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Dangerous Dog Laws

These laws impose special restrictions on owners of dogs that are officially labeled dangerous.



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Vicious dog or dangerous dog laws impose special restrictions on dogs that are officially labeled dangerous. By focusing on dogs known to pose a danger to people, these laws can protect the public and crack down on irresponsible dog owners. Many states have dangerous dog laws, and so do many cities.

Generally, the process of having a dog declared dangerous is set in motion by a formal complaint from an animal control officer or someone who has been threatened or injured by the dog. A hearing follows, at which a judge hears evidence and determines whether or not the dog is dangerous under the terms of the law.

If a dog is found to be dangerous, the judge will order the owner to take measures to prevent the dog from injuring anyone. At the least, the owner will have to keep the dog securely confined. If the judge determines that the danger can't be kept within an acceptable level, the owner may be ordered to have the dog destroyed or remove it from the city. An owner who violates the court's order will probably be fined and possibly be jailed, especially if the dog seriously injures someone. The dog will be impounded and probably killed.

States With Dangerous Dog Laws

Arizona	Maryland	Ohio
California	Massachusetts	Oklahoma
Colorado	Michigan	Oregon
Delaware	Minnesota	Pennsylvania
District of Columbia	Montana*	Rhode Island
Florida	Nebraska	South Carolina
Georgia	Nevada	South Dakota
Hawaii	New Hampshire	Tennessee
Idaho	New Jersey	Texas
Illinois	New Mexico	Vermont
Kentucky	New York	Virginia
Louisiana	North Carolina	Washington
Maine	North Dakota	West Virginia

*Kansas
NOT
Included*

Kansas ↑

*Cities or counties may enact local dangerous dog laws.

Many other states have laws on the books that make it illegal to keep vicious dogs or dogs that are a "public nuisance," but don't provide a procedure for having a judge determine what dogs are vicious. These laws aren't much help when it comes to preventing injuries; they serve primarily to increase penalties on owners after a dog injures someone.

Making a Dangerous Dog Complaint

If a dog has threatened or attacked someone, the frightened or injured person may file a formal complaint with the agency or court in charge of implementing the dangerous dog law. In many places, a local court receives complaints, but sometimes they are handled by the local sheriff, health department, or animal control department.

Who may make such a complaint depends on the law. Most laws allow anyone to complain, but in some states, only a person who has been attacked may lodge a formal complaint. In Vermont, someone who has been bitten seriously enough to require medical attention, and off the premises of the dog's owner or keeper, may file a written complaint.

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