting population.

Urge those who continue to breed dogs to exercise care and restraint to preserve the breeds they love. A high rate of breeding of any breed, particularly one with a guarding or fighting history, not only contributes to pet overpopulation but can also quickly lead to declines in health and temperament standards. The damage that has been done to the reputation and quality of today's "problem" breeds such as rottweilers, Doberman pinschers, and chows may take years to undo.

All dog owners should socialize and train their dogs early and well. Training need not be aimed at meeting some competitive standard. For most pet owners, the primary goal of training should be to build

a bond of trust and understanding, to set appropriate limits, and to help the animal become a trustworthy member of the family. If one establishes a firm foundation of basic obedience, correcting most dog-behavior problems at an early stage becomes much easier.

We need to teach children and others how to behave around strange as well as familiar dogs to reduce the likelihood of a bite. Educational materials dealing with bite prevention are available from The HSUS and many local organizations.

Animal-control agencies and humane societies can also focus more on preventing dog-aggression problems rather than dealing only with their aftermath.

Counseling during the adoption process should educate new and prospective pet owners about animal behavior so that they can have realistic expectations and learn how to avoid problems. Shelters must try to provide resources to deal with minor problems that can escalate to serious aggression. While only a handful of shelters currently employ full-time trainers or animal behaviorists, such services can pay for themselves in the form of better adoption counseling and prevention or correction of common behavior problems that could otherwise lead to the return, abandonment, or impoundment of the dog as a result of a bite incident. If shelters cannot directly provide these resources, they can assist in contacting people in the community who can provide puppy kindergartens and play groups, basic obedience training, and animal-behavior counseling.

Animal-protection and animal-control groups can work together for fair dangerous-dog legislation with strong enforcement that is designed not simply to respond to dangerous-dog problems, but also to educate the public about responsible pet ownership.

At a time when stories of dog attacks continue to fill the media, it is often easy to forget that most of our more than 50 million dogs *never* bite anyone. However, the problems caused by the highly visible minority of animals and their owners have far-reaching consequences for all of us who care about the special relationship between people and dogs. Each of us must renew his/her commitment to seeing that safe and healthy animals share their lives with understanding and responsible owners. ■

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