


Police can shoot your dog for no reason. It doesn't have to be that way.

 [washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2015/11/13/police-can-shoot-your-dog-for-no-reason-it-doesnt-have-to-be-that-way](http://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2015/11/13/police-can-shoot-your-dog-for-no-reason-it-doesnt-have-to-be-that-way)

Video shows police officer shooting family's dog

(Gillian Palacios)

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Dutchess, a 2-year-old rescue dog belonging to a family in Florida City, Fla., had always been affectionate and curious. So on a recent Tuesday, when a police officer approached the home to notify the family that their car door was open, she naturally bounded out to greet him. In a moment captured by disturbing surveillance footage, as Dutchess came toward the officer, he instinctively fired three gunshots into her head. Before they even knew why the officer was there, the family was watching Dutchess bleed to death a few feet from their front door.

Dutchess's owners are still grieving the loss of their dog, who used to sleep in bed with their 8-year-old son, and are stunned by the turn of events. "All she would have done was put some slobber on his shoes," says Gillian Palacios.

But the Florida officer's reaction was not an unusual one — dogs are killed by police on a regular basis. There's no official tally of how many dogs are killed each year by police officers. (Not particularly surprising, given how hard it is to obtain an accurate count of humans police kill annually.) But traumatized owners, furious about the killing of their pets, and organizations have created their own counts.

There are Web pages dedicated to compiling accounts of the killings, along with the dogs' pictures and names. Informal tracking sites run by activists and researchers, such as the Puppycide Database Project, collect news articles, court documents and police reports in an attempt to produce sound data. On an interactive "puppycide" map, users can plot incidents from around the country. Research by the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals suggests that half of all police firearm discharges involve the shooting of a dog. In Buffalo, local news channel WGRZ conducted an in-depth

investigation of the city's practices, concluding that police shot 92 dogs in a three-year period, with a single officer responsible for 26 shootings. A similar investigation in Atlanta found 100 deaths in two years. But often, the only data available is in the form of scattered news reports.

Dog killings are frequent enough that a Justice Department official has called them "an epidemic." The Animal Legal Defense Fund has put out guidelines on how to keep your dog from being killed by police officers. "Do not leave your dog outside unattended," it warns, as if any unwatched moment could mean a dog's death at the hands of police.

Not every dog killing means an officer acted wrongly or maliciously, and officers may be justified in using force against a dog. Many of the shootings occur when police attempt to control dogs that are reported to be dangerous or to have attacked someone. Making sudden movements can cause officers to reflexively reach for a weapon, and dogs greeting strangers are just about the most erratic and sudden movers of all. Officers have been knocked down and bitten by dogs they were called in to help control. About a dozen dog-bite fatalities occur every year, with most of the victims children and the elderly. Dogs can pose a real threat.

Yet killing isn't necessarily the only option. After all, just like police officers, postal workers regularly encounter both vicious and gregarious dogs on their daily rounds. But letter carriers don't kill dogs, even though they are bitten by the thousands every year. Instead, the Postal Service offers its employees training on how to avoid bites. (In addition, the agency keeps a centralized database of dog bites, a marked contrast to the lack of data on police killings.) At the sessions, handlers put postal workers through sample scenarios using live dogs, teaching them how to calm a dog, distract a dog and even fend one off if necessary. Similar training for meter readers has massively reduced instances of bites.

Trainers say that in many cases, officers simply have no idea how to read a dog's body language. Dog behavior counselor Brian Kilcommons, who helped produce the Justice Department's training videos on police encounters with dogs, says officers' inclination to "take command and take control" can cause them to antagonize dogs unnecessarily. "What they term as aggression is usually fear," Kilcommons says. Officers "need to realize they're there to neutralize, not control."

He adds: "If they have enough money to militarize the police with Humvees, they have enough money to train them not to kill family members. And pets are considered family."

Even when they occur, dog bites are rarely a serious enough threat for lethal force to be a sensible response. According to the [Officer Down Memorial Page](#), a national database of law enforcement officers who lost their lives in the line of duty, 15 deaths in the past 70 years have been animal-related, but none of them involved a dog attack. (Almost all involved horses or insect stings.) One would expect, then, that there would be very little need to use a firearm.

Yet it happens all the time: Sometimes dogs are killed when police enter a house to [seize](#) drugs, but just as often it seems they die when officers have the [wrong information entirely](#). In July, police in Topeka, Kan., killed the dog of a retired judge when they entered his back yard on a false burglary call, and in 2008 Maryland police notoriously [raided](#) a mayor's house and killed his dogs, on the mistaken belief that he was part of a drug ring.

In the aftermath of that incident, the state [mandated](#) that SWAT teams report to the governor any pets injured or killed during raids. Prince George's County [initiated](#) several police reforms and entered a settlement with the mayor. But the Sheriff's Office [defended](#) its actions at the time, saying the officers had "apparently felt threatened" by the dogs. "We're not in the habit of going to homes and shooting people's dogs," a spokesman said. "If we were, there would be a lot more dead dogs around the county."

But there are a lot of dead dogs around the country. In March, a San Diego man saw police [kill his service dog](#), Burberry, who helped him deal with depression after the death of his father. In Nebraska, owners mourned after the police shooting in August of a gentle border collie mix named [Todd](#) who lived among chihuahuas and liked to play with neighborhood children. Some of the stories are downright sickening, such as a Baltimore officer who cut a dog's throat.

Last year, a heartbreaking viral video [showed](#) Salt Lake City resident Sean Kendall desperately demanding answers from police who had shot his dog, Geist, after entering his yard while searching for a missing child. Kendall remains furious that the officers went onto his property and killed his dog. "The loss of Geist has completely changed my life," Kendall says. "Geist was my best friend, and we had at least 10 more years together."

Perhaps dog killings should be analyzed in the context of overzealous, militarized policing, in which force has become the default option for dealing with almost any situation. As Radley Balko wrote in the Daily Beast in 2009, killing dogs may be "a side effect of the new SWAT, paramilitary focus in many police departments, which has supplanted the idea of being an 'officer of the peace.'" (The shooting of a family's dog can seem an almost [standard measure](#) in SWAT raids.)

Of course, one must be very careful in discussing the killing of dogs, to avoid stealing attention from the greater problem of police wrongfully killing humans. It's very disturbing that, according to the law enforcement magazine Police, "shooting a dog brings more heat down on an agency than an officer-involved shooting of a human."

The fact remains, however, that dog killings are a problem, one that brings lot of unnecessary pain to families and their pets. And it might be possible to do something about it. A number of efforts are afoot to curb police shootings of dogs. The National Canine Research Council has been advocating alternatives to lethal force and produced a series of training videos for police. In 2013, Colorado passed the Dog Protection Act, which requires the implementation of protocols for dog encounters; Texas passed a similar measure this year. Activists continue to spread stories far and wide, with a new documentary called "Of Dogs and Men" drawing attention to the problem. Online petitions, such as one calling for the firing of the officer who killed Dutchess in Florida, attempt to bring both awareness and pressure.

The available legal remedies are of mixed effectiveness. Some lawsuits against police over dog killings have been successful, such as one brought by the Hell's Angels against the city of San Jose. In certain cases, courts have held that the killings violated the Fourth Amendment, and owners have collected damages or reached settlements. Often the law is uncertain, though, and procedural barriers vary from state to state. Making a city pay compensation doesn't necessarily change future police behavior, and it certainly doesn't return a pet to life.

Ultimately, police procedures need to require more restraint when it comes to the taking of life. After all, it's not that police don't care about dogs; some dog killings are taken very seriously. For example, a teenager in Florida who fatally shot a trained K-9 dog received a 23-year prison sentence. Police dog funerals can be elaborate affairs, with flag-draped coffins, uniformed processions, open-casket ceremonies and full honors. Police should have the same respect for the beloved pets of others that they afford to their own canine colleagues.

Correction: An earlier version of this story misspelled the name of the dog Dutchess.