

Reality Behind No-Kill and Dog Bites

At Austin Pets Alive!, one of the major components of our life-saving work is our Dog Behavior program. Often, dogs coming into our shelter have had little training or socialization, which puts them at risk because they may have bad manners, such as rudely greeting people or being unruly on leash. On occasion, they may have a history of having bitten a person, which often contributes to why there were surrendered.

We do not believe that every dog bite is the same, and we do not believe that every dog bite should equal a death sentence for a dog. When a dog bites we seek to understand the specific and often subtle causes of the bite. We make a concerted effort to understand the dog's overall personality and to look for all of the contributing factors. In most cases, when a dog bites, the dog is reacting defensively after previous attempts to communicate (backing away, crouching, lip licking, tucking their tail, growling, etc.) were not noticed or abided. That being said, the safety of our community is of paramount importance at APA!, and we would never intentionally adopt out a truly dangerous dog. When a dog in our care has displayed truly dangerous behavior, we make the decision to humanely euthanize the dog. Knowingly placing dangerous dogs into the community is not a part of No Kill.

An assertion has been made that Austin's No Kill status has endangered our community by placing "aggressive" dogs with bite histories into adoptive homes. So we investigated.

We focus on the data when making any assessment of No Kill practices, including how they relate to community safety. We know several critical pieces of information. First, bites per 1,000 residents in Austin is just 0.14%, a full 0.10% lower than the national average of 0.24%. **For the most part, No Kill does not exist where the higher national dog bite average occurs.** This alone should dispel the notion that No Kill inherently causes less community safety.

Community Dog Bites as a Whole

Dog bite numbers have to be viewed in context to be understood accurately. The City of Austin is responsible for collecting that data every year to protect the public from rabies. They collect it from dogs anywhere in the city, including from both owned and shelter dogs. The [City of Austin's dog bite data](#) shows that there has been an increase in bites in the community, but that is to be expected because of two factors: 1.) the population growth and 2.) greater enforcement of bite reporting in the community. As Austin and Travis County have rapidly urbanized, rabies awareness campaigns have expanded and as a result more people are reporting minor bites because of concerns over possible rabies exposure.

So, the number of community dog bites has nearly doubled from ~900 to ~1700 annually but dog bites as a percent of population has only increased from 0.11% to 0.14%. The CDC lists the dog bite per population nationally as 0.24%. Therefore, Austin remains, as an entire community including shelter dogs, well below the national average.

Shelter Dog Bites

The number of dogs being adopted has doubled since 2000 and now includes all dogs whereas prior to achieving No Kill status, most large dogs were killed, so the adopted number was mostly puppies and small breed dogs. It would stand to reason that the percentage of dogs that have bitten and are also adopted would stay the same or increase **but it actually decreased.** That is even more

remarkable when you consider that more large dogs are being adopted. Dog adoptions from the city shelter increased from 2,300 to 4,500 per year from 2000 to 2015. Dogs adopted that had a bite record increased from 45 dogs to 76 dogs in the same time period. But the percentage of dogs that were adopted from the shelter and also had bite records decreased from 1.98% to 1.76% of adopted dogs. **That means the No Kill process is actually doing a better job of selecting dogs for adoption.**

By definition No Kill is solely focused on preventing the deaths of saveable dogs in the shelter. It is important to differentiate statistics about owned animals who bite, or strays who bite, from No Kill programs.

There are going to be bad things that happen in the world to animals and by animals. No Kill is only a piece of the animal ecosystem. It is not and cannot be responsible for the things people do, or the accidents that happen.

People campaigning against No Kill programs rarely correctly use data to support their position. They tend to use fear instead. They imagine all the terrible things that can occur if you step outside the box of historical and institutionalized killing. But they are wrong.

Based on conversations with other No Kill leaders, we believe there is an organized campaign on both broadcast and social media trying to scare other communities into rejecting No Kill programs. We will continue to use facts and data to support our position. We have five years of evidence that No Kill works for people and for pets.