



DANGEROUS DOGS OR DANGEROUS REPORTING? DOG BITE FATALITIES IN THE NEWS

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Frame Analysis

Typical 'dog bite fatality frame'

- Focus on breed
- Focus on the dog
- Retrospective interpretation
- Focus on criminal proceedings
- Not the most relevant factors in focus



Focus on breed and dog

- Breed always discussed, breeds banned under the DDA named
- Breed – such as pit bull – seen as explanatory factor
 - Chief Crown Prosecutor: ‘Ellie was savaged by a pit bull terrier type dog (---) This tragic case once again highlights the very real danger these dogs present.’ (*The Mirror* 2007.04.04) [2007:1]
 - Coroner: ‘The public should be aware that this breed is classified under the Dangerous Dogs Act for a reason – its dangerousness.’ The family has ‘paid the ultimate price’ for owning a banned animal. (*The Telegraph* 2015.10.14) [2014:10]
- Focus on the dog and its behaviour
- Very little on the behaviour of victim, owners, capable guardians, family members
 - *E.g. poor supervision of child and dog*
 - *Irresponsible owners*
 - *Preventable factors*
 - *Medical factors*

'The banned dog that was bound to attack again' (*The Guardian* 2007.09.11) [2007:1]

'Killer dog "hated" Ellie Lawrenson' (*The Telegraph* 2008.04.12) [2007:1]

'Pensioner died after being attacked by neighbour's "devil dog" after row over broken fence' (*The Daily Mail* 2012.02.09) [2012:1]



Criminal Proceedings: owners and those in charge of child victims (commonly grand-parents)

- Prosecution of dog owner – up until April 2013 dog attacks in private were not covered by the DDA
- Before April 2013 criminal proceedings only when pit bulls were involved
- After April 2013 criminal proceedings in most cases not classified as ‘pure’ accidents
- Charges: dog dangerously out of control causing death, owning banned breeds, manslaughter, child neglect, animal cruelty
- Trend in reporting: more focus on legal issues and even less on what actually happened and what might have caused it



Not the most relevant issues in focus

* Animal and child welfare issues often ignored

* Soft news

* Episodic reporting

- E.g. A Rottweiler, not taken for a walk for five months and kept in a small backyard killed a 13-month-old boy who was looked after by his 16-year-old aunt (who also looked after her younger siblings aged 6 and 7 years) but the coroner was concerned ‘that breeding and distribution regulations were not stringent enough to prevent further similar tragedies’ (*The Guardian* 2008.08.23) [2007:12]



Conclusions

- No clear picture of what triggers dog bite fatalities and how they can be prevented
- Hides the double tragedies
- Focus is on breed, legal issues and individual dog behaviour
- Perpetuates myths and stereotypes regarding 'status' or 'weapon' dogs and banned breeds
- Episodic reporting concentrates on individual cases
- Too little focus on owners and context
- Reporting doesn't educate us

AS floral tributes piled up outside the home where Ava-Jayne died, neighbour Brian Harrison, 80, said of Killer: "That dog is a menace. I'm surprised such a tiny baby has been allowed around it. It's not a friendly

should never have happened." Mr Harrison said of Monday's incident: "When police arrived it was barking wildly and they couldn't get inside, they had to wait quite a long time before entering." Defence-

COMMENT

BY REBECCA HEYWORTH
PET BEHAVIOUR COUNSELLOR

PIT bulls were bred to fight and a dog hearing a baby's squeals can trigger a response.

Some dogs are much more prone to that. Bull terriers have

Educate owners

low impulse control. If you have a child and a dog, they must be actively supervised.

The emphasis should be on education and people knowing how their dogs operate.

References

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