



D83 Five Years of Fatal Dog Bites in Virginia: Case Studies

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After attending this presentation attendees will have a better understanding of the circumstances surrounding fatalities due to dog bites in Virginia.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by providing case analyses of dog bite fatalities including discussion of the significant differences and similarities between the cases, in terms of injury pattern, dog breed, and victim age. Understanding these cases may prove useful in determining how to prevent fatal dog bites as well as which situations involving dogs can prove to have a fatal outcome.

Data: Seven cases of fatal dog bite cases occurred in Virginia in the last five years. The ages of the victims ranged from 6 months to 70-years-old with the average age being 38.8 years. There were two infants, ages 5 months and 1 year, but no children or adolescents. The remaining five cases were adults. The dogs were mostly medium- to large-sized dogs and most were pit bulls or pit bull-mix breeds. Most victims had punctures and lacerations to their faces and necks. Two out of the seven fatalities were female, four of the cases were White fatalities, there were two Hispanic fatalities, and one Black fatality.

Discussion: All of these attacks were unwitnessed and all attacks occurred within minutes of the times the victims were last known to be alive. Triggers for the attacks are unknown, except for two cases: in one case, the victim trained pit bulls and staged fights in his home; and, in the other case, the victim was moving toward the dog and startled it.

Injury patterns were similar, for the most part on the face and neck, except for one case where the victim was bitten on the leg and died from complications of the leg wound. Another case differed from the rest of the fatalities in that the victim, in addition to wounds on the head, had wounds to the arms and legs as well as defensive wounds to the hands.

The breeds of the dogs were mostly attack dogs, i.e., pit bulls and bulldogs. The exceptions were one case involving an Alaskan malamute and another case where the breed was not documented. They were all medium to large, stocky, and heavy breeds, and no small lap dogs were involved in the attacks. While investigating the cases, it was thought that most of the victims would be toddler-age children as opposed to adults. However, five out of the seven cases were adult fatalities, who presumably would be better able to protect themselves and/or not trigger or instigate dog attacks.

Conclusion: The majority of the injuries to the victims were to the head and neck, consistent with the areas dogs are likely to attack. The dogs involved in the fatalities were most often one of the "attack breeds:" pit bull, bulldog, and rottweilers. While there were a couple of infants involved, most victims were adults. None of the deaths involved children or adolescents (>1-year-old, <18-years-old). Further investigation will look into the similarities and differences of fatal dog attacks within a larger time frame.

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