



Frequently Asked Questions About Dog Bites and Breed Bans

The Coalition for Living Safely with Dogs is a group of Colorado animal health, care, and control professionals seeking to educate dog owners and the general public on how to live safely with dogs and to assist municipalities in establishing and enforcing new or more effective dangerous dog laws.

- All Breed Rescue Network (ABRN)
- Animal Assistance Foundation (AAF)
- Colorado Association of Animal Control Officers (CAACO)
- Colorado Association of Certified Veterinary Technicians (CACVT)
- Colorado Federation of Animal Welfare Agencies (CFAWA)
- Colorado Veterinary Medical Association (CVMA)
- Denver Area Veterinary Medical Society (DAVMS)
- Metro Denver Shelter Alliance (MDSA)
- Summerlee Foundation

General Inquiries: David Gies, Animal Assistance Foundation, 303/744-8396, D_Dog@aaf-fd.org

Media Inquiries: Jayme Nielson-Foley, Denver Area Veterinary Medical Society, 303/318-0447, jaymenielson-foley@colovma.org

Q: I have seen data to suggest that Pit Bulls bite and kill more people than other breeds. My community has already banned Pit Bulls. Why isn't this enough to solve our dangerous dog problem?

A: Breed bans are simplistic answers to a complicated problem. These bans are reactive and mask the underlying problem of irresponsible dog owners. They do not provide a comprehensive solution to prevent dog bites and attacks or effective means of dealing with dog attacks when they occur.

Because all dogs have the potential to become dangerous, breed bans only address part of the picture. While Pit Bulls can become aggressive due to poor socialization, failure to sterilize, or targeted training for dog fights, all dog breeds can become aggressive under these conditions. As a result, breed bans fail to address all of the other dogs that could potentially harm members of the community.

Breed bans can also be confusing for communities to enforce, since it is not always clear what an individual dog's breed is. Forcing animal control officers to find dogs that have been banned and euthanize all of the banned dogs that remain in the community can overtax an already burdened system of animal control. Another concern is tremendous psychological impact on those required to perform the euthanasia.

Moreover, breed bans miss the mark because they expect lawful and responsible behavior from a group of dog owners that are inherently irresponsible. If a dog does bite, he or she will probably not be wearing identification. People who encourage aggressive behavior in their dogs—failing to act when their dogs show signs of aggression or failing to care for the health and safety of their dogs—are not likely to comply with breed bans, licensing laws, or identification recommendations. To the contrary, some communities report an increase in the numbers of banned dogs being abandoned in the streets after bans have gone into effect. With purportedly dangerous dogs being turned loose to run free in the community, breed bans can have the effect of putting the public at greater risk.

Finally, breed bans cause harm to a substantial number of responsible dog owners and well-behaved dogs. When communities ban a specific breed, owners with dogs of that breed are forced to either euthanize their dog or relocate to another community. This is the case whether or not the dog is aggressive. In this way, breed bans discourage responsible owners and encourage irresponsible owners to hide their banned dogs or abandon their dogs to the streets.

Q: The cities and towns surrounding my community have already banned Pit Bulls. Isn't a breed ban the only way for my community to protect itself from those dogs fleeing jurisdictions that have breed bans?

A: Another unfortunate consequence of breed bans is the “ripple effect” that occurs when one municipality bans a breed and a neighboring municipality does not. While communities can prevent this “ripple effect” by instituting their own ban, smaller towns and those in unincorporated areas will necessarily inherit the problems that other communities were seeking to avoid. Instead of perpetuating this cycle, municipalities can work together to create more comprehensive solutions by addressing dangerous dog issues at the community and regional levels.

Q: State and local funding for law enforcement and animal control personnel is already spread too thin. Why should we increase the resources to agencies dealing with animals when we can't afford to fund all of our programs for people?

A: Dangerous dogs, dog bites, and dog attacks are not just animal issues. All of the members of a community can potentially be impacted by a dangerous dog including the fact that dangerous dogs can sometimes be used in the perpetration of other serious crimes. As a result, communities should address funding for animal control personnel as they would funding for public health officials, police officers, and other personnel involved in keeping community members safe. As noted above, dangerous dogs are really a people issue, not just an animal issue, and people who encourage dangerous behavior in their dogs may be trying to protect evidence of other serious crimes. It's a matter of public safety.

Q: My community has a strong dangerous dog ordinance, but aggressive dogs are still a problem. What steps can I and others take to make our community a safer place to live and work?

- Approach your city council about increasing funding for animal care and control personnel.
 - Support the enforcement of strong dog laws and be a willing witness if a violation is occurring.
 - Talk with animal control officers in your area to determine what resources they need to help them address dangerous dogs.
 - Help ease the burden on animal care and control agencies by reminding friends and neighbors how important these agencies are to maintaining a safe community.
-

Q: Members of my community are not interested in banning breeds. What can we do to keep our citizens safe from dog bites and attacks, without banning specific breeds?

- Make sure that your community has a strong dangerous dog ordinance in place that holds owners accountable for continuing to own an aggressive dog.
 - If such an ordinance does not exist, encourage your city council to adopt one.
 - Express your support for law enforcement officials, animal control officers, and others who intervene in dangerous dog cases.
 - Let your elected officials know that you expect tough enforcement of the breed neutral dangerous dog laws in your community.
 - Actively support resources in your community that help create responsible dog owners.
-

Q: I don't own a Pit Bull, but I own (Labrador Retriever, Beagle, Chihuahua, German Shepherd, etc.). Why should I care about dangerous dogs in the community?

A: As noted above, any dog has the potential to be a dangerous or aggressive dog. In communities where Labrador Retrievers and other such breeds outnumber all others, Labs top the list of dogs that bite. Because dog bites result from a complex mix of factors that are different for each dog—regardless of breed—it is risky to link aggression to only some breeds of dog. Banning one breed doesn't stop people intent on creating a dangerous dog from doing the same thing with a breed that is legal. You also should be concerned with the potential impacts that dangerous dogs might have on your animals. Dogs that are poorly socialized, or are trained to fight, can cause harm to your animals during walks or while at a dog park.

Q: My dog is a source of protection for my family, so why is it a problem for the dog to appear “tough” or “aggressive” to strangers or other dogs?

A: Since the beginning of man's relationship with dogs, people have depended on dogs for a variety of support functions, including companionship and protection. Even if you see your dog as the family protector, biting and unprovoked aggression can be signs of serious concern. Unfortunately, when owners do not properly socialize their dogs or seek help to manage aggression in the family dog it is more likely that children or other family members will pay the price and not intruders or unwelcome strangers.

Q: My neighbors have aggressive dogs that often lunge at my children when they walk by. Isn't this just the way some dogs are? What can I do to protect my children from these and other dangerous dogs?

A: It is important to report aggressive dogs that you come into contact with in the community. While dogs, like people, vary in their temperaments, aggressive dogs pose the same risk to the community as drunk drivers or people who perpetrate violent crimes.

Q: What should I do if a dog bites me?

A: Report the bite to your animal control officer and seek medical attention. If possible, determine the owner of the dog or keep track of him or her until the animal control officer arrives. Dog bites can have serious health consequences and should be addressed immediately by a physician. If you do not report the bite that you incurred, then others in your community may risk being bitten by this dog in the future.

Q: What should I do if a dog starts to attack me?

A: While we hope that people will use the information above to address dangerous dogs in their community and help prevent dog attacks, we cannot expect to eliminate all dog bites and attacks or convert all irresponsible owners using these methods. Therefore, it is important that you and the members of your community know what to do if you think a dog is going to attack you. The following steps are helpful in preventing major injury should you find yourself in that situation:

- Stand straight and still if a dog approaches you. “Be a post.” Do not stare at the dog. Instead, focus your eyes just over his or her head.
- Do not scream and do not run. This may only antagonize an aggressive dog.
- To protect your neck and head, place your hands up under your jaw and remain very still. The majority of dogs will simply approach, sniff, and walk away.
- If a dog knocks you to the ground, you should also try to be still. Try to lie still with your legs together while placing your arms next to your head to protect your head and face. Curl into a ball to protect your vital organs.
- In the event that an aggressive dog attacks you or someone near you, try to grab something near you to act as a barrier between you and the dog. This can be a jacket, a book, a bag, or anything else that is near you.

(Safety tips provided by Dr. Laurie Thornton, DVM in an interview with 9News on 11/4/2005)
