

## America's Blame Game Goes to the Dogs

by Karen Delise, author of [The Pit Bull Placebo: The Media, Myths and Politics of Canine Aggression](#)

Today, dogs contribute more to society than ever before in the history of the human-dog bond. Dogs have been elevated far beyond their historic functions of hunting, protection and warfare and now serve as guide dogs, assistance dogs, therapy dogs, and search and rescue dogs. The dog's acute sense of smell allows for their use in the detection of dangerous items such as bombs, guns and drugs and even to alert to illegal produce, termites and mold.

Society now recognizes that the dog's unique ability to interact and bond with humans can help children who have been victimized by sexual and violent crimes. The unconditional acceptance and comfort of dogs is also used to help adults who suffer from panic disorders, post traumatic stress, agoraphobia, depression and sleep disorders.

In recognition of the enormous benefits that dogs provide to the emotional and physical welfare of humans, therapy and assistance dogs have been invited into nursing homes, hospitals, schools, homes for battered women, halfway houses, and prisons in an effort to enhance the well-being of the residents of these facilities.

Tens of millions of dogs also provide emotional and physical benefits to individuals who cherish them as companions and consider them an integral part of their lives.

Today, dogs are less of a threat to the welfare of humans than ever before. Advances in veterinary care and science have made incidence of rabies and other zoonotic diseases so rare as to be aberrations.



An avid sailor, rescued Pit Bull Deacon Jones is also a dock diving champ.

*(Photo courtesy of  
Laura Moss  
Photography and [The  
Unexpected Pit Bull  
Calendar](#))*



A partnership between New York City Animal Care & Control and Animal Farm Foundation helped Mr. Tibbs, a Canine Good Citizen, find his new home.

*(Photo courtesy of  
Laura Moss  
Photography and [The  
Unexpected Pit Bull  
Calendar](#))*

And despite the significant increase in both the human and dog population over the past decades, the truth of the matter is that dog bites and attacks are at historic lows.

The New York City Department of Health and Hygiene is justifiably proud of the fact that dog bites in the city have been reduced from over 37,000 in 1971 to less than 4,000 in 2005. Other cities across the nation record similar stunning decreases in the number of dog bites over the past 35 years: Baltimore, 6,809 reported dogs bites in 1971, reduced to 582 in 2005; Philadelphia, 8,524 in 1971, down to 1,520 in 2000; and Washington, D.C., with 3,351 reported bites in 1971 down to an astonishing low of 183 reported bites in 2006.

And these tremendous strides have been accomplished over the past decades by focusing on owner responsibility. Mandatory rabies vaccinations, enforcement of leash, licensing and anti-cruelty laws, along with education, have all been effective in increasing the number of owners who now provide humane care and control over their dogs.

So how is it that today so many people believe there is a dog bite

"epidemic" and that certain types of dog in particular are a threat to public safety?

The public has been duped by pseudo-statistics, intimidated by political posturing, and frightened by a barrage of sensationalized media coverage, into believing that dogs are biting with greater frequency and severity than in previous generations.

An Internet search using the words "dog bites" quickly reveals a multitude of sites claiming that millions of people are bitten by dogs every year. Most people accept these "national statistics" at face value, unaware that these are not tabulations, but critically flawed, wildly extrapolated estimates that presume to capture even the most insignificant animal exposures.

The media also has misled people into believing that dog attacks are on the rise. Although dogs have always bitten people, and a number of these attacks have always been reported in the newspapers, at no previous time in history has a news report of dog attack in a small community been instantly accessible to a nation-wide audience. Prior to the Internet and 24-hour-a-day broadcast journalism, if a serious injury from a dog attack was reported in the newspaper, rarely were people outside the local newspaper's reading audience aware of such an incident. By contrast, today reports of a dog attack are accessible to a world-wide audience with a few strokes on a keyboard.

The ability to retrieve this information quickly has seriously distorted our perception of the frequency of such events. Because an Internet search can easily produce hundreds of articles about dog attacks, it appears that these events occur frequently, and it appears they occur only with certain breeds. The dog attack stories we read in the newspapers and watch on television are a biased sample — meaning, the media does not cover all dog attacks, but only cherry picks the stories they believe will generate reader/viewer interest. While proof of media-bias abounds, one small example will demonstrate how the media determines which dog attack stories are printed and also which attacks reach the largest audience and garner the most attention:

On August 19, 2007, a small boy was killed by a mixed breed dog in rural Tennessee. The local news printed two small articles on this tragic death.

Two days later, on August 21, 2007, a woman was seriously, but not fatally, injured by two Pit Bulls in Washington State. Not only did the local papers cover this attack, but over 230 national and international media sources, including CNN, MSNBC and FOX news, picked up this story.

It is nearly impossible for a person, or a politician, to not be exposed to Pit Bull attack stories. The fact that these attacks are not a true representative sample of dog attacks, or that serious attacks by dogs are extremely rare, seems of no consequence. The fact that some of these dogs were owned by reckless and/or abusive owners also appears to be irrelevant to both the media and the public. Perhaps this is of no surprise in a society where personal responsibility and restraint seem things of the past; where every inappropriate or antisocial human behavior seems to now be defined by a medical term; or where our physical mishaps are believed to be the fault of others who have failed to protect us from our own errors in judgment.

In a culture increasingly guilty of directing blame away from individuals and placing it on others, it is



Pit Bull Abe Lincoln, pictured here with mom, Ashley, earned his Canine Good Citizen Certification and is a certified therapy dog. A partnership between New York City Animal Care & Control and Animal Farm Foundation gave Abe a second chance.

*(Photo courtesy of [Animal Farm Foundation](#))*

of little surprise that we should set our sights on our canine companions in a continuing and desperate effort to deflect blame away from ourselves.

Blissfully ignoring the fact that it is humans who have purposely and maliciously corrupted certain breeds to amuse our degenerate nature, we are haughty and smug in our belief that function for which the breed was created is evidence of the breed's "aggressive nature."



Ruby brings comfort and helps seniors reminisce about the dogs they have shared their lives with. Ruby is a certified therapy dog and the 2007 Recipient of the Minnesota Veterinary Medical Association (MVMA) Hall of Fame Companion Award.

In our smugness we imagine that by eradicating certain breeds, the humans who seek out dogs for abusive and aggressive functions will be instantly neutralized. We seem very keen to accuse some dog breeds of viciousness, while steadfastly refusing to acknowledge the time-tested and undeniable viciousness found in our own species. This denial allows us to believe that the humans who have historically and repeatedly obtained dogs to be used as an extension of their own aggressive tendencies, upon the eradication of their "bad breed *du jour*," will submissively shrug their shoulders and concede that they now have no option but to pursue socially acceptable forms of behavior, thereupon becoming tax-paying, church-going cat owners.

We will continue to shift the blame from one breed to another, until ultimately, all large dogs are viewed as possible enemies to our increasingly tender sense of well-being. Meaningless "dog bite" numbers are used to bolster our conviction that the problem rests within the dogs, allowing the human care-less-takers of these animals to escape public condemnation and accountability.

There seems no need for us to examine how our nature allows us to be so callous and uncaring as to abandon millions of our canine companions to die frightened and trembling in overpopulated shelters across the country; or how it is that an owner can gaze out his window and see his dog, chained in far reaches of the frozen backyard, and not see the loneliness and despair in the animal's eyes.

Yes, better to point at numbers, or blame a dog's physical characteristics, or shake our heads in fear and outrage over a case of a sensationalized dog attack.

But, when the last, and most loyal, ally humankind has ever known is legislated away, until all that remains are tiny lap dogs, how much safer and more secure will we really be?

---

*Karen Delise is the founder of the [National Canine Research Council](#) and is a New York state-licensed veterinary technician. The nation's leading expert on fatal dog attacks, she is the author of [The Pit Bull Placebo: The Media, Myths and Politics of Canine Aggression](#) and [Fatal Dog Attacks: The Stories Behind the Statistics](#).*

