



Do Dangerous-Dog Laws Work?

Every year, nearly 4.6 million Americans are bitten by a dog. Children receive about 60% of these bites. There is something primal and frightening about being attacked by an animal. In fact, most people are far more afraid of dog bites than car accidents, yet your chances of being injured or killed in a car are far, far greater than your risk from dogs.

Nonetheless, 4.6 million bites is too many. I truly believe that most dog bites are preventable with proper community education. And yet, the measures we are taking as a society are focusing on the wrong aspects of the problem.

Whenever a well-publicized bite occurs, there's an outcry from the community asking what can be done to prevent such incidents in the future. At this point, the legislature steps in to enact or strengthen dangerous dog laws.

These laws are great for politicians. Who could be in favor of dangerous dogs? These laws provide more extensive penalties for the owners of dogs who attack, threaten, or frighten members of the community.

But there are some significant problems with dangerous dog laws.

1. They do not reduce the number of dog bites. By focusing on the after-effects of a bite, these laws do not take any measures to prevent bites. In theory, the risk of punishment is a motivation to change behavior. But most dog owners do not believe their dogs to be dangerous. So the perception is that these laws are for other dogs—problem dogs—but not their dog. Then, when a bite occurs, that particular owner may face additional liability, but his friends and neighbors will not change their habits regarding their own dogs.
2. The laws do not take into account the severity of the incident. Most dangerous dog laws cover a huge range of behavior from “threatening displays” to actual bites. What this means is that you may be as liable for your goofy social dog rushing out the door and charging gleefully at a neighbor as another owner is for an undersocialized, aggressive dog who bites a child on the face. Are these equal? Under many dangerous dog laws, they are.
3. Some people deliberately choose dogs that many of us would agree are dangerous. They are seeking a dog for protection or implied threat.

Some breeds are far over-represented in bite statistics. Let's use pit bulls as an example. There are good pit bulls and bad pit bulls, but all of them are powerful, intelligent, driven dogs.

There are three basic types of pit bull owners. The first believes that there are no bad dogs, only bad owners, so that with enough love, all dogs will be gentle and good. The behavior of these owners will not be affected by dangerous dog laws because they do not see their dogs as capable of aggression.



The second group of owners chose a pit bull specifically because of its reputation. They were looking for a tough, scary dog. If their motivation was to choose a macho, intimidating dog, they also will not change their behavior because of dangerous dog laws. In fact, several studies have shown that in addition to their dog's aggressive incidents, many owners of dangerous dogs have other missteps with the law as well. The members of this group are not especially motivated by the actions of the local legislature.

And the third type of owner knows they have a powerful, intense, and easily aroused dog whom they have to train and carefully supervise at all times. Owners like this don't need dangerous dog laws! They are preventing problems through awareness.

Dangerous dog laws do not cause people deliberately looking for a protective dog to choose differently.

What it comes down to is this, dangerous dog laws are a feel-good attempt to show the community that we are taking action. Unfortunately they do not provide any protective effects, merely punishment after the fact.

There are many things a community can do to prevent dog bites, including educating parents how to supervise and when to intervene in kid-and-dog interactions, teaching owners how to socialize and train their dogs with methods that encourage friendly behavior, and providing some basic education about canine body language so the many misunderstandings we have with dogs each day can be reduced.