



WHEN DOG BITES HAPPEN

A Data-Driven Guide for Virginia Families

Understanding When, Where, and Why Dog Bites Occur

Prepared by Parrish Law Firm
Serving Northern Virginia Families

January 2026 | Publication Edition

About This Document

This case study combines Virginia-specific data with peer-reviewed research. Every statistical claim includes a numbered endnote corresponding to the references at the end of this document. Sources include the Virginia State Code, published court opinions, peer-reviewed medical journals, and national reporting databases.

Introduction

Every year, thousands of Virginia families experience unexpected dog bite injuries often involving children, and almost always involving a dog they thought they could trust.

The common assumption is that dangerous dogs are strays, unfamiliar animals, or obviously aggressive breeds. The data tells a different story. According to multiple peer-reviewed studies, the majority of dog bites involve a dog belonging to the victim's family or friends, with estimates ranging from 53% to 99% depending on population studied and reporting methodology. Pediatric studies consistently find higher rates of familiar-dog involvement, between 73% and 89%.¹

The threat is not lurking on unfamiliar streets. It is at home, at a relative's house, or at a neighbor's backyard barbecue.

This case study examines four dimensions of dog bite incidents: when they occur, where they happen, what situations trigger them, and what families typically do after a bite.

Trend 1: When Dog Bites Occur

Dog bites are not randomly distributed throughout the day, week, or year. They cluster around predictable patterns that, once understood, help families exercise heightened awareness during high-risk periods.

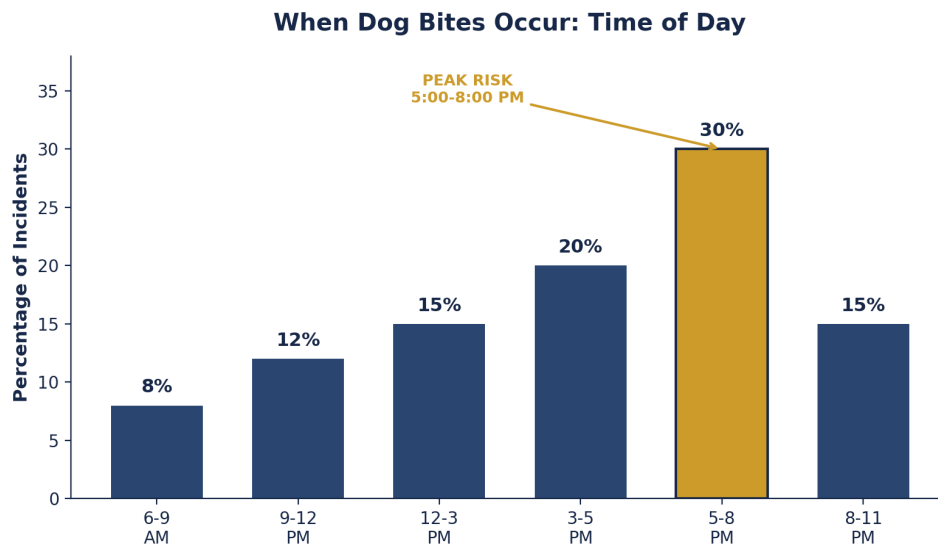
The Summer Surge

Dog bite incidents peak dramatically during summer months, particularly in June and July. A large-scale study analyzing over 56,000 pediatric dog bite cases found incidents reached their highest point in July and lowest point in February, a pattern directly correlated with the school calendar.²

The explanation is straightforward. Children are out of school and spending more unstructured time with dogs. Summer vacation means more backyard play, more visits to relatives with pets, more outdoor gatherings where children and dogs interact without close supervision.

Peak Hours: Late Afternoon to Evening

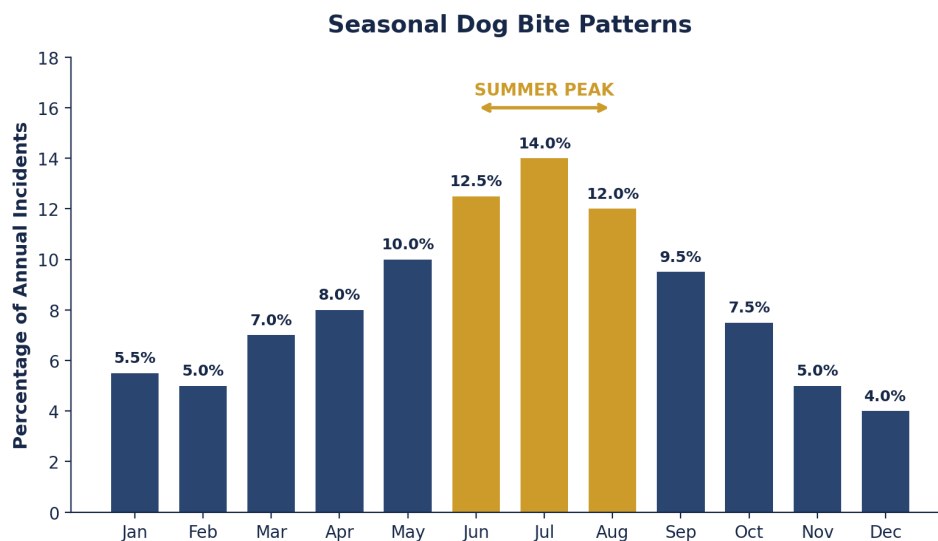
Within any given day, dog bites occur most frequently between 5:00 PM and 8:00 PM, with elevated rates on weekends.³ This window coincides with after-school hours, dinner preparation time, and evening social activities—all periods when supervision may lapse while dog-human interaction increases.



Source: Arch Plast Surg, 2013; Plana et al., J Craniofacial Surgery 2022

Weather and Heat

Hot, sunny weather appears to elevate bite risk. A 2023 analysis of nearly 70,000 dog bites across eight U.S. cities found incidents increased 4% per standard deviation increase in temperature and 11% per standard deviation increase in UV exposure.⁴ These patterns suggest heat may affect dog behavior and stress tolerance, an important consideration during Virginia's humid summer months.



Source: Plana et al., J Craniofacial Surgery 2022 (56,106 pediatric cases; July peak, February nadir)

Trend 2: Where Dog Bites Occur

If you imagine dog bites happening in public parks or on unfamiliar streets, the data will surprise you. The most dangerous location is not “out there.” It is at home.

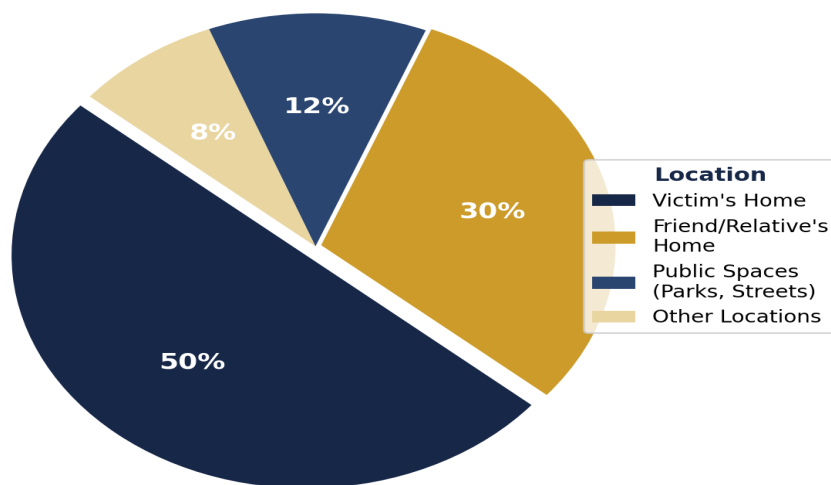
80%

Most dog bites occur at home

Source: Heliyon, 2019 (NEISS data: 80.2% at home)⁵

This challenges the assumption that “good family dogs don’t bite.” Familiarity breeds complacency for humans who may miss warning signs, and for dogs who may feel their personal space invaded.

Where Dog Bites Occur



80% of bites occur at home | Source: Heliyon 2019 (NEISS data)

Children's Heightened Vulnerability

Children face elevated risk in domestic settings. Research shows that 73% of children treated in emergency rooms for dog bites suffer injuries to the face, head, or neck, compared to approximately 30% for adults.¹

Children ages 5–9 have the highest dog bite rates of any demographic, nearly double the rate for adults.⁶

Trend 3: Everyday Situations That Lead to Bites

Most dog bites are not random acts of aggression. They are predictable responses to specific situations. Recognizing these triggers transforms prevention from abstract caution into concrete action.

Top 5 Everyday Scenarios That Lead to Dog Bites

- 1 Approaching a Dog While Eating**
Resource guarding triggers defensive bites, even from friendly pets.
- 2 Disturbing a Sleeping Dog**
"Let sleeping dogs lie" exists for good reason. Startled dogs bite instinctively.
- 3 Reaching Over Fences**
Confined spaces amplify territorial instincts. Normally friendly dogs may bite.
- 4 Face-to-Face With Unfamiliar Dogs**
73% of pediatric bites target the face, head, or neck.
- 5 Hugging or Rough Play**
Many dogs feel trapped when held tightly. Overstimulation leads to biting.

Source: AVMA Dog Bite Prevention Guidelines; Weiss et al., JAMA 1998

1. Approaching a Dog While Eating

Dogs can be protective of food, treats, or favorite toys—a behavior called “resource guarding.” A child reaching toward a dog’s food bowl may trigger a defensive bite, even from an otherwise friendly pet.

2. Disturbing a Sleeping or Resting Dog

Startling a sleeping dog by touching, stepping on, or falling onto it can trigger an instinctive defensive bite before the dog is fully awake. The saying “let sleeping dogs lie” exists for good reason.

3. Reaching Over Fences or Into Confined Spaces

Dogs are territorial. A normally friendly dog may bite if someone reaches through a fence, into a car window, or into a crate. Confined spaces amplify defensive instincts.

4. Face-to-Face Contact With Unfamiliar Dogs

Staring a dog in the eyes or putting your face close can be perceived as a threat. This is a common mistake children make. 73% of pediatric bites are to the face, head, or neck.

5. Hugging, Restraining, or Rough Play

While humans see hugs as affection, many dogs feel trapped when held tightly. Rough play, screaming, and sudden movements can overstimulate a dog to the point of biting, even during “play.”

Adapted from AVMA Dog Bite Prevention Guidelines.⁶

Additional Risk Factors

The Neutering Factor. Research shows that 70–76% of biting dogs are intact (unneutered) males. Intact male dogs are 2.6 times more likely to bite than neutered dogs.⁷

Multi-Dog Households. Adults with two or more dogs are approximately five times more likely to suffer a dog bite than those with no dogs.⁸

Trend 4: What Families Do After a Bite

How families respond in the hours and days after a dog bite significantly affects both medical outcomes and legal options.

Medical Response

Dog bite wounds carry significant infection risk. Approximately 3–18% of dog bite wounds become infected without proper treatment.⁹ Pasteurella bacteria are commonly found in infected dog bite wounds. Prompt professional cleaning and antibiotics are essential.

In 2022, approximately 395,000 emergency department visits occurred nationally for dog bite injuries—nearly 1,000 per day.¹⁰

Reporting Requirements in Virginia

Virginia Department of Health guidance directs bite victims and healthcare providers to report dog bites to the local health department, which manages rabies risk assessment.¹¹ Under Virginia law, animals that may have exposed a person to rabies must be reported.¹² The biting dog is legally required to undergo a 10-day quarantine and observation period regardless of vaccination status.¹¹

The Insurance Landscape

Despite the frequency of dog bites, most victims never file an insurance claim. National insurance data illustrates the scale.

Metric (2023 National Data)	Value	Source
Total U.S. claims	19,062	Insurance Information Institute
Total U.S. payouts	\$1.12 billion	III / State Farm Report
Average payout per claim	\$58,545	III, April 2024
Virginia ranking	17th in total payouts	State Farm, 2024

The reality is that filing an insurance claim is not “suing your neighbor.” Homeowners’ insurance exists precisely for these situations. Most policies provide \$100,000 to \$300,000 in liability coverage for pet injuries.

Legal Insight: Virginia Dog Bite Law

Virginia's legal framework for dog bite cases differs significantly from most states. Understanding these rules is essential for anyone considering whether to pursue a claim.

Virginia's "One-Bite Rule"

Unlike most states, Virginia does not impose automatic (strict) liability on dog owners. Under Virginia's common law "one-bite rule," an owner is liable only if they had reason to know the dog might bite, typically proven by showing prior biting incidents or aggressive behavior. The one-bite rule is Virginia common law doctrine, not a specific statute.

The first bite is not always "free." An owner can be liable even without prior bites if evidence shows they should have known the dog was dangerous. Prior lunging, snapping, growling, or animal control complaints can establish knowledge.

Leash Law Violations: A Pathway to Liability

Key Case: Butler v. Frieden (1967)

Virginia's Supreme Court established that violating a local leash ordinance constitutes negligence per se—meaning automatic legal negligence. If a dog was running loose when it bit someone, the owner cannot claim ignorance of the dog's dangerous nature.

208 Va. 352, 158 S.E.2d 121 (1967)

Virginia authorizes localities to enact leash laws.¹³ Local ordinances in Northern Virginia include Fairfax County Code Section 41.1-2-4 and Prince William County Code Section 4-23.

Virginia's Contributory Negligence Rule

Virginia is one of only four states following pure contributory negligence. If the victim is found even 1% at fault, they may be completely barred from recovery. Defense attorneys often argue victims provoked the dog or ignored warning signs, making thorough documentation critical.

This doctrine was reaffirmed in *Ponirakis v. Choi* (2001), which applied the rule that any plaintiff fault bars recovery in Virginia.¹⁴ That case involved medical malpractice but applied the contributory negligence standard that governs all negligence cases in Virginia, including dog bites.

Statute of limitations for personal injury claims is two years from the date of injury.¹⁵

Recent Virginia Settlements

The following settlements demonstrate how Virginia courts have valued dog bite cases, particularly where prior knowledge of dangerous behavior could be established.

Settlement	Location / Year	Key Factor	Source
\$1.4 million	Prince William, 2024	Prior biting history; owners failed to warn	Va. Lawyers Weekly, Mar. 2025
\$100,000	Alexandria, 2025	Dog known to harass other pets; State Farm policy limits	Va. Lawyers Weekly, Dec. 2025
\$850,000	Fairfax, 2023	Documented prior aggression	Not independently confirmed*
\$400,000	Prince William, 2022	Two prior biting incidents	Not independently confirmed*
\$123,700	Fairfax, 2023	Dog had bitten neighbor twice before	Not independently confirmed*

** Three settlements could not be independently confirmed through publicly accessible sources. They may be reported behind Virginia Lawyers Weekly's subscription paywall.*

Pattern. Settlements are highest when victims can prove the owner knew or should have known the dog was dangerous. Documentation of prior incidents, even minor ones, substantially increases case value.

Key Takeaways

- 1. Familiar dogs are the primary risk.** Most bites involve dogs the victim knows (53–99% across studies). Do not assume “our dog would never bite.”
- 2. Summer and late afternoon are peak times.** Increase supervision during school breaks and the 5:00–8:00 PM window.
- 3. Triggers are predictable.** Teach children never to approach eating or sleeping dogs, reach over fences, or hug unfamiliar pets.
- 4. Report and document everything.** VDH guidance calls for bite reporting for rabies assessment. Documentation protects both health and legal options.
- 5. Insurance exists to help.** Filing a claim is not “suing your neighbor.” It is using coverage designed for exactly this situation.

If Your Family Has Been Affected

Parrish Law Firm has helped Northern Virginia families navigate dog bite cases for over two decades. We understand Virginia’s unique legal landscape and can help you understand your options at no cost for an initial consultation.

www.TheParrishLawFirm.com | (571) 229-1800

References

All sources are listed in the order they first appear in the text. Superscript numbers throughout this document correspond to the entries below.

Peer-Reviewed Research

1. Weiss HB, Friedman DI, Coben JH. "Incidence of Dog Bite Injuries Treated in Emergency Departments." *Journal of the American Medical Association* 279, no. 1 (1998): 51–53. See also Westgarth C, Brooke M, Christley RM. "How Many People Have Been Bitten by Dogs?" *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health* 72 (2018): 331–336.
2. Plana NM, Rifkin WJ, Grayson J, et al. "Epidemiologic Trends in Pediatric Dog Bites: A NEISS Analysis." *Journal of Craniofacial Surgery* 33, no. 2 (2022): 520–524.
3. Park JW, et al. "Epidemiology of Dog Bite Injuries Treated in the Emergency Department." *Archives of Plastic Surgery* 40, no. 4 (2013): 327–331.
4. Dey S, Haque R, Bhatt M, et al. "Associations Between Ambient Temperature, UV Radiation, and Dog Bite Incidence." *Scientific Reports (Nature)* 13 (2023): 9645.
5. Tang R, et al. "Non-Fatal Dog Bite Injuries Treated in U.S. Emergency Departments, 2001–2017." *Heliyon* 5, no. 10 (2019): e02585.
6. American Veterinary Medical Association. "Dog Bite Prevention." AVMA Task Force on Canine Aggression and Human-Canine Interactions. Updated 2023.
7. Gershman KA, Sacks JJ, Wright JC. "Which Dogs Bite? A Case-Control Study of Risk Factors." *Pediatrics* 93, no. 6 (1994): 913–917. See also AVMA Task Force (2001).
8. Reisner IR, Nance ML, Zeller JS, et al. "Behavioural Characteristics Associated with Dog Bites to Children." *Injury Prevention* 14 (2008): 97–101.
9. Talan DA, Citron DM, Abrahamian FM, et al. "Bacteriologic Analysis of Infected Dog and Cat Bites." *New England Journal of Medicine* 340, no. 2 (1999): 85–92.
10. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. "Web-based Injury Statistics Query and Reporting System (WISQARS): Nonfatal Injury Data." National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, 2022.

Virginia Legal and Government Sources

11. Virginia Department of Health. "Rabies Control Guidelines: Animal Bite Reporting and Quarantine Protocols." Richmond, VA.
12. Code of Virginia, Section 3.2-6522. Rabies control; exposure to rabies; duty to report.
13. Code of Virginia, Section 3.2-6538. Ordinances regarding running at large.
14. *Ponirakis v. Choi*, 262 Va. 119 (2001). Virginia Supreme Court. Reaffirming contributory negligence as a complete bar to recovery.
15. Code of Virginia, Section 8.01-243. Two-year statute of limitations for personal injury claims.

Additional Statutes and Case Law

16. Code of Virginia, Section 3.2-6540. Procedure for adjudication of dangerous dogs.
17. *Butler v. Frieden*, 208 Va. 352, 158 S.E.2d 121 (1967). Virginia Supreme Court. Violation of local leash ordinance constitutes negligence per se.
18. Fairfax County Code, Section 41.1-2-4. Local leash law provisions.
19. Prince William County Code, Section 4-23. Animal control and leash requirements.

National Insurance and Statistical Data

20. Insurance Information Institute. "Facts + Statistics: Homeowners and Renters Insurance." Updated April 2024. Reporting 19,062 claims totaling \$1.12 billion in 2023.
21. American Veterinary Medical Association. "Dog Bite Statistics." Citing 4.5 million annual bites nationally with more than 800,000 requiring medical attention.
22. *Virginia Lawyers Weekly*. "\$1.4M Settlement in Prince William County Dog Bite Case." Published March 2025.
23. *Virginia Lawyers Weekly*. "\$100K Settlement in Alexandria Dog Bite Case." Published December 2025.

Methodology and Limitations

This report draws primarily on peer-reviewed medical literature indexed in PubMed/MEDLINE, Virginia state code accessed through the Virginia Legislative Information System, published court opinions, and national reporting databases maintained by the CDC and Insurance Information Institute. Settlement amounts referenced from *Virginia Lawyers Weekly* are as reported by that publication; three additional settlements could not be independently confirmed through publicly accessible sources. All Virginia Code citations were verified against current statutory text. This document is intended for educational purposes and does not constitute legal advice.

