

How Police Dogs Work

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Culture | Law Enforcement



Breston's nose has about 200 million scent-receptor cells. A human's nose has about 5 million.

No one is quite sure when humans first domesticated dogs, but one thing is certain -- dogs and people have been working side by side for thousands of years. Modern training methods have led to dogs becoming an integral part of many people's lives, not just as companions, but also as guide dogs, search-and-rescue dogs, and bomb- or drug-sniffing dogs. But few dogs are asked to give as much of themselves as police dogs.

Today, police forces in most major cities use police dogs to track criminals, sniff out illegal materials, search buildings, and do other jobs human police officers can't do as well as a dog can. Not only are there thousands of police dogs on the job on any given day, but there are also hundreds of police dogs who have given their lives to protect and serve.

In this article, we'll find out how a dog becomes a police dog and what a typical day in the life of a police dog is like. We'll also check out some stories about police dogs in action.

Dogs On Patrol



The seizure of approximately 1,500 pounds (680 kg) of marijuana, found by K-9 Breston during the routine check of a self-storage facility

Why do we bother using police dogs at all? For one thing, **their sense of smell is almost 50 times more sensitive than a human's**. A dog can sniff out criminals, drugs, weapons, and bombs in situations where a human officer would have to search every inch, a dangerous task. In one case, **Breston**, a Belgian Malinois who works with the Cheektowaga Police Department in Cheektowaga, NY (a suburb of Buffalo), easily sniffed out a shipment of marijuana in heat-sealed Mylar bags, inside plastic-lined crates sealed with foam sealant, inside a closed storage garage. With his sensitive nose and a search warrant, Breston kept \$3,400,000 worth of drugs off the streets.

In addition to sensitivity, a dog's sense of smell is picky. It can discern a specific scent even when there are dozens of other scents around. Drug smugglers have tried to fool drug-sniffing dogs by wrapping drugs in towels soaked with perfume, but the dogs find the drugs anyway.

A police dog's work isn't all about his nose, though. The intimidating growl of a well-trained German shepherd can cause many criminals to surrender instead of running or fighting. "When I

bring out the dog, all of a sudden they know they can't reason with him, they can't intimidate him, they can't try to scare him," said Officer Dan Smith, Breston's handler. **The very presence of a police dog can prevent physical confrontations.**

When a conflict does arise, dogs are faster and stronger than most humans, able to catch a fleeing criminal and clamp down with powerful jaws to apprehend the suspect until other officers arrive. Dogs have more than earned their place in the police forces of the world.

History of Police Dogs

European police forces were using bloodhounds as early as the 18th century. It wasn't until World War I that countries like Belgium and Germany formalized the training process and started using dogs for specific tasks, such as guard duty. The practice continued through World War II. Soldiers returning home brought news of the well-trained dogs being used by both sides of the conflict. Soon, K-9 programs were begun in London and other cities across Europe. The use of police dogs didn't gain a foothold in the United States until the 1970s. Today, police dogs are recognized as a vital part of law enforcement, and the use of police dogs has grown rapidly in the last five years.

The Right Dog for the Job

Breston, on call



Dogs come in an huge variety of shapes and sizes, and not every breed of dog is suited for police work. There probably aren't any police Lhasa apsos in the world. The majority of police dogs in the world are German shepherds, although Labrador retrievers and several other breeds (like Breston, a Belgian Malinois, pictured at right) are sometimes used, depending on the specific tasks they will be needed for. The key attributes of a successful police dog are intelligence, aggression, strength, and sense of smell. Most police dogs are male, and are frequently left unneutered so that they maintain their natural aggression. This aggression must be kept in check with thorough and rigorous training.

Police departments obtain dogs from a variety of sources. Some are donated by their original owners. However, more police departments are realizing the importance of using dogs that have been specifically bred and raised for police work. Dogs imported from Europe have several advantages over American-bred dogs. In Europe, breeding standards are very strict. Dogs are measured against a core set of physical attributes, and are only bred if they meet these criteria. In addition, European police dog agencies are internationally renowned. Before a dog even comes to the United States, it has already gone through rigorous training and achieved an **international certification**. Breston, for example, is from Holland, where he graduated with honors from the Royal Dutch Police Dog Association.

The drawback to using European dogs is the cost. It costs an average of \$8,500 to purchase and ship a dog from Europe to a U.S. police department. However, in many cases, police dogs "pay for themselves." Breston was purchased using money seized from drug dealers, many of whom were busted with the help of Breston's predecessor, Gringo. Gringo was a German shepherd who retired from police service in 1998. When Breston retires later this year, his

replacement, who will probably come from Hungary, will also be paid for using seized drug money.

Police dogs are the best of the best, and their handlers are very carefully chosen, too. The police dog and his handler together make up a K-9 unit.

Only the most dedicated officers are considered for K-9 units. They must have exemplary records, plenty of arrests with convictions, an outgoing, energetic personality, and strong physical conditioning. A K-9 officer often puts in 60 hours each week. The pay is good, but the schedule is grueling, and there's no backing out. A K-9 officer can't decide a month or a year into the job that he or she is tired of it. A police dog's career usually lasts about six years, and the handler is in it for the long haul.

Next, let's take a look at what police-dog training entails.

In the Line of Duty

Read about the final heroic moments of Aron, a police dog near Nashville who gave his life to save his handler, at <http://www.hendersonville-pd.org/aron.html>.

Police Dog Basic Training



*Breston is always sniffing for **drugs**, even when he's not conducting a drug search. If he alerts to a specific location, officers can obtain a search warrant to find the drugs.*

A police dog must be comfortable in public places and used to distractions like traffic.



All police dogs must first become experts at basic obedience training. They must obey the commands of their handler without hesitation. This is what keeps the inherent aggression of the dog in check, and allows the officer to control how much force the dog is using against a suspect.

Dogs from Europe are often given commands in their native language (Breston's commands are all in Dutch). Many people think this is so no one besides the handler can accidentally give them an "attack" command in English. **This is a myth.** The real reason is much simpler -- the dogs were trained with those command words, and it's much easier for the officer to learn a few Dutch or German words than to retrain the dog with new commands.

A police dog must also make it through endurance and agility training. The dog must be able to jump over walls and climb stairs. Each dog is acclimated to city life, because a dog that's nervous around people won't make a good police dog.

Finally, each dog receives specialty training. Many dogs are trained to search for drugs, though some are bomb or gun sniffers. Police dogs can also track missing persons or suspects.

In the next section, you'll learn about the specialty training that produces a dog able to locate illegal drugs.

Police Dog Drug Training



Breston uncovered a shipment of marijuana in heat-sealed Mylar bags, inside plastic-lined crates sealed with foam sealant, inside a closed storage garage.

People often wonder if dogs sniff out hidden drugs because they want to eat them, or because they're addicted to drugs themselves. In fact, the dogs have absolutely no interest in drugs. What they're actually looking for is their **favorite toy**. Their training has led them to associate that toy with the smell of drugs.

The toy used most often is a white towel. Police dogs love to play a vigorous game of tug-of-war with their favorite towel. To begin the training, the handler simply plays with the dog and the towel, which has been carefully washed so that it has no scent of its own. Later, a bag of marijuana is rolled up inside the towel. After playing for a while, the dog starts to recognize the smell of marijuana as the smell of his favorite toy. The handler then hides the towel, with the drugs, in various places. Whenever the dog sniffs out the drugs, he digs and scratches, trying to get at his toy. He soon comes to learn that if he sniffs out the smell of drugs, as soon as he finds them he'll be rewarded with a game of tug-of-war.

As training progresses, different drugs are placed in the towel, until the dog is able to sniff out a host of illegal substances. The same method is used for bomb-detection dogs, except various chemicals used to manufacture explosives are placed in the towel instead of drugs.

A story recounted in "Dogs On the Case," by Patricia Curtis, tells of a drug dog that was a little too eager for a game of tug-of-war. While walking along a line of cars waiting to enter the United States from Mexico, one of the dogs alerted to the smell of drugs, slipped her leash, and ran down the line of cars. Before her handler could find her, she trotted back into view, holding a large brick of marijuana in her jaws. Although the border patrol had no way to tell which car the drugs came from, the dog still got her tug-of-war. She did her job, and the drugs were off the street.

Passive vs. Aggressive Alerting

When a police dog finds what he's sniffing for, he lets his handler know it's there by giving the alert signal. Drug dogs use an **aggressive alert** -- they dig and paw at the spot where they smell the drugs, trying to get at the toy they think is waiting there.

However, there are some specialties where an aggressive alert would be bad news. If a dog searching for a bomb digs and scratches at it when he finds it, the results could be disastrous. In these cases, a **passive alert** is used. A good example of passive-alert dogs are the beagles used by the U.S. Department of Agriculture to sniff out produce that isn't allowed to enter the country. The Beagle Brigade, as they're affectionately called, sniffs people's luggage while they wait in customs lines at airports and border crossings. Because no one wants a dog digging at their belongings, the USDA beagles have been trained to simply sit down when they smell fruits or vegetables.

A Day In the Life of a Police Dog

Breston and Officer Smith head back to their K-9 Unit SUV to answer a call.



Police dogs live with their partners. A K-9 unit is a team that stays together 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

On a typical morning, Breston and Officer Smith wake up early and assist other local K-9 units doing **drug sweeps** at schools. These searches send a strong message that drugs won't be tolerated at schools, and anyone who brings them will get caught. The K-9 unit also conducts drug searches at local businesses, at the owner's request.

On some days, Officer Smith and Breston have to **attend court**, either to give testimony against a suspect they caught, or to defend themselves against someone who claims Breston unfairly injured them. As we'll see later, although these claims are made frequently, a police dog's training record is strong evidence that excessive force was not used.

By the time 4 p.m. rolls around, the K-9 unit has already had a busy day. But their actual **patrol shift** lasts from 4 p.m. to midnight, the busiest time, and the shift when police departments want their dogs out on the streets.

Like most police work, each eight-hour shift involves lots of waiting, followed by brief periods of action when a call comes in on the radio. When a call comes in, the K-9 unit rolls out in a special police car outfitted with a space in the back for the dog. In Breston's case, he gets to ride around in an SUV, with one separate compartment for Breston and one for arrested suspects. The unit might have to do something as mundane as call a tow-truck to remove an abandoned car, or they might be asked to track down a suspect that has fled the scene of a burglary. Most police dogs are cross-trained, so they can track people in addition to drugs. They learn to scent on the ground, for the scent trail that a person leaves, and in the air, for the scent "cone" that flows downwind from a person when he or she is nearby. Air scenting is important, because that way a dog can sense if a suspect has circled back around to ambush the officer.

After their eight-hour shift has ended, it's back home for a good night's sleep. As you can see, that's a busy schedule, and that doesn't even include training days. Every week to two weeks, the K-9 unit will spend eight hours training, helping to keep the dog's skills sharp.

The Dogs Have It

While a police dog is on a drug sweep, he can cover a lot of area very quickly. It would take human officers 10 times as long to search the same area, and they'd still never find everything a dog can sniff out.

Police Dogs and Legal Issues



Breston's consistently high level of training provides good evidence that his behavior, in any circumstance, was appropriate.

If a police dog injures someone or causes damage, the police department could be liable for those damages. The same could be said for police officers themselves. There isn't a separate set of standards for using a police dog to forcefully capture or restrain a suspect. That falls under the same standards that are used to decide if any police force was used appropriately. The **use of force is justified** depending on three factors:

- How severe the crime is
- If the suspect poses an immediate threat to anyone
- If the suspect is trying to run away or resist arrest

Typically, a court will find that the use of canine force was justified if the suspect was armed, the suspect hadn't yet been searched by officers, or if the suspect was fleeing and was suspected of a serious crime. An impressive training record can also help prove the dog used only the force that was absolutely necessary. This is where a European training certificate, such as Breston's KNPV-I Met Lof Award, can be extremely valuable. "The first thing that a defense attorney is going to ask for is the dog's training records," said Officer Smith. "I can show that not only was his training kept up in this country, but he achieved an internationally recognized training, and passed."

The use of police dogs is increasing as police departments realize that a well-trained dog/handler team actually reduces liability, rather than increasing it. Every time a suspect runs away or fights police officers, the chase and struggle can lead to injuries and lawsuits against the department. The use of a K-9 unit can often keep a suspect from resisting at all, and can often end the situation before it escalates to the point where someone might get injured.

Dogs on the Front Line

Police dogs are often on the front lines in the fight against violent criminals. For that reason, many police dogs have been fitted with bulletproof vests. Breston received his vest recently, thanks to a local girl who wanted to raise money to help protect him. In three weeks' time, she had collected enough money for not only Breston, but for every dog in three counties in Western New York State to get a bulletproof vest. The police departments actually had to ask the public to stop sending money.

Sadly, police dogs do fall in the line of duty. A life-size bronze memorial statue stands at police headquarters in Jacksonville, FL. A monument in tribute to police dogs' close relatives, war dogs, stands at March Field Air Museum in Riverside, CA. Information about many other police dog memorials can be found at Connecticut Police Work Dog Association: K-9 Memorial Monuments. The Connecticut Police Work Dog Association maintains a list of all the reported deaths of police dogs at CPWDA: Supreme Sacrifice-Police Dogs Killed In Service.

Famous Police Dogs



Hollywood star Rin Tin Tin is perhaps the most famous police dog.

PHOTO COURTESY [AMAZON.COM](https://www.amazon.com)

A few police dogs become famous. The most legendary police dog of all is probably **Rin Tin Tin**, a trained German shepherd who was left behind by retreating German forces in 1918. An American sergeant took him to the United States, where he went on to star in 122 films and a TV series.

Another police dog became famous because she was unique. **Mattie**, a black

Labrador retriever with the Connecticut State Police, was trained to sniff out evidence of arson. Mattie could pick her way through the charred, dangerous ruins of a fire and point out a few small drops of gasoline, despite all the strong smells of a recent fire and all the fire and police officials walking around the scene. Mattie could identify several different chemical accelerants. She was the first **operational accelerant detection dog** in the country, and possibly in the world, when she went on duty in 1986. Since then, the program has been very successful, with Dolph and Rosie following in Mattie's paw prints.

Bibliography

- [Dogs on the Case: Search Dogs Who Help Save Lives and Enforce the Law](#), by Patricia Curtis
- [Aero and Officer Mike: Police Partners](#) Joan Plummer Russell
- [Bomb Detection Dogs](#), by Charles George and Linda George