



The Seeing Eye

Independence & Dignity Since 1929

2011 Dog Attack & Interference Survey United States Report

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Introduction

Established in 1929, The Seeing Eye, Inc., provides specially bred and trained dogs to guide people who are blind or visually impaired. With over 80 years of experience, The Seeing Eye is a leading expert on advocacy issues related to the safe and effective travel of guide dog teams. Nationwide, approximately 8,500 people who are blind or visually impaired partner with guide dogs to increase their ability to move about safely, effectively and independently. One significant issue that continually threatens both the physical and emotional well-being of guide dog teams is attacks and interference by aggressive dogs.

These incidents are far more dangerous than simple dog-to-dog altercations. The safety of the guide dog team depends largely on the dog's ability to concentrate on its work. When distracted from these duties, the dog and its blind owner become instantly vulnerable to harm. People who are blind must face dog attacks and interference without the ability to use vision to protect themselves or their guide dogs.

Even without physical injury, attacks and interference can negatively affect a guide dog's behavior and work performance. When a dog is no longer able to work as a guide due to the physical or emotional effects of interference or attack, it is devastating to the blind handler to lose this valued companion and source of mobility.

The blind person as well as the guide dog school may also suffer economic damages. In many instances, the blind person is forced to incur an additional burden of veterinary and/or medical expenses, lost wages, and/or unexpected transportation costs. Additionally, the cost incurred by the guide dog school to breed, raise and train a replacement guide dog and to instruct the blind person to work with a new dog well exceeds \$50,000.

Background

According to the National Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta, 4.7 million Americans suffer dog bites each year, and almost 800,000 bites per year are serious enough to require medical attention. Additionally, the American Veterinary Medical Association and insurance company statistics report that there are over one million dog bite reports filed annually.

While the prevalence of loose or uncontrolled dogs may be inferred by the frequency with which Americans suffer dog bites, there is little data that indicates the extent of adverse interactions between guide dog teams and loose or uncontrolled dogs.

In order to better identify the scope of this problem, The Seeing Eye conducted a study to confirm anecdotal information indicating that guide dog teams experience a high frequency of attacks and interference; to identify possible interventions to help reduce their frequency; and to establish baseline data to assist with future studies.

Method

The Seeing Eye designed a 55-question survey related to guide dog handlers' experiences with attacks and interference by aggressive dogs. For the purpose of the survey, the term "dog attack" was defined as "a negative encounter with another dog that bites or otherwise physically harms you or your guide dog." The term "interference" was defined as "any dog that aggressively obstructs, intimidates, chases, harasses or otherwise jeopardizes the safety and emotional well-being of you or your guide dog."

The survey was open from December 13, 2010, to January 29, 2011, through a web based survey vendor. Guide dog handlers from the United States and Canada were notified of the opportunity to participate in the online survey through web communications including emails, social networking sites, blogs, newsletters and word-of-mouth. Those individuals who were unable to or did not wish to access the online survey had the option of calling The Seeing Eye's toll-free phone number to request that the survey be administered by telephone. The total number of respondents from the United States was 744, 80 of which were interviewed by phone. This report only covers the results collected from U.S. respondents. Persons seeking information from the Canadian study should contact The Seeing Eye.

Since the topic of the survey was known in advance to those invited to participate, it is possible that a self-selection bias positively influenced the frequency of attacks and interference reported in the results of the study. The advocacy team attempted to mitigate the possibility of any such self-selection bias by encouraging guide dog handlers to participate in the survey regardless of whether they had or had not experienced an attack or interference. Nevertheless, the effects of that encouragement were not under strict control.

Questions about the frequency of breeds involved in interference/attacks were purposely omitted in this survey. A representation ratio to compare the relative risks between breeds is irrelevant to this study as any dog, regardless of its breed, can pose a threat to the health and safety of a guide dog team.

Results

Frequency and Location of Attacks

The Seeing Eye 2011 dog attack and interference survey revealed that 44% of respondents (324 out of 744) had experienced at least one attack. Of those, 58% were

attacked more than once. Findings also showed that 83% (617 respondents) had experienced interference by an aggressive dog. The vast majority of attacks (80%) and interference (83%) occurred on a public-right-of-way such as a sidewalk or roadway. In cases involving the most recent attacks, 74% happened when respondents were being guided by their dogs within 30 minutes walking distance from their homes. Most of them (80%) travel by foot within their neighborhood on a daily basis.

Circumstances of Attacks and Interference

The survey data indicated that dog owners who let their animals run loose or fail to adequately secure their home properties are not the only ones who pose a threat to the guide dog team's safety. Many dog owners do not seem to understand that a working dog should not be distracted while performing its duties as a guide. For instance, pet owners who allow a leashed dog to make physical contact with a guide dog or to otherwise distract or interfere with a guide dog (either out of ignorance or because they are unable to control their dog) needlessly risk the safety of the working team. Likewise, tying a dog out in a public place and leaving it unsupervised can also pose a hazard.

Survey respondents were asked to select from a list of circumstances under which instances of attack and interference took place. Those who experienced more than one attack were asked to mark all that applied. Results showed that:

- 76% of respondents reported they had been attacked at least once by a loose dog
- 47% of respondents said they had been attacked at least once by a dog that was leashed but inadequately controlled by its handler
- 13% of respondents said they had been attacked at least once by a dog that was tied but left unsupervised

Similar findings were recorded for incidents of interference by dogs that were loose but the latter two circumstances increased substantially (see the chart below for more details) during episodes of interference.

Circumstance	Attacks	Interference
Dog was loose	76%	79%
Dog was leashed but owner did not control it	47%	58%
Dog was tied and left unsupervised	13%	27%

Season and Time of Incident

When asked to report specific details of the attack (those experiencing more than one attack were asked to base their responses on the most recent incident), nearly one-third (31%) reported that attacks occurred in the summer (June, July or August) and 25% in the spring (March, April, or May). More than one-third (40%) of attacks occurred

between 2 p.m. and 6 p.m., while 29% of the attacks happened between 10 a.m. and 2 p.m.

Over half of the respondents reported that they were “not sure” when asked if there was a particular time of year (64%) or time of day (57%) that they were more likely to experience interference. For those respondents who did identify a time of year, the most common response (24%) was summer (June, July, and August) and for the time of day, 17% reported that interference happened between 2 p.m. and 6 p.m.

Animal Control & Police

The survey also explored the effectiveness of animal control and police intervention. Findings revealed that 64% (207 out of 324 respondents) who experienced an attack did not report their most recent incident to animal control or the police. The top two reasons for not reporting the attack were that 38% of the respondents did not feel that the physical harm was severe enough for them to file a complaint and 29% said they were unable to identify the attacking dog or its owner. Out of the 117 respondents that did report the incident, almost two thirds (60%) were dissatisfied with the way the incident was handled. When asked why, many respondents expressed frustration with the lack of "follow-up" while several others noted inadequate enforcement and insufficient knowledge/understanding about the serious nature of attacks against guide dog teams.

Out of those respondents who experienced interference, 73% (452 out of 617) did not report their most recent incident to animal control or the police. The top two reasons for not reporting interference were that the respondents did not feel that the emotional harm was severe enough for them to file a complaint (48%); or because the respondents were unable to identify the attacking dog or its owner (31%). Out of the 166 respondents that did report the incident, over half (55%) were dissatisfied with the way the incident was handled.

Identification of the Attacking Dog's Owner

In 37% of the most recent incidents, the owner of the attacking dog was not identified. This is due, in part, to the fact that the majority of respondents (74%) reported that they were not walking with a sighted person at the time of the attack. Moreover, almost half of the respondents who were traveling by themselves reported that there were either no witnesses (25%) or that it was unknown if witnesses were present (23%) at the time of the attack. In many instances, a blind handler's visual limitation can make it difficult to report observations and descriptions that may otherwise help to identify the attacking dog or its owner. Moreover, a disturbing number of owners/handlers whose dogs have attacked or interfered with a guide dog team have reportedly walked away from the incident without offering assistance or taking responsibility for their dog's actions.

Attacks and Interference by the Same Dog

Over one third (34%) of all respondents who experienced an attack reported experiencing subsequent incidents by a dog that had caused problems in the past. Nearly half (45%) of those who experienced interference noted the same problem with repeat offenders.

The high incidents of dogs that have repeatedly caused problems suggest a lack of responsibility on the part of the offending dog's handler. These incidents may also be due, in part, to the handler's failure to report prior attacks and interference or because of the lack of enforcement by local authorities.

Negative Impact on Guide Dog

Following an attack, guide dogs may be unable to work because of physical injuries. A less obvious, but equally as harmful, effect occurs when guide dogs develop undesirable behaviors towards other dogs. These behaviors may be temporary or permanent but either circumstance compromises the team's ability to work safely and effectively. In the survey, 35% of respondents reported that, after the most recent attack, their dog's behavior negatively changed towards other dogs. When asked to report the biggest change(s), exactly half (50%) noted that their dog became easily distracted by other dogs; 43% became aggressive around other dogs; 43% became fearful or shy around other dogs; 25% were more worried about potential threats than working responsibly; and 11% developed a lack of confidence when working. Out of the 25% of respondents who reported negative behavior changes in their dogs after interference, most changes were similar to that of dogs that had been attacked. One exception was that dogs that had been attacked were more likely to become fearful or shy of other dogs (see the chart below for more details).

Behavior	Attacks	Interference
Easily distracted by other dogs	50%	59%
Aggressive towards other dogs	43%	32%
Fearful/shy of other dogs	43%	25%
More worried about potential threats than working responsibly	25%	24%
General lack of confidence while working	11%	8%

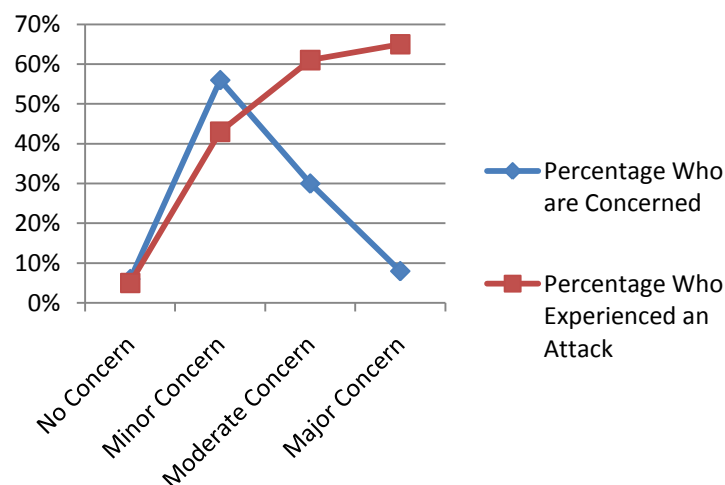
In the more severe cases, 16% (52) of the guide dogs that were attacked were temporarily unable to work and 3% (10 dogs) were retired from service. Out of the more severe incidents of interference, 2% (15) dogs were retired from service.

Effect on the Guide Dog Handler

It is important to realize that people who are blind can incur physical injuries secondary to those that may be directly inflicted by an aggressive dog. During the confusion of an attack/interference and its aftermath, handlers can easily become disoriented in their

surroundings. Without being safely oriented to their immediate surroundings, handlers can sustain physical injuries from hazards such as changes in elevation or oncoming traffic. For example, one guide dog handler recently sustained a concussion when she inadvertently stepped off a curb and fell while her dog was trying to flee from a menacing dog. In the survey, 37% (120 respondents) became temporarily disoriented as a direct result of an attack and 32% (197 respondents) became disoriented as a result of interference.

The survey also explored the psychological effects of attacks and interference. Guide dog handlers often experience varying degrees of anxiety when they become aware that another dog is present. The fear of not knowing if the dog is friendly or aggressive or whether or not the dog is properly restrained or confined can be most unsettling. The level of concern is often greater for those who have previously experienced negative encounters with aggressive dogs. For instance, 6% (41) respondents said they felt “no concern” about dog attacks. Not surprisingly, nearly all (85%) of these respondents had never experienced an attack. The most common response, 56% (413 respondents), said that they had “Minor concern but generally does not affect my usual routine.” Just over half of these respondents (57%) had never experienced an attack. Out of the 30% of respondents (226) who selected “Moderate concern such as planning alternate routes to avoid known dogs,” 39% reported never experiencing an attack. Finally, out of the 8% (63) respondents who recorded “Major concern such as limiting travel whenever possible in order to avoid loose or uncontrolled dogs,” 35% had never experienced an attack. In all four categories, respondents who had not been attacked showed less concern than those who had been attacked -- particularly when the level of concern increased. This same pattern held true for those respondents who experienced interference.



Conclusion

Although the actual number of guide dog teams in the United States that are harmed due to attacks and interference remains unknown, the 2011 Seeing Eye survey clearly indicates that uncontrolled dogs can pose a serious threat to all guide dog teams.

Findings also show that attacks and interference can inflict considerable physical and/or emotional damage on victims and substantially reduce the team's ability to work safely, confidently, and effectively. The Seeing Eye strongly believes that a well-planned, proactive community approach is the best way to make a substantial reduction in the number of guide dog teams who experience attacks and interference.

Recommendations

The following information is intended to help communities find effective ways to protect guide dog teams from attacks and interference by aggressive dogs.

Guidance for Dog Owners & the General Public

Dog attacks and interference against guide dog teams are largely preventable. The first step is to realize that any dog, even a family pet, is capable of causing harm if it is threatened, in pain, out of control, protecting its "territory" or trained to be aggressive (whether deliberate or inadvertent).

Guide dogs are not like ordinary pets. Thousands of dollars and hours are invested in the breeding, raising and training of guide dogs before they are paired with a blind person. Dogs that are permitted to disrupt the work of a guide dog, whether they are on or off a leash, can pose a serious threat to the guide dog team. Pet owners should keep their dogs properly restrained and confined at all times to prevent dangerous situations for both the guide dog team and the pet dog. Members of the public who are aware of a dog that is loose in their neighborhood should alert animal control. If someone witnesses an attack on a guide dog team, they should identify themselves to the handler and offer assistance. Finally, the owner of the attacking or interfering dog must take responsibility for their dog's actions.

Guidance for Law Enforcement Officials

Data from The Seeing Eye survey clearly shows that the vast majority of attacks and interference occur on public property. Many of these incidents involved repeated offenses by the very same dog. It is important to recognize that these incidents are far more dangerous than simple dog-to-dog altercations. The imminent danger to a blind individual whose guide dog is being attacked or subjected to interference is potentially far greater than that of pet owners, who do not require the services of their dogs to walk about safely and independently.

If law enforcement agencies were to step up their efforts to restrain dogs at large, especially in areas where guide dog teams typically travel, these negative encounters could be greatly reduced. Likewise, timely action when responding to calls and thoroughly investigating and reporting all interference and attack incidents involving guide dog teams would also help to minimize future risks.

Guidance for State and Local Legislators

Most local and state laws prohibit dogs from roaming about unleashed and unsupervised. Yet the majority of attacks and interference reported in this study occurred on public property by a loose dog. These incidents grossly interfere with a blind person's ability to walk freely and safely within their communities or anywhere else they wish to go.

Tougher laws that offer around-the-clock protection by the police should be enacted. Animal control officers, whose services are typically not available outside standard business hours, and whose resources are often limited, cannot be relied upon to successfully remedy an attack situation in a timely and effective manner. These laws should also require that the owner of the attacking dog be responsible for all veterinary, medical, and other costs resulting from the attack, including the costs for remedial training or replacement of the guide dog.

Guidance for Guide Dog Handlers

The most important step that guide dog handlers can take to minimize the risk of attacks and interference is to be proactive. Handlers can work with their local animal control and police agencies to help officials and community members gain a better understanding of how dogs that are not properly restrained or confined can jeopardize the safety of a guide dog team. Handlers may also wish to ask for greater enforcement of leash laws in areas where they routinely travel; put emergency numbers in their cell phone directories; and pack a collapsible white cane as an alternative means of mobility.

Finally, practicing daily obedience in a variety of locations can help handlers maintain a leadership position within the partnership. This will minimize the likelihood that a guide dog will become overly distracted in the presence of other dogs. Handlers can check with their guide dog schools for further tips.

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