

## **Causes of loss or retirement from active duty for New Zealand police German shepherd dogs**

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### **Abstract**

The aim of this study was to determine the causes of loss from active duty amongst German shepherd dogs in service with the New Zealand Police Dog Section. Current or previous police dog handlers ( $n = 149$ ) completed a postal survey for each dog they had worked with during their career including their current dog. Causes of loss were categorised as either retirement, euthanasia whilst still in active duty, death from illness/natural causes, or being killed whilst on duty. Of 182 dogs with completed questionnaires, 48 dogs were still in service, leaving 134 that were retired (94), had been euthanased (24), had died (11) or had been killed (5). The mean and median age at loss for all dogs no longer in service was 6.6 years. The nominal age for planned retirement (8 years) was only reached by 40% of dogs. The single most important cause of retirement was the inability to cope with the physical demands of the job (61/94 dogs or 65%). Degenerative musculoskeletal disease was cited as the primary factor in 42/61 of these dogs (69%). When both retired and euthanased dogs were considered together, 27% were retired or euthanased due to back/spinal problems, and a high proportion of these were believed to have involved the lumbosacral joint. Greater research efforts should be targeted at identification of the factors that lead to degenerative musculoskeletal and lumbo-sacral disease to determine methods of lowering their incidence in police working dogs. Such research could lead to increasing the average working life and 'in work' welfare of a police German shepherd dog in New Zealand.

**Keywords:** animal welfare, canine, German shepherd, police, retirement, working dog