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# North Texas cities seek breed-specific regulations as statistics show pit bulls lead in bite incidents

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Elizabeth Sorto didn't fear the two stray pit bulls that wandered into her backyard. Neither did her 8-month-old kitten.

The young feline raced out of the open door that day last spring and was mauled by the dogs. Ms. Sorto suffered a bite on her right hand.

"I've never been scared of dogs, but now I have no sympathy towards them," said Ms. Sorto, 18.

In some North Texas cities, including Mesquite, where Ms. Sorto lives, city councils are urging state legislators to allow cities to regulate owners of breeds with vicious tendencies.

Pit bulls are notorious for brutal attacks similar to Ms. Sorto's. Some blame the media for amplifying such attacks. But statistics in three North Texas cities show that animal control officers responded to more dog-bite calls involving pit bulls in the past year than any other breed. Animal control experts say that regulating owners of certain breeds will help reduce the number of attacks and perhaps save lives. Animal advocates say it's unfair to target specific dogs.

But that hasn't kept cities from trying.

In February, city leaders in Madisonville, which is near Huntsville, passed what is believed to be the first dog ban in a Texas city. The ordinance targeted pit bulls, which were not allowed in the city unless residents already owned one. The grandfathering clause allowed pit bull owners to keep their dogs, but they had to pay for \$100,000 liability protection and meet strict leash and muzzle laws.

Six months later, the council repealed the ordinance because it penalized responsible dog owners, said interim city manager Paul Feazelle.

Laura Dapkus of the Lone Star State Pit Bull Club said complaints about fierce dogs are typically about owners who are "already breaking a multitude of laws."

According to dog-bite incident reports from July 2007 to July 2008 in Duncanville, Cedar Hill and Mesquite – three cities that passed resolutions urging the state Legislature to allow breed-specific legislation – about a third of all animal attacks involve pit bulls.

Many of those attacks occur when the dogs are running loose in the city. Rogue dogs are a violation in those cities regardless of the breed.

Regulating breeds "doesn't get to the root causes of irresponsible ownership," Ms. Dapkus said. "Picking on one particular breed is not going to keep dogs confined; it's not going to educate anyone."

Mesquite resident Felipe Badajos agrees.

Mr. Badajos, 51, doesn't mind his pit bull playing around his 8-month-old son, Sebastian. Mr. Badajos said he trusts Rocky because he's well-trained.

"I see on the TV and newspapers too many times when they attack kids," Mr. Badajos said. "Well, that means the owner is doing something wrong. They don't feed their dog; they don't take care of the dog."

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**Felipe Badajos doesn't mind** his pit bull playing around his 8-month-old son, Sebastian.

The Mesquite resident says he trusts Rocky because he's well-trained. Mesquite is one of three North Texas cities urging the state to allow

If lawmakers decide to pursue breed-specific legislation, Cliff Keheley said Mesquite wouldn't ban breeds completely. Instead, the director of housing and community services said his city could enforce tougher regulations for the brawny animals.

"Stronger containment is our main goal," he said. "We want to make it if you own a pit bull, you have to be a little more responsible."

More regulation could mean requiring micro-chipping, having a stronger, taller fenced-in enclosure or restricting the number of dogs that owners can have.

Mr. Keheley said Mesquite could also consider enacting restrictions on those owning other breeds such as Rottweilers.

In Duncanville, Mayor David Green said the City Council would hold public hearings and workshops if Texas lawmakers allowed breed-specific regulation.

"We would have to really study it more than we've studied it right now," the mayor said.

Cedar Hill Mayor Pro Tem Cory Spillman said his city could seek tougher restrictions without penalizing reliable owners.

"Every dog is going to have its own personality, which is why I'd be against banning a specific breed," he said. "But there are some that must have a higher level of responsibility from its owners."

Statistics gathered during the last 12 months shows that pit bulls aren't the only lead suspects in dog-bite incidents.

Other common culprits include German shepherds (9.6 percent) and Labradors (9 percent). Mr. Keheley said those are popular family dogs and can have a higher percentage of incidents simply because there are so many of them.

But with pit bulls, calls for animal control come in because owners can't control the dog's brute strength and temperament, he said.

Ms. Dapkus, the American Pit Bull Terrier Club member, said owners need to make a commitment if they intend to keep that type of animal as the family pet.

"Some people need to just be educated," she said. "A dog that is tired because he's been exercised and walked and played with is not out biting people and chasing cats."