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Rediscover the Pit Bull.

Pit Bulls by the Numbers

A look at the facts surrounding faulty pit bull “statistics”

By Micaela Myers

What do you do when you read a news story that claims pit bulls make up only 5 percent of the dog population but account for a third or even half of the dog bite related fatalities? Where did these numbers come from, and are they accurate? Here, we examine the truth behind these commonly quoted studies and what the other side is leaving out.

Some of the most frequently cited statistics come from the [Center for Disease Control's Special Report](#) on fatal human dog attacks between 1979 and 1998. The report attributes a third of the fatalities between 1981 – 1992 to “pit-bull type dogs,” but what the other side fails to include is that the report comes with many warnings about its “statistics”:



- First, let's look at where the CDC and other studies get their information: You guessed it – largely from media accounts. Of course, the media reports on pit bull-related incidents far more than those involving other types of dogs, a fact clearly detailed in the Canine Research Council's publication, [“The Pit Bull Placebo,”](#) and the ASPCA's [“Pit Bull Bias in the Media.”](#) Another commonly cited source, the anti-pit bull website [Dogsbite.org](#), also sites studies that use press accounts to compile their numbers.
- Aside from the fact the collection methods were faulty, the CDC study notes that guessing a dog's breed is just that, a guess. And what's more, people are influenced by a dog's reputation and may attribute breed to a dog involved in an incident based on that rather than any real knowledge. To quote the report: “... to the extent that attacks by 1 breed are more newsworthy than those by other breeds, our methods may have resulted in differential ascertainment of fatalities by breed. ... [B]ecause identification of a dog's breed may be subjective (even experts may disagree on a breed of a particular dog), DBRF [dog bite related fatalities] may be differentially ascribed to breeds with a reputation for aggression.” It gets muddier from there, considering that “pit-bull type dogs” are not a breed at all but a type encompassing several breeds and mixes that resemble those breeds. This means you have a very loose category of dogs that it's easy for people to miss-identify.
- Sites like [Dogsbite.org](#) like to claim that pit bulls only make up 5 percent of the total dog population in the United States and are therefore “attacking” at a much higher rate than other dogs, but the truth is that there are no accurate statistics kept on the total number of dogs in this country, let alone dogs by type. The CDC clearly states this on its [website](#): “There is currently no accurate way to identify the number of dogs of a particular breed, and consequently no measure to determine which breeds are more likely to bite or kill.” And while it's anyone's guess exactly how many pit bull type dogs there are in this country, it's clear from looking around most cities, neighborhoods and shelters that dogs labeled as pit bulls are far more common than 5 percent.

- Of course, there are even more factors to consider. The CDC study begins at the same time pit bulls' "[Evolution of a Bad Rap](#)" started. Prior to that, according to "[The Pit Bull Placebo](#)," pit bulls were nowhere to be found on bite lists. "In a 10-year span, from 1966 – 1975, there is only one documented case of a fatal dog attack in the United States by a dog which could even remotely be identified as a 'Pit bull,'" writes the book's author, Karen Delise. (And there are no incidents to date of a spayed/neutered indoor family pit bull ever having killed anyone.)
- It's also important to note which types of dogs are listed as responsible for bites or fatalities changes over time, depending on which types of dogs are popular for negative functions, such as guarding, at that time. The CDC report also discusses this: "[B]reeds responsible for DBRF have varied over time. ... As ascertained from our data, between 1979 and 1980, Great Danes caused the most reported human DBRF. ... [S]ince 1975, dogs belonging to more than 30 breeds have been responsible for fatal attacks on people, including Dachshunds, a Yorkshire Terrier, and a Labrador Retriever." (It's also key to point out that you are more likely to be killed by lightning than a dog, and [dog bites are at historic lows](#).)
- The CDC report concludes that many factors contribute to [whether a dog bites or not](#) and recommends [breed-neutral laws](#) that focus on owner responsibility and individual dog behavior rather than [breed-discriminatory legislation](#).



What's the take home message of all this? It's important to question statistics related to how many pit bulls there are in the United States and how often they bite for all the reasons listed above. And, if you're in need of some positive statistics, consider this: Temperament evaluations by the [American Temperament Test Society](#) give American Pit Bull Terriers an extremely high passing rate of 82.6 percent. The average passing rate for the other 121 breeds of dogs tested was 77 percent. Pit bulls share their homes with all types of people – from celebrities to senators to everyday families like you and me. They work as search and rescue dogs, therapy dogs and service dogs, and they are our faithful companions and best friends.

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[Pit Bull Rescue Central - FAQ](#)

[ASPCA - Pit Bull Bias in the Media](#)

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