

Dog attacks on adults are rising, but science shows blaming breeds won't help

August 15 2023, by Carri Westgarth and John Tulloch



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Another terrifying dog attack video has [just gone viral](#) on social media. It shows three large bull breed dogs jumping up and grabbing onto a screaming woman in a park.

It is understandable that when such videos and [media reports](#) circulate

there are [renewed calls to ban](#) certain breeds. The latest is the [American Bully XL](#), an evolution bred from the pit bull terrier, which can [weigh up to 60kg](#). But are breeds such as this really to blame for a rising dog [bite](#) problem?

Research shows that [one in four people](#) have been bitten by a dog in their lifetime but less than 1% of bites result in hospital admission. Our research showed that [English hospital admissions](#) for being "bitten or struck by a dog" rose over a 20-year period from 1998 to 2018. This data concerns bites serious enough for hospital admission, not just emergency department attendance. Over a similar period, fatal dog bites in England and Wales [averaged at about three per year](#).

In 2022 there were 10 fatalities. It's not clear whether this is a new trend, or whether 2022 was a tragically anomalous year.

The rise in incidence of dog bites appears to be restricted to adults, where the numbers have tripled over 20 years.

In general, [men are more likely to be bitten](#) and [delivery workers are a common victim](#). Dog attacks on [middle-aged women](#) are increasing the fastest. We don't know why this is, but it could be that [the profile of people who own](#) and spend time with dogs is changing.

We find higher rates in more [deprived communities](#). The reasons for this are unknown, but similar trends are seen in other types of injuries too.

Are some breeds more aggressive than others?

There is [little consistent scientific evidence](#) that some breeds are inherently more aggressive than others. Our evaluations suggest that the breeds reported to bite are simply the most popular breeds in that region.

However, when we examine [breeds involved in fatalities](#), it is clear that most are large and powerful. That's not to say smaller breeds cannot kill—they have been known to. As American XL Bullies are a new sub-breed of the American bulldog, there has been no scientific study of their bite risk and bite rates were rising long before they existed.

They and the other American bulldogs and related pit bulls do feature highly in fatalities lists. Yet so do rottweilers, German shepherds and Malamutes. Kenneth Baker, the [home secretary](#) responsible for the [Dangerous Dogs Act](#) that banned pit bull terriers admitted [in his autobiography](#) that a ban on rottweilers, dobermans and Alsations would have "infuriated" the middle classes. A confounding factor here is breed distribution, as powerful breeds have long been linked to [deprived communities](#) where violence and injuries already centralize. Some evidence links these breeds to [status or criminal use](#), but most are family pets.

The majority of dog bites are from a [dog known to the victim](#). Often this is [the family pet](#) and bites happen during stroking, restraining or just play. The dog is often responding to discomfort, [whether pain](#) or fear.

What can we do to prevent dog bites?

Genetic tendencies in [breeding lines](#) are an important factor so when choosing a dog, it's important to [view and assess](#) the parents of the puppy. Dogs of the same breed [vary widely](#) in their behavior. Behavior tendencies are inherited from parents.

Look for signs of nervousness or shyness around people, as well as outright aggression (barking, growling, snapping). Dogs from [puppy farms](#) in particular are prone to health and behavioral problems. Unfortunately, many puppies who come from these mass-producing unscrupulous breeders are [fraudulently marketed](#) as from a loving family

home.

Banning more breeds won't work. New varieties will fill the gap, like what happened with the pit bull.

Dog bites are a complex societal problem and we cannot expect a quick legislative fix (such as banning a [breed](#) or reintroduction of dog licenses) to solve it. Dog licensing would be prohibitively expensive to manage and without strict enforcement, would be easy to circumvent.

Clever environmental design could go a long way towards preventing people and dogs from being exposed to risky situations, for example installing external letterboxes as standard.

People often tout education as the answer. But it's a small part of the solution. Public education needs enforcement measures and supportive policy to work. Improving people's expectations of what good dog welfare looks like is key to minimize fearful and frustrating situations for dogs. This includes not abusing dogs in the name of training and providing sufficient exercise and space. Training methods must be [kind and reward-based](#), as punishment-based methods are associated with [reduced success](#) and [greater stress](#), [fear](#) and aggression.

Educational efforts should be focused on addressing the [perception that "it wouldn't happen to me"](#) and introducing new social norms such as [never leaving children alone](#) with dogs. There are lots of resources about safe interactions with dogs on the [Mersey Dog Safe website](#).

Don't fall into the trap of thinking "my dog wouldn't bite anyone." Every day, dogs who have never bitten someone before, do.

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