



Sunday, February 19, 2006 - 12:00 AM

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Fatal Attacks: understanding the numbers

In making the case for pit bulls' inherent "dangerousness," many supporters of breed bans cite a 2000 study done by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. It found that pit-bull-type dogs and Rottweilers were involved in more than half of the 238 fatalities that occurred in the United States between 1979 and 1998.

A Colorado court, however, decided that bite statistics do not prove pit bulls are more likely to attack.

Instead, it ruled that numbers aren't a reliable measure due to inaccurate reporting, including a tendency to attribute dog bites to particular breeds, and because certain dog breeds are owned disproportionately by irresponsible dog owners.

For Karen Delise, author of "Fatal Dog Attacks: The Stories Behind the Statistics," breed is just one of many factors.

She examined as much evidence as she could find surrounding 431 fatal dog attacks from 1965 to 2001 and determined that three critical factors are determinants in dog bite-related fatalities: the function of the dog; the owner's level of responsibility; and the gender and reproductive status of the dog.

For example, Delise discovered that of fatal dog attacks attributed to pit bulls and pit-bull mixes (21 percent), an "overwhelming majority" involved unneutered males.

Seventy-nine percent of the attacks were on children younger than 12. Interestingly in evidence presented in a Denver breed-ban case, no bull terrier registered with the American Kennel Club or United Kennel Club has ever been involved in a fatal attack.

— *Lisa Wogan*

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