



## Get facts before judging pit bulls

By Stephanie Friedman

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What does the word dog mean to you?

For most people, dogs are synonymous with loyalty, animated personality and boundless energy.

But consider that this dog is a pit bull terrier. And take into account this breed's recent reputation. I am certain that your innocuous image is now distorted.

Now, stop for a moment and ask yourself why that is. What moved you to feel differently? More importantly, what else are you associating with the picture, and where have you obtained it?

With the bombardment of media attention on pit bulls, which incidentally is not a breed but instead a class consisting of a variety of breeds, it is no wonder that there is a great jumble of emotion encompassing the subject.

Opinions develop from personal experience, scientific studies, anecdote, published fact or a mixture thereof. Regardless of how these beliefs manifest, there is a common thread among them: They are all reactions.

Occasionally reactions evolve via analytical

scrutiny. However, it is far more common for reactions to derive from impulse. When a reaction promotes a generalized and prejudiced image of a group and does not acknowledge individual differences, it is said to be a stereotype.

Historically, stereotypes based on fear have led to discrimination, violence and genocide.

Media representation of fatal dog attacks is affecting how pit bulls are viewed. Specifically, an immense fear has been generated, and legislators are pandering to the public concern.

This response has fueled a relatively new movement for breed-specific legislation, which in effect would limit or exclude the existence of particular canine breeds in certain municipalities.

My objective is not to sway your bias on these measures, but instead to encourage you to found your opinions in thorough fact examination - even if the truth is unpopular.

Meeting this challenge requires you to think critically. Always scrutinize information presented as solid data, such as statistical bite reports, by also considering the veiled facts that underlie the blanket testimony.

For example, what is the significance and relevance of dog-bite statistics? It is easy to judge a breed as vicious based on a high number of fatal incidents.

However, this logic is inherently flawed for

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numerous reasons. Specific questions must be answered to elucidate the true predictive value of such reports: What is the ratio of fatal attacks by a particular breed to the number of individuals of that breed in existence? If the dog is a mixed breed, how is the dog categorized? And on what are the guidelines for categorization based?

How does the statistical analysis consider the direct relationship between popular trends in specific breed ownership and the incidence of problematic individuals?

Most importantly, what are the exact and complete circumstances that led up to an attack?

Consider the following account of a girl being mauled to death by her family's two pit bulls.

According to the media report, the family had owned the dogs since they were puppies, and they were friendly and loved the children.

Unexpectedly, the dogs had escaped from the basement of their previous home, and attacked the child as she played on the swing set outside.

At first blush, this story could be construed to support the purported unpredictable and savage nature of pit bulls.

Further investigation of the story, however, paints an entirely different picture: The "family pets" were left unattended in the basement of the family's previous home for an indefinite period of time after they had moved.

Both dogs were sexually intact, and the female was in heat, adding to the potential for excitable behavior.

Both dogs were physically malnourished and had ingested rat poison, a potential contributor to aggressive behavior. The 1-year old female had a bullet lodged in her groin, also for an indefinite period of time.

(See: <http://www.understand-a-bull.com/BSL/FatalDog/Fatal%20Dog%20Attacks.htm>)

The intent of this account is not to persuade you one way or the other on pit bulls and breed-specific legislation. Rather it is to motivate your acquisition of complete information. Determine if fear or fact sets your opinion. Always investigate media claims with critical analysis and develop an informed position instead of passively accepting information.

I urge you to learn the truth.

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