**4 THINGS YOU NEED TO KNOW TO REDUCE DOG SHOOTINGS**

**IN ROUTINE POLICE ENCOUNTERS**

National awareness and concern over shootings of dogs by law enforcement officers is growing. At the same time, law enforcement leaders acknowledge that their agencies’ legitimacy and reputation are tied to community members’ perceptions about fairness, trust, and confidence in the police. When pet dogs are shot by police, this can erode public trust and legitimacy. In addition, there are increased risks to bystanders and officers when officers shoot at dogs.[[1]](#footnote-1)

As such, there is increasing attention and pressure on law enforcement agencies and their personnel to avoid shooting dogs when possible. This pressure is evident in the growing number of court cases resulting in settlements or judgments against jurisdictions—with some awards topping a million dollars. It is also seen in elevated media attention and advocacy by animal welfare organizations, along with public outrage over controversial dog shootings.

To shed light on this critical issue, the National Police Foundation and Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, Los Angeles (spcaLA)-- <https://spcala.com/spcalapolicefoundationstudy/> have released an important report entitled “An Evidence-Based Approach to Reducing Dog Shootings in Routine Police Encounters: Regulations, Policies, Practices, and Training Implications.” The reported results include the following four crucial points that all law enforcement officers should know to handle dog encounters safely.

1. CIRCUMSTANCES VARY WIDELY AND MISCONCEPTIONS CAN LEAD TO SHOOTINGS THAT MIGHT OTHERWISE BE AVOIDED. Conditions leading up to shootings of dogs by police vary considerably, from dog shootings in which police officers most certainly saved the lives of human beings, to those in which officers could have avoided the shootings without significant risks to others or themselves. It appears that many of the latter incidents stem from misinterpretations or misperceptions about dog behavior, and/or concerns or fear about being attacked or bitten.
2. COMMONLY HELD BELIEFS ABOUT DOG BEHAVIOR ARE OFTEN INACCURATE AND BASED ON STEREOTYPES. Commonly held knowledge about dog behavior and breed-specific information are too frequently based on inaccurate stereotypes, derived from media attention, TV programs, and internet sites that are not evidence-based. This can exacerbate perceived threats, activation of fear, and the conditions that may lead to some dogs being shot by police.

A commonly misunderstood issue is the “pack” and “dominance” model that underlies much of training and popular beliefs. This highly misinterpreted theory has led many to mistakenly believe that we should dominate dogs and use aversive training methods such as physical punishment, corrections, and raising our voice. Yet this misinterpretation has been all but fully abandoned by most professional dog training organizations, scientists, and animal welfare experts who find it inconsistent with science and best practices of dog training organizations.[[2]](#footnote-2)

1. THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN K-9 DOGS AND PETS NEED TO BE BETTER UNDERSTOOD.

Knowledge and practices about dogs in law enforcement is limited, and this may lead agencies to rely on K-9 officers to inform other officers about dog behavior. While K-9 officers receive substantial training, it pertains to the very specifically selected characteristics for working dogs, and not more generally to interactions or random encounters with companion/pet dogs.[[3]](#footnote-3) In some agencies, K-9 officers are the only designated individuals authorized to attend training in dog behavior—despite the fact that the training of K-9s is quite distinct and may actually be inappropriate or improperly applied to interactions with pet dogs. However, this is beginning to change as eight states have recently adopted standards or requirements for peace officer training in dog behavior.

1. ALL TRAINING IS NOT EQUAL AND BETTER STANDARDS AND POLICIES ARE NEEDED.

Currently, there are no standardized, nationwide requirements for training police regarding encounters with dogs; it varies state-to-state, and across jurisdictions. In addition, there are no consistent national standards for the actual training programs. As a result, training can be sub-par or based on training approaches now known to be ineffective. More consistent training requirements, as well as better oversight of training programs, is imperative.

Clearly, there is a pressing need for more evidence-based knowledge to be conveyed to law enforcement officers regarding breed-specific behavior stereotypes and the differences between K-9 and companion dog behavior. Ultimately, evidence-based standards and training for police-dog encounters will promote safety of officers, residents, visitors, pets and our communities as a whole.

*Source*: Amendola, K.L., Valdovinos, M. & Perea, C. (2019). An Evidence-Based Approach to Reducing Dog Shootings in Routine Police Encounters: Regulations, Policies, Practices, and Training Implications. Washington, DC: National Police Foundation.

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For the full report, see: <https://www.policefoundation.org/publication/reducing-dog-shootings-in-routine-police-encounters-regulations-policies-practices-and-training-implications/>

1. See for example: Balko, R. (2015). Cops shooting at dogs. Washington Post: The Watch, July. https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the- watch/wp/2015/06/25/cops-shooting-at-dogs/?utm\_term=.2170ea36a4ad . *Also see* Friedersdorf, Conor. (2017). What Dog Shootings Reveal About American Policing. *The Atlantic* (July 13). https://www. theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/07/what-dog-shootings-reveal-about-american-policing/533319/ [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See e.g., <https://apdt.com/about/position-statements/> ; <https://asvab.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/Dominance_Position_Statement-download.pdf> ; Bradshaw, J. W., Blackwell, E. J., & Casey, R. A. (2009). Dominance in domestic dogs – useful construct or bad habit? *Journal of Veterinary Behavior: Clinical Applications and Research*, May/June 2009, pp 135 – 144; Herron, M. E., Shofer, F. S., & Reisner, I. R. (2009). Survey of the use and outcome of confrontational and non-confrontational training methods in client-owned dogs showing undesired behaviors. *Applied Animal Behaviour Science*, *117*(1-2), pp 47 - 54; Hsu, Y. & Sun, L. (2010). Factors associated with aggressive responses in pet dogs. Applied Animal Behaviour Science, *123*(3-4), pp 108 – 123; Mech, L. D. (2008). What ever happened to the term alpha wolf? International Wolf; Ziv, G. (2017). The effects of using aversive training methods in dogs—A review. *Journal of Veterinary Behavior*, 19, pp 50 – 60. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Bradley, J. (2018). Personal communication. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)