

DOGBITES - LOS ANGELES TIMES

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Man's Best Friend a Worst Nightmare

Pets: 'Land sharks,' dogs bred for protection or fighting, are blamed for rise in attacks on humans. Southland in particular favors aggressive breeds. By MARTHA L. WILLMAN, Times Staff Writer

ENCINO--All across America, and particularly in Southern California, there is a growing epidemic of "land sharks"--vicious dogs ready to pounce on the next human that looks them in the eye, some animal workers contend.

More than likely, the unsuspecting human is a child, even an infant.

The causes are twofold, the professionals say: More people are selecting household pets for protection rather than companionship, and illegal dog fighting is spreading.

"We have an affinity here in Southern California for large, aggressive breeds of dogs that is unparalleled anywhere else in the nation," said Gini Barrett, director of the American Humane Assn.'s Western regional office in Encino. "Crimes and a fear of crimes is a part of our culture."

Statistics are incomplete, but the issue was a major subject last week at a conference in Anaheim of 700 animal protection professionals. The largest conference of its kind in the nation, it was called "to start to educate the public about the realities of the dog bite problem and to start to explain to the public the things they can do to protect their children," Barrett said.

"It's rampant, but because we haven't been talking about it, [dog bite] victims feel that they are the only ones," Barrett said. "This is actually happening everywhere."

A survey by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta concludes that dogs bite nearly 2% of the U.S. population--more than 4.7 million people--annually. The survey also found that 304 people in the United States, mostly children, died as a result of dog attacks from 1979 through 1996, including 30 in California.

Animal workers attribute the apparent rise in incidents, in part, to a mushrooming industry of breeders--totally apart from the show dog variety--working to develop muscular dogs with powerful jaws, used for illegal dog fighting.

"Breeders are breeding these land sharks for fighting," said Dan Knapp, general manager of the Los Angeles Department of Animal Services. The pups that don't make it into the fighting pits often wind up in households or in homeless packs roaming the streets, he said.

Most alarming, Knapp added, is that many of the fighting dogs now being bred show none of the warning signs--such as snarling or a stiff stance--typically displayed by a dog before it attacks.

"These dogs are impervious to pain and give no warning," Knapp said. "Consequently, you don't know what will trigger them."

Barrett, a five-year member of the city Animal Regulation Commission, said sample surveys of dogs at city shelters indicate 40% to 45% are pit bulls or pit bull mixes and 20% stem from Rottweiler or chow breeds--the most popular mixes for fighting dogs.

In response to growing complaints, the Los Angeles City Council in April urged officials to expand efforts to stop dog fighting. But local and state officials say they lack the personnel and resources to stem its growth.

"There are literally hundreds of dogs out there that pose a real danger to children," said Frank Andrews, director of the county's Department of Animal Care and Control. The department in July formed a nine-member "safety squad" to round up packs of dogs throughout the county. "If we stay with it for a year, we should make a dent in some of the problem," Andrews said.

Animal workers, law enforcement agencies and educators are beginning to work together to combat the problem. The Anaheim conference launched a drive to educate parents, teachers and pet owners about steps that can be taken to prevent and avoid bites.

Insurance companies, hit with what they say are large increases in claims stemming from dog bites, have launched their own attack, with some charging a premium or refusing to issue homeowners policies to those who keep potentially dangerous dogs.

The Insurance Information Institute reports that about a third of all homeowner claims involve dog bites.

The number of dog bite injuries dwarfs the reported cases of mumps, measles and whooping cough combined, said Dr. Jeffrey Sacks of the CDC, who has called for a nationwide prevention effort similar to those that have virtually wiped out those previously common childhood diseases.

In an eight-year span ending in 1994--the most recent year for which the CDC compiled such information--the number of dog bites requiring medical attention increased 37%. In 1994 alone, more than 800,000 dog bites nationwide required medical attention, according to the CDC study.

Statistics on dog bites in Los Angeles County have not been kept since 1995 because of lack of funding, county health department officials said. However, the county in June issued a public health warning about dog attacks.

"It is becoming a major health issue here," said Dr. Patrick Ryan, the county's chief of veterinary health. He attributes much of the problem to closer contact between people and dogs and the inability of many people to properly train their pets.

"A lot of people think it's macho to have an animal that bites." Ryan said. "They don't want a wimp for a dog."

Los Angeles Police Department officials report aggressive dogs are increasingly being used by criminals. In the first 10 months this year, 43% of all police shootings involved dogs, up from 30% in 1997 and 8.8% in 1993, according to the department.

Firm statistics are sketchy nationally, because bites occurring in the household often are not reported and because many areas lack agencies to collect the data, said Martha Armstrong, a vice president for companion animals of the Humane Society of the United States.

Erick Navarro, a 6-year-old Panorama City boy, was mauled by a pit bull in March, requiring surgery to close a dozen bites on the back of his head, neck and shoulder. He was walking along a Pacoima neighborhood street with his 83-year-old baby sitter when he was suddenly attacked by the 80-pound unneutered dog.

The baby sitter, Guadalupe Molina, and Victor Panos, a 16-year-old neighbor, also were bitten after they lifted the injured boy onto the roof of a car to prevent further attack.

The dog's owner said the animal was "riled up" from playing roughly with an adult. Animal control officials ordered the dog destroyed. Its owner was allowed to keep her Chihuahua, but was banned from owning any other dogs in the city for the next three years.

Erick's mother, Raquel Navarro, said her son often wakes up screaming in the night, dreaming that he is being attacked by a pack of dogs. Whenever he sees one, he grabs the hand of his 4-year-old sister and scrambles to climb with her

on top of any object. He undergoes 30 minutes of private counseling once a week at school.

On Friday, Erick will undergo plastic surgery to eliminate the scars on his neck and head. "He is very afraid of every kind of dog," his mother said, "even those Chihuahua ones." Times staff writer Richard Marosi contributed to this story.

Animal Safety

Animal workers say there is a nationwide outbreak of dog bites. A survey by the national Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta concludes that dogs bite nearly 2% of the U.S. population-more than 4.7 million people annually. A particularly dangerous combination: fighting dogs and small children.

Facts:

In the U.S. from 1979 through 1988, dog attacks claimed an average of an average of 15 human lives annually.

From 1979 to 1996, 304 people in the U.S died from dog attacks, including 30 in California.

Most deaths occurred in children

Breeds involved in most attacks

* Pit Bulls * Rottweilers * German Sheperds * Chows

Preventing Animal Bites

July and August--when most kids are enjoying summer vacation and people are more likely to let their dogs outside--are the peak months for dog bites, according to the American Humane Assn.

Each year about 20,000 people are bitten by dogs in Los Angeles County, compared with about 4.5 million nationally. Of the 585,000 bites that required medical attention nationally in one year, 64% of the victims were children.

Cats bite nearly 400,000 people nationwide, annually. Boys are more likely to be bitten by dogs; girls are more likely to be bitten by cats.

Warning signs from dogs

Ears laid back Fur on back standing up

Snarling with teeth showing

Barking and growling

Legs stiff

Tail up

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