



COMMON MISCONCEPTIONS

Infallibility of Canine Officers and Drug Alerts

Many people believe that police dogs are infallible when it comes to detecting drugs and that when a drug dog “hits” or “alerts,” one has solid evidence of the presence of illegal substances. This belief is not surprising given the incredible sensitivity of a dog’s nose, which is thought to be, at a minimum, 1,000 times more sensitive than a human’s nose. Alerting by a canine officer is directly tied to law enforcement’s ability to conduct warrantless searches. The U.S. Supreme Court has ruled that a canine’s alert for narcotics is sufficient to establish probable cause for a warrantless search of a vehicle and the individuals in the vehicle. In other words, a dog’s alert may mean the difference between having one’s car, luggage, bags, pockets, and other items searched without warrant and not having these searched.

So how accurate are police dogs when it comes to alerting on drugs? Findings vary, but some research

suggests they are not terribly accurate. For example, in a 2007–2008 examination of the Illinois State Police canine unit, slightly less than 26% of the alerts by police dogs resulted in uncovering drugs. A similar study in the suburbs of Chicago revealed a slightly better outcome: an overall accuracy rate of 44%. Interestingly, when the officers in the Chicago suburbs interfaced with Hispanics, the accuracy rates of the dogs was a mere 27%.

So what is going on? Some say the dogs, though trained, often respond to subtle cues by their handler. In other words, officers intentionally or unintentionally can provide subtle cues prompting a dog to alert. This lack of accuracy and the ease with which one could subtly cue a drug dog to alert is disturbing. And it suggests the possibility that some officers may use drug dogs improperly to provide law enforcement with legal cover to conduct a search.