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Dealing with Reckless Owners and Dangerous Dogs in Your Community

Dogs permitted by their owners to run loose, and dogs who attack people or other animals, are real and often serious problems in communities across the country—but how to best address dangerous and potentially dangerous dogs can be a confusing and touchy issue.



"Breed-specific" legislation (BSL) is the blanket term for laws that either regulate or ban certain breeds completely in the hopes of reducing dog attacks. Some city/municipal governments have enacted breed-specific laws. However, **the problem of dangerous dogs will not be remedied by the "quick fix" of breed-specific laws—or, as they should truly be called, breed-discriminatory laws.**

It is worth noting that in some areas, regulated breeds include not just American Pit Bull terriers, American Staffordshire Terriers, Staffordshire Bull Terriers, English Bull Terriers and Rottweilers, but also a variety of other dogs, including American Bulldogs, Mastiffs, Dalmatians, Chow Chows, German Shepherds, Doberman Pinschers, or any mix of these breeds—and dogs who simply resemble these breeds.

On the bright side, many states (including New York, Texas and Illinois) favor laws that identify, track and regulate dangerous dogs individually, regardless of breed, and prohibit BSL.

Are Breed-Specific Laws Effective?

There is no evidence that breed-specific laws—which are costly and difficult to enforce—make communities safer for people or companion animals. For example, Prince George's County, MD, spends more than \$250,000 annually to enforce its ban on Pit Bulls. In 2003, a study conducted by the county on the ban's effectiveness noted that "public safety is not improved as a result of [the ban]," and that "there is no transgression committed by owner or animal that is not covered by another, non-breed-specific portion of the Animal Control Code (i.e., vicious animal, nuisance animal, leash laws)."

Following a thorough study of human fatalities resulting from dog bites, the United States Centers for Disease Control (CDC) decided not to support BSL. The CDC cited, among other problems, the inaccuracy of dog bite data and the difficulty in identifying dog breeds (especially true of mixed-breed dogs). The CDC also noted the likelihood that as certain breeds are regulated, those who exploit dogs by making them aggressive will replace them with other, unregulated breeds.

What's Wrong with Breed-Specific Laws?

BSL carries a host of negative and wholly unintended consequences.

- **Dogs go into hiding** *owners hide dogs*
Rather than give up their beloved pets, owners of highly regulated or banned breeds often attempt to avoid detection of their "outlaw" dogs by restricting outdoor exercise and socialization and forgoing licensing, microchipping and proper veterinary care, including spay/neuter surgery and essential vaccinations. Such actions have implications both for public safety and the health of these dogs.
- **Good owners and dogs are punished**
BSL also causes hardship to responsible owners of entirely friendly, properly supervised and well-socialized dogs who happen to fall within the regulated breed. Although these dog owners have done nothing to endanger the public, they are required to comply with local breed bans and regulations unless they are able to mount successful (and often costly) legal challenges.
- **They impart a false sense of security.**
Breed-specific laws have a tendency to compromise rather than enhance public safety. When limited animal control resources are used to regulate or ban a certain breed of dog, without regard to behavior, the focus is shifted away from routine, effective enforcement of laws that have the best chance of making our communities safer: dog license laws, leash laws, animal fighting laws, anti-tethering laws, laws facilitating spaying and neutering and laws that require all owners to control their dogs, regardless of breed.
- **They may actually encourage ownership by irresponsible people**
If you outlaw a breed, then outlaws are attracted to that breed. Unfortunately some people take advantage of the "outlaw" status of their breed of choice to bolster their own self image as living outside of the rules of mainstream society. Ironically, the rise of Pit Bull ownership among gang members and others in the late 1980's coincided with the first round of breed-specific legislation.

What's the Alternative to Breed-Specific Laws?

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