

American Humane Association™

The nation's voice for the protection of children & animals

Breed-Specific Legislation

What Is Breed-Specific Legislation?

Breed-specific legislation (BSL) is the banning or restriction of specific breeds of dogs considered "dangerous" breeds, such as pit bull breeds, Rottweilers and German shepherds. Many states, counties and municipal governments are turning to legislation that targets specific breeds as an answer to dog attacks.

BSL Does Not Work

While supporters of BSL argue that the only way to be safe from dog bites is to eradicate "dangerous breeds" from the community, there is little evidence that supports BSL as an effective means of reducing dog bites and dog attacks. On the contrary, studies have shown that it is not the breeds themselves that are dangerous, but unfavorable situations that are creating dangerous dogs. Often, the very research that some cite as "support" for BSL actually argues for alternative, more effective means. Examples include:

- [Breeds of Dogs Involved in Fatal Dog Attacks in the U.S. Between 1979 and 1999](#)
- [Fatal Dog Attacks, 1989-1994](#)
- [Dog-Bite-Related Fatalities - United States, 1995-1996](#)

Enforcement of BSL

Breed Identification

According to the American Pet Products Association, out of 73 million pet dogs, 31 million are classified by their owners as "mutts".¹ While almost all BSL refers to "pit bulls," many breeds of dogs have the facial and body characteristics of a "pit bull," but are actually not pit bulls at all, including Labrador retrievers, bulldogs, Rhodesian Ridgebacks, mastiffs and many others.

Cost

Enforcing breed-specific legislation can be burdensome and costly. BSL is enforced by animal control agencies on tight budgets, expanding their duties without necessarily expanding their budget. Additionally, many rural areas do not have funding to establish and effectively run an animal control division. Costs can include additional animal control staff to enforce the law, the kenneling of dogs awaiting breed determination and/or appeal, court time and costs, expert testimony and veterinary care. As an example, one county in Maryland spent more than \$560,000 maintaining pit bulls (not including payroll, cross-agency costs and utilities), while fees generated only \$35,000.² As a result of such costs, many cities have considered repealing or have repealed breed-specific legislation. In the Maryland case, the task force found that while the county spends more than a quarter-million dollars each year to enforce the ban, "public safety has not improved as a result [of the ban]."³

Alternatives to BSL

Legislation targeting specific breeds simply does not work because dog attacks result from multiple factors, not just a simple breakdown of breed culpability. Studies conducted by the Centers for Disease Control, the American Veterinary Medical Association and The National Canine Research Council, as well as independent researchers, all agree that BSL is not productive. They do, however, identify four key points that could reduce the number of dog attacks.

1. Education^{4,5,7,8,9,10,11,12}

Children are statistically the most at risk for dog bites. Unsupervised newborns were 370 times more likely than an adult to be killed by a dog.¹³ Eighty-two percent of dog bites treated in emergency rooms involved children under 15 years old.¹⁴ Adult supervision plays a key role in prevention. Children who understand how to act around dogs, how to play with dogs, when to leave dogs alone and how to properly meet a dog are much less likely to be bitten. To address this need, American Humane has created [American Humane KIDS: Kids Interacting with Dogs Safely™](#), a dog-bite prevention program specifically for children ages 4 to 7. By educating children at home and in school, we can drastically reduce the instances of dog bites.

2. Enforcement^{3,5,7,8,9,10,11,12}

Communities can greatly reduce the number of dog bites by enacting stronger animal control laws and by providing better resources for enforcing existing laws. Examples include leash, animal-at-large and licensing laws, as well as mandatory spay/neuter laws for shelters. Additional measures include increasing and enforcing penalties for violations, targeting chronically irresponsible owners, imposing serious penalties for bites that occur in the context of another infraction (particularly a violation of leash laws) and prohibiting chaining or tethering for excessive periods of time. Chaining and/or neglect results in anxious, lonely, bored, under-stimulated, untrained, unsocialized, isolated dogs that are much more likely to react aggressively because of their fear.

However, enacting more laws and strengthening laws are not the only answers. Animal control facilities are already underfunded and understaffed, which makes enforcement of existing laws difficult. It is essential that legislators recognize the value of and need for animal control facilities and officers, and provide them with increased financial support and staffing to enforce these laws.

American Humane supports the enactment and enforcement of dangerous-dog laws that are breed neutral and identify dangerous dogs based on actions, not on breeds. Good dangerous-dog laws involve a hearing after a dog has bitten or threatened a person or another animal. If the dog is found to be dangerous, the dog's owner can be required to meet a variety of requirements, such as having the dog neutered, muzzled at all times when off the owner's property, always on a leash, confined to the owner's yard, microchipped, etc.

3. Spaying and neutering^{6,7,8,9,10,11,12}

Unneutered male dogs are more than 2.6 times more likely to bite than neutered dogs⁶, while female dogs in heat or nursing are much more dangerous than spayed females. The behavior of intact animals can be unpredictable. Talk to your veterinarian to schedule an appointment, or contact your local humane organization or animal shelter for information on low-cost spay/neuter assistance. If your community does not provide low-cost services, encourage your legislator, local animal shelter or veterinarian to consider the option as a public health service. [Get more information on spaying and neutering.](#)

4. Better bite reporting^{4,7,8,9,10,11,12}

Researchers agree that better statistics on dog bites could greatly improve our ability to firmly identify the factors that should be the primary focus for improving public safety. Research to date is primarily based on incomplete police and hospital records, as well as newspaper articles. Incomplete data includes failure to record the location of bites, age and sex of the dog, age and sex of the victim, circumstances surrounding the bites and accurate breed identification.

Additional Suggestions

Supervision:

Dogs left on their own may feel uncertain and defensive, or even overly confident – and this poses risks to the dog, as well as to other people and dogs. The vast majority of dogs involved in attacks are off-leash and unsupervised. Additionally, unsupervised children may innocently wander too close to a dangerous situation. Eighty-eight percent of fatal dog attacks among 2-year-olds occurred when the child was left unsupervised.¹³ Supervision of children, especially around dogs, is one way to help ensure they are safe.

Train and socialize your dog:

Be sure your dog interacts with and has good manners around all members of the family, the public and other animals. Basic training is as important for the owner as it is for the dog, and socialization is the key to a well-adjusted adult dog! It is essential that puppies between 8 and 16 weeks old be exposed to a variety of people, places, dogs and other animals. As dogs age, do your best to continue their exposure to these things to ensure that they are well socialized throughout their lives.

Restrain your dog:

Twenty-four percent of fatal dog attacks involved loose dogs that were off their owner's property.¹⁴ Dogs that are allowed to roam loose outside the yard may perceive the entire neighborhood as their "territory" and may defend it aggressively. By obeying leash laws and taking care to properly fence your yard, you will not only be respecting the laws in your community, but you will also be keeping your dog safe from cars, other dogs and unforeseen dangers.

Unchain your dog:

Chained dogs are 2.8 times more likely to bite.¹⁵ Tethering or chaining dogs increases their stress, protectiveness and vulnerability, thereby increasing the potential for aggression. Fencing is the better solution.

⁶Humane Society of the United States. (2005). National Pet Related Statistics. Shelter Pages.

⁷Prince George County, Maryland – Vicious Animal Report. Retrieved from <http://www.understand-a-bill.com/BSU/Research/PGCMD/PGCP24.htm>

⁸Prince George County, Maryland – Vicious Animal Report. Retrieved from <http://www.understand-a-bill.com/BSU/Research/PGCMD/PGCP24.htm>

⁹Sacks, J.J., Lockwood, R., Horroch, J., & Sattin, R.W. (1996). Fatal Dog Attacks, 1989-1994. Pediatrics, 97, 891-895.

¹⁰Bradley, A. (2006). Dog Bites: Problems and Solutions Policy Paper. Animals and Society Institute.

¹¹National Canine Research Foundation.

¹²Sacks, J.J., Kresnow, M., & Houston, B. (1998). Dog bites: How big a problem? Injury Prevention 2:52-54.

¹³Borud, L., & Friedman, D. (2000). Dog Bites in New York City. Institute of Reconstructive Plastic Surgery at NYU Medical Center.

¹⁴Sacks, J.J., Senoak, I., Ghertel, J., Corbin, G., & Lockwood, R. (2000). Breeds of dogs involved in fatal human attacks in the United States between 1979 and 1998. JAVMA, 217(8), 836-840.

¹⁵El Dorado County Public Health Department: County Hopes to Prevent Dog Bites Through Strengthened Ordinance and Publication of Local Dog Bite Study. News release.

¹⁶Lockwood, R. (1997). Dog-Bite-Related Fatalities - United States, 1995-1996. 46(2/1), 463-468.

¹⁷Division of Hazard and Injury Data Systems. U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission (2003). Nonfatal dog bite-related injuries

Some Aley's cases for Congress to address