

Banning a breed?

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One state lawmaker says pit bulls are bred to be vicious, and that banning the breed might be a way to keep people safe.

But others, including some veterinarians and dog owners, say targeting pit bulls -- or any breed -- misses the mark.

"Any breed that you talk about -- they're not all biting dogs. So we don't want to eliminate the breed," said Dr. Amy Marder, a veterinarian at New England Veterinary Behavior Associates in Lexington. "I've been called in to evaluate the possibility that a dog will bite again, and it's so dependent on the owner. Some owners are capable of controlling a potentially biting dog. And some owners could care less."

Still, pit bulls' ferocious reputation is not all false, according to statistics from the Massachusetts State Insurance Company.

The dogs are responsible for the third-highest number of serious attacks on people in Massachusetts, after Rottweilers and German Shepherds, according to the group.

"The level of damage inflicted by a pit bull attack, anecdotally, seems to be more severe," said state Rep. Vincent Pedone, D-Worcester. "These dogs were bred as very strong, athletic, agile animals ... made to fight, bite, pull, shake, rip, crush and tear."

Maritza Rivera, who owns two red nose pits, said this is only true of owners who want it to be.

Her dogs -- full-grown Diamond, and smaller Mia -- nuzzled with Maritza Rivera's eight-year-old daughter during a visit to their Leominster home this week. The girl held out chicken nuggets, and the dogs snatched them from her hand.

"My son literally jumps on them, and they don't attack him," Rivera said. "It depends on how you bring them up. You give them the attention they need, the time, they'll be fine."

She knows that some pit bull owners purposely mistreat their dogs.

"Some people keep them in dark rooms, alone, or put gunpowder or black pepper in their meat ... that gets them aggressive," Rivera said.

Concern over this aggression -- whether manufactured or not -- led the province of Ontario, Canada to ban pit bulls in 2005.

Existing pit bull owners were permitted to keep their dogs, but needed to spay or neuter them, and keep them leashed and muzzled in public, according to Ontario's Ministry of the Attorney General.

But that law has been "very difficult" to enforce, one Toronto official said.

It is hard to be certain that strays or mixed breeds are pit bulls, said Eletta Purdy, Toronto's citywide manager for animal services.

Also, some dogs need to be put to sleep even if they've exhibited no aggression.

"We get a number of dogs into our shelters that are not claimed, and have to be euthanized or put up for adoption outside Ontario," Purdy said, noting that out-of-province adoption is a logistical challenge.

"And it's even more difficult when we're presented with a litter of puppies born after (the law's effective date)," she said. "It's certainly an issue for us, having to euthanize animals with no behavior problems."

But the number of dog bites does appear to be lower now than before the ban began, Purdy said.

Pedone has not proposed specific legislation to ban pit bulls in Massachusetts.

But he held a State House hearing this week to discuss the matter, and he and his staff will research the issue this summer and might present a bill in the fall. He said in a phone interview that he's also open to stricter licensing laws or required neutering.

Dangerous dogs

Meanwhile, many pet owners are backing a bill proposed by state Rep. Bradford Hill, D-Ipswich, which defines a "potentially dangerous dog" as any that has, unprovoked, either bitten or required defensive action twice within 36 months.

The bill also defines a "vicious" dog as one who inflicts serious injury on or kills a person, or who continues dangerous behavior after the owner is notified of its potentially dangerous status.

"We have to hold the owner responsible. If we don't hold the owner responsible, we're simply not solving the problem," said Charlotte McGowan, the legislative liaison for the Massachusetts Federation of Dog Clubs and Responsible Dog Owners.

Pit bulls do seem to be the dog of choice for those likely to abuse their strength, according to police officers interviewed.

The breed of choice

"It's the most common dog that we encounter when we go on these drug raids," said Gardner Lt. Gerald J. Poirier, commander of the North Worcester County Drug Task Force. "We've had many cases where drug users use pit bulls as early warning systems and guard dogs against police ... Any breed can be trained to be vicious. However, when it comes to pit bulls, they've been bred to have a wide head and jaw, and the ability to fight hard."

He acknowledged that drug users -- who are already breaking the law -- might not adhere to a ban against pit bulls.

"If you make it illegal to own a pit bull, they'll find another dog to do the same job," said Holly Stump, a legislative specialist for MassFed, the dog clubs organization. "It's just a fad. You've had Dobermans in this position, you've had German Shepherds in this position."

But Poirier said a ban might still help.

"We do run into a lot of pit bulls more than the average dog," said Leominster Det. Joseph Siciliano, who said he wasn't sure if he supported a pit bull ban.

"Definitely I'd like to see them stop being used for the wrong reasons," Siciliano said.

Dr. Bob Feccia examined Rivera's two pit bulls in his office at the Leominster Animal Hospital Thursday.

"These dogs were jumping, they were kissing me. They were, in this case, the nicest pets," the veterinarian said later that day. "And my next appointment was a little Chihuahua who I got bit by."

He didn't dispute that pit bulls can attack, sometimes unprovoked. But so can other dogs, he said.

Genetic aggression

"Some of them, yes, they are aggressive. Some of the aggression is genetic, and it's genetic in other breeds too," Feccia said. "Some of it is a product of environment. Some of these guys want their dogs to be aggressive, and they will treat them in a manner that promotes aggression."

Locally, both Leominster and Fitchburg have proposed ordinances to ban dogs from public events. The measure failed in Leominster, and is still in Fitchburg's public safety committee.

"These events are not geared for animals. They're geared for people," said Fitchburg Ward 2 City Councilor Norman Boisvert, who submitted the petition. "People go down to these events to enjoy themselves, not be scared."

Boisvert called pit bulls "an extremely volatile breed," but agreed that legislation might need to focus on owners, not types of dogs.

"If your dog is a dog that is inclined to attack or bite, then you've got to protect people from this dog," Boisvert said. "If you can't do your job, then you don't deserve to have the dog."

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