

Breed-Specific Bans



Objective: to educate people on the ineffectiveness of breed-specific bans in the effort to control dangerous dogs in a community.

Introduction

Every few decades a new “bad” dog emerges. During Civil War times, it was the Bloodhound who was vilified in works like *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Dobermans, Rottweilers, German Shepherd Dogs, Chow Chows, and Mastiffs have come under attack as being dangerous dogs simply by membership in the breed.

Today, it is the Pit Bull breed, which includes: Staffordshire Bull Terrier, American Staffordshire Terrier, and American Pit Bull Terrier. Even those who look like Pit Bulls, but have none of the Pit Bull DNA, are not safe from being stigmatized as dangerous dogs.

But is the community that bans or restricts these dogs any safer than the community that has not passed breed-specific bans? No, it is not.

Therefore, the Federation of Humane Organizations of West Virginia (FOHO WV) opposes banning or severely regulating dogs based solely on their breed.

What causes dogs to be dangerous?

Any dog can be dangerous given the right circumstances. Therefore, behavior, not breed, should be the deciding factor as to whether a dog is deemed dangerous, as it is far easier

to recognize unacceptable canine behavior than it is to recognize particular breeds. In addition, a September 2000 study published in the Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association (VetMed Today: Special Report) reported at least 25 different breeds or crossbreeds of dogs were involved in fatally wounding human beings.¹

If breed is not the determining factor as to which dogs will bite, what are the circumstances that most often result in dogs biting humans?

The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) noted many factors beyond breed that may affect a dog’s tendency toward aggression – things such as heredity, sex, early experience, reproductive status, socialization, and training.

- More than 70 percent of all dog bite cases involve unneutered male dogs.
- An unneutered male dog is 2.6 times more likely to bite than is a neutered dog.
- A chained or tethered dog is 2.8 times more likely to bite than a dog who is not chained or tethered.
- 97 percent of dogs involved in fatal dog attacks in 2006 were not

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spayed/neutered.

- 78 percent were maintained not as pets, but rather for guarding, image enhancement, fighting, or breeding.
- 84 percent were maintained by reckless owners – these dogs were abused or neglected, not humanely controlled or contained, or allowed to interact with children unsupervised.²

Determining a dog’s breed is often difficult; therefore, enforcement of breed-specific bans is difficult as well. Time spent trying to determine the breed or breed mix of a particular dog could be better spent educating guardians on humane animal care.

In fact, sometimes banning a breed actually creates the demand for that breed. In addition, banning one breed simply creates a demand for another breed by those who want a vicious dog.

Studies conducted by the CDC, the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA), and The National Canine Research Council, as well as independent researchers, all agree that breed-specific bans are not productive. They do, however, identify four key points that could reduce the number of dog attacks: education, enforcement, spaying and neutering, and better bite reporting.⁴

Finally, breed bans simply do not address the problem – bad behavior, not bad breeds. They do, however, penalize responsible guardians of the banned breeds; and they do punish those dogs that are reliable community citizens – therapy and assistance dogs, search and rescue dogs, and drug and police dogs.

The cost of enforcing breed-specific bans can be overwhelming, with little to show for the expenditure. In one Maryland county, for example, a task force found that while the county spent more than a quarter-million dollars each year to enforce the ban, “public safety has not improved as a result [of the ban].”³

Costs include salaries for additional animal control staff to enforce the law, feeding and housing confiscated dogs, time spent in court, and veterinary and medical expenses.

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If banning breeds does not reduce the incidence of dogs biting humans, what does?

Solution

(1) Enacting and enforcing dangerous dog laws and holding guardians accountable for their dog’s behavior. Further, preventing those convicted of dog abuse from owning dogs for a period of time. WV State Code already has some provision for dangerous dogs under 19-20-21. License fee for keeping vicious or dangerous

dog.⁵ Strengthening dangerous dog laws, along with enforcing humane standards of care for dogs, will better protect a community than enacting breed-specific bans.

(2) Educating people on their responsibility to socialize, train, and humanely care for their dogs; and educating them, their family, and friends on how to behave around dogs. Children, especially, are more apt to be bitten by the family dog. So, caution must be taken by guardians when infants and small children are present.

(3) Enforcing leash, anti-tethering, and containment laws to keep dogs from roaming free and increasing and enforcing penalties, especially for those guardians who habitually violate these laws.

(4) Encouraging guardians to have their animals spayed/neutered. In addition, offering spay/neuter assistance to those families who may not be able to afford the full cost of these life-saving surgeries.

(5) Preventing dog abuse and dog fighting, which is illegal in all 50 states and the District of Columbia. However, dog fighting still flourishes in many communities. Those convicted of dog fighting should be served harsh penalties and not allowed to own dogs for a period of time.

(6) Offering low-cost or free dog training and dog behavior help through shelters, pet stores, and rescue groups, and encouraging people to better understand the importance of basic obedience and basic safety around dogs.

Breed-specific bans do not work. The CDC, AVMA, and numerous other organizations, including jurisdictions that have enacted such bans only to repeal them, place the burden on the guardians to properly train and socialize all dogs, regardless

of breed. They argue that the breed itself is not the problem but rather the lack of responsibility on the part of the guardians to support good canine citizenship and, thereby, protect human life.

Endnotes

1. “Breeds of dogs involved in fatal attacks between 1979 and 1998,” cdc.gov/homeandrecreationsafety/images/dogbreeds-a.pdf.

2. Breed-Specific Legislation, aspc.org/fight-animal-cruelty/dog-fighting/breed-specific-legislation.aspx.

3. Prince George County, Maryland – Vicious Animal Report, understand-a-bull.com/BSL/Research/PGCMD/PGCP24.htm.

4. Sacks, J.J., Lockwood, R., Hornreich, J., & Sattin, R.W. (1996) Fatal Dog Attacks, 1989-1994. *Pediatrics*, 97, 891-895.

5. West Virginia Code, legis.state.wv.us/legisdocs/code/19.
