

Fatal Dog Bites Share Common Factors

Posted by [Victoria Stilwell](#) - 12/05/13



The Journal of the American Veterinary Association has released the most comprehensive study to date regarding fatal dog bites and the common factors that link them. The authors of the study found that there were some significant errors reported by the media in certain stories, so rather than relying on a potentially biased media source, their findings are based on investigative reports from interviews with animal control agencies, investigators, and homicide detectives.

Interestingly, the breeds of the dogs involved in fatal attacks could only be identified in 18% of the cases. Often times, the media's report of the dog's breed conflicted with animal control reports. Within that 18%, twenty different breeds were identified, which correlates with previous studies that have found that no single breed of dog is more likely to attack than another. The results of these studies make it clear that the solution to preventing future dog attacks is better management and husbandry practices, and not banning specific breeds.

The findings from this study are intriguing, although not entirely surprising. Here are the various factors they found to be commonplace in fatal dog attacks:

#1: There is no able-bodied person present to intervene (87.1%)

This common factor is why I persistently beg parents not to leave their infants or young children alone with a dog under any circumstances. It only takes a split second for a tragedy to occur, and this staggering statistic shows just how vital it is for an able-bodied person to be present in case of an incident between a dog and a child, or any person who is unable to defend themselves against an attack.

#2: The victim has no prior relationship with the dog (85.2%)

This factor serves as an important reminder that we need to be particularly careful with dogs when there is a new person around them, especially if the dog has a history of fear or aggression. The statistic shows that the majority of fatal dog bites occur when the victim does not have a relationship with the dog, so it's important that you manage your dog's environment so that he is not set up for failure and you don't put a guest in a position to get bitten. On the other hand, it's also vital to be careful when you're interacting with unfamiliar dogs.

#3: The dog is not spayed or neutered (84.4%)

There are many reasons why spaying and neutering is important, but this might be the top one. In almost 85 percent of cases, the dogs responsible for fatal attacks on humans were unaltered. Be a smart, responsible owner and spay or neuter your dogs, or properly manage your dog if you prefer not to have them altered. In the United States especially, spaying and neutering is often attributed to responsible ownership, and therefore some of the

unaltered dogs that fatally attacked people were likely subjected to irresponsible ownership. In some cases, a dog being unaltered may have actually caused the aggressive behavior, and in others it was simply correlated with an owner's irresponsibility.

#4: The victim is unable to manage their interactions with the dog (77.4%)

Usually due to the victim's age, or as a result of their physical or mental health state, they are compromised in some way. Teaching children how to safely interact with dogs is imperative for preventing fatal attacks, but it's also in the hands of parents and guardians to monitor all interactions between dogs and people who are physically or mentally compromised in any way. Check out our friends with Family Paws Parent Education or American Humane's Pet Meets Baby campaign to learn more about protecting your child from a dog attack.

#5: The dog is not kept as a family pet (76.2%)

We've all seen a "backyard dog"--the dog who barks incessantly at all hours of the day and night and who has minimal interaction with people or other animals. Dogs who live in this way are much more prone to aggressive behavior since they live most of their life without any positive social interaction. This is why chaining and tethering is such a bad idea--it breeds the pent-up frustration that is often a precursor to aggression.

#6: The owner has mismanaged the dog in the past (37.5%) or has abused or neglected the dog (21.1%)

Abuse, neglect, or general poor ownership are all factors that can contribute to aggression and violent behavior in dogs. Dogs who are starved or who suffer physical abuse or mental intimidation can seemingly "snap," even though the frustration has been building long before an attack ever happens. If you suspect a dog you know of suffering from abuse or neglect, contact your local authorities.



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