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What to do about pit bulls

HOWARD GERSON AND DR. ALAN KLAG

Tomorrow, an Ontario judge will hear submissions on the fate of Bandit, a pit bull-Labrador mix who bit and seriously injured a 3-year-old boy last year. This comes amid much debate and public concern about being mauled or killed in an unprovoked attack by a powerful dog, following a series of pit bull attacks throughout the province.

Attorney-General Michael Bryant has gone so far as to say that a province-wide ban of the breed is under consideration.

The attacks have focused public attention on the pit bull, also known as the American Staffordshire terrier, a dog originally bred for the now outlawed sports of dog fighting and bear baiting.

The debate on what to do about the breed is passionate and highly polarized.

Proponents of pit bulls describe individual dogs as "sweet" or "affectionate" and lay the blame for their aggressive behaviour on the irresponsibility of dog owners.

They argue the issue is not about the breed but rather about the way their owners handle the dogs, since any breed will bite if abused.

Those who favour banning the animal argue that its breeding as a fighting dog makes the pit bull and its cross-breeds "natural-born killers" incapable of cohabiting safely with humans in densely populated urban areas.

They point out that the muscular pit bull has a large and powerful jaw designed to clamp down on a victim, inflicting severe damage.

But what are the relative risks posed by pit bulls compared to other breeds commonly faced by the public?

The Canada Safety Council reported in its bulletin of October, 2001, that Canada has "no national data on canine population, dog-related deaths and injuries or which breeds cause the most harm."

However, in the United States, institutions including the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta, Ga., and the U.S. health department have studied the problem scientifically since the late 1970s.

Highlights from the considerable U.S. data include:

★ Between 1979 and 1998 there were 304 dog-bite related fatalities or approximately 15 deaths a year.

★ Pit bulls, followed by rottweilers, were the most commonly reported breed involved in fatal attacks and the two breeds together account for 60 per cent of human deaths between 1979 and 1998.

★ In 1979, rottweilers and pit bull-type dogs accounted for 67 per cent of dog bite related deaths. However, rottweilers accounted for almost twice as many deaths as pit bulls between 1993 and 1998.

★ Pit bulls and rottweilers account for fewer than 10 per cent of U.S. dogs.

★ 70 per cent of the victims were children.

The data show it is rare to die from a dog attack since such deaths average only 15 per year. However, other data suggest the risk of being bitten and injured by a dog is great, is increasing and poses a serious public health concern.

In 1994, there were approximately 800,000 U.S. non-fatal dog bites requiring medical treatment compared to only 585,000 in 1986. While the number of fatal bites a year has remained relatively constant, non-fatal bites pose a serious problem and are increasing.

In fact, being bitten by a dog is the second most frequent cause of injury to American children after playing baseball.

Accordingly, it is important to assess the likelihood of receiving a serious bite from one breed versus another when considering public policy options.

One study by a California State University professor showed that pit bulls were far and away a greater danger to the public than other dogs. Robert Plumb expressed his findings in terms of the number of dogs it took to generate a bite from a particular breed serious enough to require hospital treatment.

His study shows it takes only 16 pit bulls to generate a bite compared to 156 German shepherds, 274 spaniels (all types), 296 Dobermans and 433 small terriers.

While banning the breed may seem the simplest and most effective solution, reports suggest people who want aggressive dogs will simply seek out another breed if pit bulls and rottweilers are banned.

The most striking evidence of this are reports that after two Presa Canarios, (a relatively unknown but powerful dog) mauled 31-year-old Diane Whipple to death in San Francisco in 2001, breeders were inundated with calls from people who wanted to purchase a similar dog. This is the human aspect of the problem and the main reason bans are unlikely to solve the public safety issue.

Still, laws that limit and regulate who can own or breed certain dogs should be enacted and properly enforced. Certainly no one with a criminal record involving violent behaviour should be permitted to own a potentially aggressive animal.

Animals purchased for protection and high-risk breeds should be muzzled if exposed to the public and training should be mandatory for the dogs and their owners. Unfortunately there are few serious regulations pertaining to dog ownership and even those are rarely enforced.

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