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One Health**
Indies



PERSPECTIVES ON HUMAN- DOG CONFLICT

MEDIA DOSSIER

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Introduction

An instance of conflict between a dog and human can result in tragic consequences. However, while reporting on cases of human-dog conflict, it is important to bear in mind that the story does not begin and end at the moment of conflict. In order to tell a more complete story, it is important to present the micro-context of the particular fact scenario as well as the macro-context of how the particular case relates to wider debates around subjects like dog bites, rabies and culling.

This dossier will provide some national and locally relevant information around these subjects and equip you with some data-backed arguments to ensure that your report can gain credibility by drawing reference to relevant facts and current scientific debates, rather than playing upon people's emotions and fears. It will also cover some best practices in reporting on human-dog conflict.

Media portrayals have the power to shape public opinion in a significant manner and especially so in the case of emotive issues such as human-dog relations. In an environment where many people espouse very strongly held opinions about the presence of dogs in our cities, the task of the journalist is to occupy the middle ground. We hope the information contained in this dossier can help to report on conflict in a more informed and responsible manner.

Information / Data section

This section will provide some important data points on key elements relating to human-dog conflict and strategies to address the same. This will include data relating to rabies incidence in India, dog bite statistics, measures taken to address human-dog conflict and to manage dog populations, the lay of the legal landscape, and scientific research relating to the most common forms of human-street dog interactions.

Rabies

- India accounts for over 1/3rd of global rabies deaths.
- To address this problem, India has devised the National Rabies Control Programme (NRCP) to eliminate Rabies (NRCP) by 2030.

- In 2021, India declared human rabies notifiable, to ensure more accurate rabies incidence data, which is crucial for developing and implementing effective prevention and control measures
- On January 9 2023, the Government of West Bengal passed an [order](#) declaring human rabies as a notifiable disease in West Bengal.

Making rabies a notifiable disease is an important step by the government to strengthen the disease surveillance apparatus in India. It requires all health care providers, private or public, to report a case of rabies on the IDSP-IHIP disease surveillance platform. Over time, this will help to present a more accurate picture of rabies in India by providing incidence data in a more integrated manner; rather than the patchwork government data that we have been relying on thus far which often present gross over-estimations based on extrapolating data from particular clinics to a larger geographical area. **It is important to bear this caveat of unauthenticated data in mind as we consider the data in the following sections.**

According to a [study](#) of rabies trends using data from the National Health Profile (NHP), a collection of state-wise monthly health condition reports, 2863 rabies cases in India were reported between 2005 and 2020.

- **Five states contributed to over three-fourths of the total burden:** West Bengal (43%), Andhra Pradesh (10%), Maharashtra (8%), Karnataka (7%) and Delhi (6%)
- In this period, **rabies incidence showed a significant declining trend** from 2.36 to 0.41 per 10 million population
- In West Bengal, incidence of rabies has consistently declined in this period
- Reported rabies cases in the National Health Profile of India by states and union territories, 2005-2020

	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	Total
West Bengal	104	163	96	102	156	94	80	80	57	52	47	47	38	46	41	22	1225
India	259	343	243	259	263	181	253	212	132	125	113	93	111	116	105	55	2863

This data shows upto 2020 that, although West Bengal does carry a significant portion of the country's rabies burden, long term efforts to control rabies have been successful to a great extent. The fear of rabies is often overplayed in everyday conversations on dogs in cities and it is therefore important to bear in mind this positive trajectory of rabies incidence in India to ensure that reportage on conflict and its public health ramifications provide factual context where necessary.

Dog Bites

Apart from rabies, the pain and suffering caused by dog bites and other forms of violence like chasing are distinct problems to consider. This section will present some year-on-year data on the number of dog bites. Year-on-year comparisons are also provided to showcase the longer term trajectory.

Number of Dog Bites, 2018-2023

	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
West Bengal	390434	443768	431649	488462	22627	42905
India	7566467	7269410	4758041	3235595	2180185	2759758

[\[source\]](#)

This data from the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare suggests a declining trend in the number of dog bites across the country over 5 years with a sharp drop in 2022, and then a rise again in 2023. This fluctuation in the data in 2022 could be explained in part by teething pains associated with the change in reporting mechanism, from the IDSP to IHIP platform.¹ However the longer declining trend in the number of dog bites is clearly evidenced in this data.

It is important to note that government data on dog bites is not disaggregated for pet dog bites and street dog bites; very often, scratches are also recorded as bites. At the hospital level, some hospitals maintain records that distinguish between the two, but when it gets aggregated

¹ For a more detailed examination of the difference between these two disease surveillance platforms, please refer to research by [Pankaj Singh et. al \(2023\)](#).

at the state level, the distinction is lost. Hospital-based studies of bites consistently show that pet dog bites are much more common than street dog bites.

Dog Population Management

The population figures of street dogs, among many other animals, are released in the Livestock Census report by the Ministry of Fisheries, Animal Husbandry & Dairying once every 5 years. The last one was conducted in 2019 and the next report is due to be released later this year.

According to [data](#) presented in the Lok Sabha recently by the Ministry of Fisheries and Animal Husbandry:

- **The overall number of street dogs has declined in the majority of states in the country,** but increased in 17 states including Maharashtra and Karnataka. The overall number of 1,71,38,349 in 2012 has now reduced to around 1,53,09,355. **The last count was held in 2019 through the 20th Livestock Census.**
- Uttar Pradesh and Karnataka have the highest numbers of free-ranging dogs.
- **In West Bengal, the number of street dogs has declined marginally from 11,57,170 in 2012 to 11,40,165 in 2019**

We await the release of the 2024 Livestock Census for more up to date figures.

ABC, or animal birth control programmes aim to catch street dogs, surgically sterilize and vaccinate the dogs against rabies and release them back to the exact location from where they came. This is an extremely resource and skill intensive process, accounting for the number of veterinarians needed to administer the surgeries and vaccinations, not to mention the difficulty involved in catching such a large number of dogs.

ABC is one of the most hotly debated issues when it comes to stray dogs, but there is a **general agreement that a well implemented ABC programme results in more stable street dog population sizes, and more friendly and rabies-free dogs, with a gradual decrease in dog numbers over a period of time, such as in Jaipur and South Mumbai.** One objection however is that spay/neuter vaccinations constitute an unnecessary intrusion in a dog's life

course, and that natural evolutionary population control mechanisms will kick in to regulate population sizes. For instance, mortality rates are quite high among street dogs, including puppies, which means that birth rates don't automatically lead to equivalent street dog population increases. The size of dog populations is also directly influenced by the availability of resources such as food.

While ABC programmes are not a silver bullet solution, they may form one part of a multipronged strategy. Take for example, the ABC programme being conducted in [Jaipur](#), which commenced in 1994 and continues to this day. Through sustained effort over three decades, the programme has been successful in stabilizing (and not eradicating) the city's street dog population and in controlling the spread of rabies.

For human rabies prevention, mass dog vaccination (MDV) has proven to be an effective tool, amongst other measures. Take the example of Goa which initiated a State Rabies Control Programme in 2015 in partnership with Mission Rabies. The programme consisted of three elements: 1) Mass Dog Vaccination, 2) Rabies Surveillance, and 3) Education and Awareness.

The data collected between 2015-2022 shows that in the seven years of the implementation of the programme, Goa has not seen a single case of human rabies since 2018.

Data from the Government of Goa

#	Year	Human Rabies Cases	Animal Brain Tissues tested	Dog Rabies Cases	No. of dogs vaccinated	Children educated on rabies	Community people reached
1.	2014	17	94	74	24,306	72744	1122
2.	2015	5	45	39	56,681	40070	25205
3.	2016	1	78	64	51,294	62782	23012
4.	2017	2	132	81	96,033	169222	22293
5.	2018	0	73	29	97,368	172513	52503
6.	2019	0	130	9	96,176	170107	30944
7.	2020	0	175	24	82,012	213735	17624
8.	2021	0	108	8	75,917	214352	127351
9.	2022	0	79	2	39,619	101929	20588

The success of such long-term and multi-pronged strategies highlight the need for greater resource allocation devoted specifically to designing and implementing different programmes to address different problems relating to street dogs.

The legal landscape

The primary legislation that governs issues relating to street dogs in India is Animal Birth Control Rules (2001/ 2023) which requires local authorities to implement neutering and vaccination programmes if they wish to manage street dog populations.

The 2023 amendment to the Animal Birth Control Rules, contains important provisions relating to ABC programmes for street dogs, public feeding of street dogs, and cases in which euthanasia of dogs may be permitted. Refer to this [article](#) for a useful legal primer on the Animal Birth Control Rules, 2023.

Apart from the ABC Rules, there are other patchwork provisions to govern issues relating to dogs. A recent [example](#) is the circular issued by the central Ministry of Fisheries, Animal Husbandry and Dairying prohibiting the import, breeding, and selling of 24 “ferocious” dog breeds. In addition, Courts also adjudicate on specific subjects relating to street dog conflict management, such as in assessing the compensation for victims of street dog bites. Some cases also arise in response to petitions from groups such as representatives from the breeding industry, resident welfare associations or animal rights groups.

Everyday Interactions with street dogs

News media tend to report on incidents of extreme or severe conflict. This seems quite natural as such incidents can have serious consequences. However, **it is important to bear in mind that everyday realities of human-street dog interaction are far more multidimensional** - ranging from neutral or positive interactions to more minor forms of conflict, such as chasing of vehicles, night-time barking, or fights between dogs.

It is also worth covering positive/neutral interactions as these certainly constitute the majority of interactions. Ongoing [research](#) by ROH-Indies, based on extensive interaction with the general public in different parts of the country, finds that the **predominant attitude among people interviewed is that “street dogs are simply part of the background.”** Further, scientific [research](#) by the Dog Lab on the behaviour patterns of free-ranging dogs found that “dogs are

generally lazy and friendly animals, and their rare interactions with humans are typically submissive.”

Reporting on human-dog conflict must therefore be situated within this larger context, and take into consideration this multidimensional nature of human-street dog interactions.

Media Portrayals - Best Practices

When it comes to reporting on human-dog conflict, the media has a key role in enabling strategies for effective resolution of problems. Our ongoing media monitoring efforts across various parts of the country show that media reportage tends to overemphasise certain issues such as ABC and public feeding while not giving attention to other important considerations such as the importance of education or the positive results of national rabies prevention efforts. Further, stories that frame dogs as a menace and a constant threat, paint a false picture of the actual state of affairs. Scientific research as well as our own daily interactions can attest to the fact that most interactions with the dogs on our streets are unremarkable and not newsworthy stories.

It is with this perspective that we approach this section on best practices in media portrayals of human-dog conflict. This section will provide some pointers on how to report on conflict in a responsible and accurate way that does not spread fear among readers, and bears in mind the broader context of the data presented in the previous section.

- A story of human-dog conflict does not begin and end at the moment of conflict. For example, there can be important factors that lead up to a dog biting a person, such as the dog being provoked or made to feel threatened. While researching the fact-scenario, it is important to pose the question of why did the dog bite, and to speak to as many witnesses as possible. This can help to produce a more well-rounded report of the incident.
- When discussing solutions, it is important to recognize that measures such as ABC and mass dog vaccination programmes have been successful to a great extent. States like

Sikkim and Goa provide success stories of these programmes and show that, when implemented properly, these programmes can help in fostering more peaceful coexistence between dogs and humans. It is therefore important to present constructive critiques of programmes like ABC as a means to control dog populations, rather than dismissing them outright.

- While using images/photographs as a visual aid in a story, editorial care should be taken to avoid presenting images of snarling or ferocious dogs as this automatically builds up a fear in the mind of the reader.
- The effects of this sort of fear-mongering reportage can be seen on social media, where the viral spread of horrifying footage of dog attacks has contributed significantly to more polarised attitudes and anti-dog sentiments. It is important to cut through these kinds of attention-grabbing tactics and present a more sober, balanced report of events.
- As the issue of human-dog conflict becomes increasingly polarised, it becomes particularly important for the media to consider proposed solutions such as mass culling or confinement in shelters with scepticism. In addition to the cruelty of these kinds of measures, ecological research as well as past experiences of eradication of “pest” species in different parts of the world provide evidence that such measures are neither pragmatic nor effective in reducing human-animal conflict, and that they often have unforeseen ecological impacts..
- In the course of reporting on human-dog conflict, it is important to speak to various relevant stakeholders. Ideally, this would include those involved in the incident and bystanders who might have seen it play out. Additionally, and considering the constraints of tight deadlines, inputs from subject matter experts in fields such as behavioural ecology, public health, and the law, can help to offer different perspectives and lend further credibility to the story.
- The data and information provided here can also help to contextualize the story within the larger debates around human-dog conflict in India. Keeping readers informed about facts such as the consistent drop in incidence of rabies cases, or the legal remedies in case of a dog bite can provide an important hook to lend credibility to a story.