

Profiling: Two Sides of the Issue

Editor’s Note: The fear of certain allegedly vicious canine breeds has spread like a prairie fire across North America, with many jurisdictions passing strict bans. Even if there are no local laws restricting ownership of these breeds, homeowners may find it impossible or prohibitively expensive to purchase homeowner’s insurance if they own certain breeds.

The current scare breed is the pit bull, which is often vaguely defined as any dog that, to relevant authorities, looks like their conception of a pit bull. (An attorney friend once showed 24 photos of purebred dogs to students in my animal ethics seminar and challenged them to identify the “pit bulls” — no one could do so with any accuracy.) Rottweilers elicit a similar reaction. A generation ago, the targeted breeds were German shepherds and Doberman pinschers.

Experts are divided on the rationality of these approaches. The late Dr. Frank Loew, dean at Tufts and Cornell Universities veterinary schools, dismissed such reactions as “canine racism,” since canine breeds are essentially races and individuals are targeted because of group membership. Other experts strongly defend such bans as being empirically based and essential to protecting public health and safety.

In this pair of columns, we present the strongest arguments we could find that are put forth by experts from both sides of the issue in the hope that veterinarians will be better informed in the event they are approached to help advance or prevent such breed-specific bans in their communities.—Bernard E. Rollin, PhD, Column Editor

POINT

By Ledy VanKavage, Esq

Mark Twain said, “What gets us into trouble is not what we don’t know, it’s what we know for sure that just ain’t so.”

If you’ve read the papers lately, you would think that every dog that bit must be a “pit.” Based on the myriad of news accounts, city councils have rushed to pass laws banning any mixed-breed dog that merely resembles an American pit bull terrier. Animal control and police officers routinely overrule veterinarians regarding the heritage of a mutt. The outcome: Friendly shorthaired dogs are being seized by authorities and killed because of their alleged “breed.”

Is this a rational response to dog bites, or is it a witch hunt fueled by modern media bias?

A study in media bias

According to Janis Bradley, author of *Dogs Bite: But Balloons and Slippers Are More Dangerous*, more people are killed by lightning each year than by dogs. The canine population has blossomed to 73 million in the United States.¹ Despite this increase, a relatively consistent 12 to 24 humans die from dog bites each year.²

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COUNTERPOINT

By Alan M. Beck, Sc.D.

Subpopulations of plants and animals that become distinct as a result of isolation from the large population are known as *races*. Subgroups of domestic animals whose differences develop because of human selection are known as *breeds*. Human races are a special case in that, although they developed naturally, they no longer have any biological significance. Indeed, human races are more defined by those who make the categories than by any inherent characteristic. They are social statements, not natural ones. When a group of humans uses race as a category to deny another group social equality, we call it “racism.”

The pit bull-supporting community has not suggested any serious breeding program but has reacted by denying the validity of the data and using the rhetorical argument of calling the bans “racist.” The analogy to real racism is cruel and inaccurate. At the very least, it demeans the terrible impact human racism has had on our culture. It also implies that canine breeds are some kind of “protected” category, which they are not. We change canine breeds all the time by changing breed standards and crossing breeds to create new ones.

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So why the visceral reaction to dog bites when swimming pools, for example, are much more dangerous? Perhaps the answer is that dogs are predators, and humans naturally recoil from being considered prey. Our innate fear of carnivores results in bad public policy.

That fear is further fueled by inflammatory news reports designed to sell papers. Karen Delise, LVT, the author of *Fatal Dog Attacks: The Stories Behind the Statistics*, has examined media bias in dog-bite reporting. She surveyed news stories about dog attacks that occurred on a random day: June 9, 2006 (Delise K: Personal communication, National Canine Research Council, Slanesville, WV, 2006).

On that day, a 3-year-old Virginia boy was admitted to the hospital with extensive injuries. The child required 300 stitches and eventually needed additional surgeries to functionally repair muscles and nerves as well as scar tissue. The child had been attacked by a golden retriever mixed-breed dog. This horrific attack was reported in only two local Virginia newspapers.

An 11-year-old girl was bitten in the leg and hospitalized when she was attacked by two pit bulls in California. She had serious but not life-threatening injuries. This incident, however, was reported by more than 91 national newspapers and media outlets, including Fox News, *Forbes*, *The Washington Post*, the *Los Angeles Times*, and the *Chicago Tribune*.

Two other incidents were reported that day: In Denver, a 3-year-old girl was admitted to The Children's Hospital with serious lacerations to her face and head. She had been attacked by her Labrador retriever. The attack was covered by four Colorado media sources only. In another dog-bite incident, one Indiana newspaper picked up the story of a woman who had been attacked by a German shepherd while she was walking her Shetland sheepdog mix. Neighbors were able to restrain the German shepherd but not before the woman had been bitten twice in the face, and her dog was so severely injured that it eventually had to be euthanized.

So, on June 9, 2006, four dog attacks made the news — but only the incident involving the pit bulls garnered extensive national attention.

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The AVMA Professional Liability Trust published a book for veterinarians who are AVMA members that gives information on how to recognize pit bull–type dogs and has references to other books with useful photographs. After listing all the breeds usually associated with pit bulls, the authors note, “One should remember that crossbred dogs with pit bull in their bloodlines. . . are equally dangerous and unpredictable.”¹ Does this mean that the AVMA is practicing canine racism?

Is there canine racism?

Dogs whose breeding has been managed by humans are a wonderful example of breed development. Dogs were originally bred for specific functions but are more recently being bred for morphologic (appearance) preferences. Is this canine racism? Just look at breed clubs and dog shows — judgments of inclusion or exclusion based on breed and breed alone. That is a form of canine racism, although with less sinister intentions than human racism. Nevertheless, there is a clear recognition that specific breeds have recognizable morphologic and behavioral differences. The general categories (breeds) recognized by observation match fairly closely what has been

found using genetic mapping.

It has long been recognized that breed traits include both morphology and behavior. No one is surprised when the Border collie herds or the pointer points. The behaviors emerge without specific training, which is noticeably more effective in breeds selected for a breed-specific behavioral pattern. Breed-specific behaviors are often released spontaneously. In most cases, these behaviors are, at worst, annoying. But when the behavior is an inclination to attack, there is a social problem that requires attention.

Breed-specific problems

Responsible breed organizations often address issues when a breed-specific problem emerges, whether it is a physical deformity or undesirable behavior. We have seen this when addressing springer spaniel rage and Doberman pinscher aggression. For some reason, the people dedicated to pit bull–type dogs have not addressed the issue of aggressiveness to people or even other dogs.

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Beyond breed banning

Legislators, of course, respond to sensationalized media accounts. Given the over-reporting of pit bull attacks, bans targeting that breed might appear rational, but in the past, such breeds as German shepherds, Doberman pinschers, and rottweilers have all been similarly villified. Italy, in fact, now restricts over 90 breeds of dogs, including Welsh corgis.³

Despite the supposed quick fix offered by such bans, the only published study conducted on breed bans⁴ indicated that they don't work. The study involved the United Kingdom's Dangerous Dog Act, which banned "pit bulls" in 1991. The study concluded that the ban had no effect on stopping dog attacks. Indeed, data in a report published in the September 15, 2000, issue of *JAVMA* indicate that breed-specific legislation is not the solution to dog-bite prevention.

So, if canine profiling isn't the answer, what will work?



Tragically, the implementations of breed-specific legislation can sever the human-animal bond.

Delise examined all fatal dog attacks that occurred in the United States in 2005 and found some striking commonalities:

- 90% of the dogs were not neutered or spayed (interestingly, according to Delise, there is no documented case of a neutered companion pit bull causing a human fatality).
- 81% were not maintained as a pet (i.e., they were used as guard dogs or for fighting).
- 61% involved abuse and neglect cases or were not humanely controlled or contained (i.e., they were chained or allowed to roam).²

In lieu of profiling, politicians should focus on remedying these factors.

An owner's outcry

Tragically, breed-specific legislation severs the human-animal bond. Most Americans now view their pets as family members.⁵ The anguish experienced by thousands of responsible guardians who have had their pets seized simply because of their perceived breed is eloquently expressed in a recent message board posting on the Internet (originally posted in its entirety at tech.groups.yahoo.com/group/SecondChanceFosteringforDogs/message/56):

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Researchers² studying the 1979 to 1998 records of dog bite-related fatalities recognized that not having concise estimates of the population of each canine breed placed some limitations on the certainty of the data regarding pit bulls:

"Despite these limitations and concerns, the data indicate that rottweilers and pit bull-type dogs accounted for 67% of human dog bite-related fatalities in the United States between 1979 and 1998. It is extremely unlikely that they accounted for anywhere near 60% of dogs in the United States during that same period; thus, there appears to be a breed-specific problem with fatalities."

It has been suggested that, because the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) data rely, in part, on

It is time to stop evoking emotion and begin to honestly assess a problem already recognized around the world.



newspaper articles, there may be bias because pit bull attacks may be reported more often than attacks by other breeds. It may be true that nonfatal attacks have been disproportionately reported when pit bulls are involved, but fatal attacks are reported, at least once, for all breeds. Fatalities caused by pit bulls may be reported more extensively, but all the CDC studies were careful to "count" each event only once, regardless of how often it was reported in the media, accurately demonstrating the disproportionate contribution of pit bull-type dogs to human fatalities (Lockwood R: Personal communication, The Humane Society of the United States, Washington, DC, 2006).

The pit bull community takes pride in noting a single study³ that purportedly proves that pit bull bans do not work. In reality, the study proves absolutely nothing! It is a descriptive study of one small emergency room in Scotland, noting emergency room admissions for all bites, including humans, and no fatalities during a 3-month period before and after the British law of 1991 was passed. The number of pit bull bites went from six to 12, although other breeds did experience a slight decrease. The single observation of a difference of six bites in a small hospital that received no fatalities proves nothing, and it is sad that it is the best source the pit bull "lobby" can cite.

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"My name is Andrea Miller, and I own an 8-year-old, black-and-white, neutered pit bull named Ali. I just found out today during a visit from the health department that pit bulls were outlawed in my city.... I've had Ali since the day he was born; the runt of a litter of 10, he had to be bottle fed, and I became attached. He's been my best friend all his life and my only friend at times. Eight months ago, I had a baby, and Ali had no problem adjusting to the new situation. After all that Ali has become to me and my family, I can't bear to give him up and let city hall put him to sleep. But no one at city hall or the health department seems to care how heart-wrenching this is, and I just can't understand how they can be so coldhearted....

"He gets along with cats, too. ... He and Kiki take turns cleaning each other. I'm afraid she will be devastated as well once she realizes he is no longer around.

"I've wondered sometimes what life would be like when Ali passed on from old age, but I always assumed I didn't need to worry about that for many years. I never would have imagined something like this could be possible. He's been my one reliable, stable friend for so long that I don't know how I will manage without him. But I can guarantee it will be easier if I know he is alive, happy, and cared for. I've lived in and supported this city almost my whole life, but I can't help but feel betrayed and very bitter."

Across the United States, dogs such as Ali — many of them mutts — are being seized and killed simply because of their appearance. It's not only unconscionable and unconstitutional — it's un-American. **vF**

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The need for legislation

About 20 years ago, western countries recognized the problems associated with pit bulls and did what governments do when there is no self-correction—they developed legislative approaches to protect the majority. Since the end of the 1980s, many European countries and many cities in North America enacted breed-specific legislation in varying forms from outright bans of ownership to restrictive management when the pit bull-type breeds were in public.

I suspect if a breed disproportionately caused the death of humans and other dogs because of disease there would be symposia, breed club meetings, and changes in breed standards to address the problem. It would not be canine racism but good and responsible husbandry. It is time to stop calling names to evoke emotion and begin an honest recognition of a problem already recognized around the world. As an empirical generalization, pit bull-type dogs are an added burden for society, impacting the health of people, other dogs, and even themselves. I do not believe it is appropriate to take pit bull dogs away from their owners and believe such laws are unconscionable. However, I do find enough evidence to support restrictions, such as leashing and muzzling when in public, and not adding to their numbers in society.

There should be less talk of racism and more talk of responsible animal management so that all dogs would be more welcomed in society. **vF**

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