

Prince George County, Maryland - Vicious Animal Report

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Appendices

March 2003

To Whom It May Concern,

The Humane Society of the United States (HSUS) has been asked to offer our position on breed specific issues as they pertain to dogs.

Breed Specific Legislation (BSL) is a common first approach that many communities take. Thankfully, once research is conducted most community leaders correctly realize that BSL won't solve the problems they face with dangerous dogs. The HSUS opposes legislation aimed at eradicating, or strictly regulating, dogs based solely on their breed for a number of reasons.

There are over 4.5 million dog bites each year. This is an estimate as there is no central reporting agency for dog bites, thus breed and other information is not captured. Out of the millions of bites, about 10-20 are fatal each year. While certainly tragic, it represents a very small number statistically and should not be considered as a basis for sweeping legislative changes.

It is imperative that the dog population in the community be understood. To simply pull numbers of attacks does not give an accurate representation of a breed necessarily. For example, if you review a study that states there have been 5 attacks by Golden Retrievers in a community and 10 attacks by Pit Bulls in that same community it would appear that pit bulls are more dangerous. But, if you look at the dog populations in that community and learn that there are 50 Golden Retrievers present and 500 Pit Bulls, then the Pit Bulls are actually the safer breed statistically.

While breed is one factor that contributes to a dog's temperament, it alone cannot be used to predict whether a dog may pose a danger to his or her community. A September 2000 study published in the *Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association (VetMed Today; Special Report)* further illustrates this point. The report details dog bite related fatalities in the United States from 1979 through 1998, and reveals that over the nineteen years examined in the study at least twenty-five different breeds or crossbreeds of dogs have been involved in fatally wounding a human being. Breeds cited range from the oft-maligned pit bulls and rottweilers to the legendary "forever loyal" breed of St. Bernards. The study was conducted by a group of veterinarians, medical doctors, and psychology and public health experts.

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The main conclusion of the study was that breed specific legislation doesn't work for several reasons including the inherent problems in trying to determine a dog's breed, making enforcement of breed-specific legislation difficult at best; the fact that fatal attacks represent a very small portion of bite-related injuries, and should not be the major factor driving public policy; and specifically noted that non-breed specific legislation already exists and offers promise for prevention of dog bites. I have enclosed a copy of that study for your information.

Two decades ago, pit bulls and rottweillers (the most recent breeds targeted) were of little to no concern. At that time it was the Doberman pinscher who was being vilified. Two years ago no one had heard of the Presa Canario breed, involved in the tragic, fatal attack on Diane Whipple in California in January of 2001. Now, that breed is being sought by individuals who desire the new "killer dog." Unfortunately, the "problem dog" at any given time is often the most popular breed among individuals who tend to be irresponsible, if not abusive, in the control and keeping of their pets. Simply put, if you ban one breed, individuals will just move on to another one. Banning a breed only speeds up the timetable.

Communities that have banned specific breeds have discovered that it has not been the easy answer they thought it would be. In fact, it has been no answer at all. In some areas, media hype has actually increased the demand for dogs whose breed is in danger of being banned. Animal control agencies, even those that are well funded and equipped, have found the laws to be an enforcement nightmare.

Restrictions placed on a specific breed fail to address the larger problems of abuse, aggression training, and irresponsible dog ownership. Again, breed alone is not an adequate indicator of a dog's propensity to bite. Rather, a dog's tendency to bite is a product of several factors, including but not limited to:

- early socialization, or lack thereof, of the dog to people
- sound obedience training for recognition of where he or she "fits" with regard to dominance and people or mistreating for fighting or increased aggression
- genetic makeup, including breed and strains within a breed
- quality of care and supervision by the owner (is the dog part of the family or is she kept chained outside)
- current levels of socialization of the dog with his or her human family
- behavior of the victim
- whether the dog has been spayed or neutered

If the goal is to offer communities better protection from dogs who are dangerous, then thoughtful legislation that addresses responsible dog keeping is in order. Legislation aimed at punishing the owner of the dog rather than punishing the dog is far more

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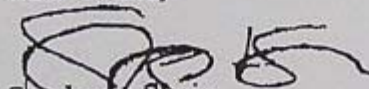
effective in reducing the number of dog bites and attacks. Well enforced, non-breed-specific laws offer an effective and fair solution to the problem of dangerous dogs in all communities.

Comprehensive "dog bite" legislation, coupled with better consumer education and forced responsible pet keeping efforts, would do far more to protect communities than banning a specific breed. I encourage you to read the *Community Approach to Dog Bite Prevention* by the American Veterinary Medical Association, available to be read at: <http://www.avma.org/prcss/dogbite/dogbite.pdf>

The HSUS is committed to keeping dogs and people safe and is available and willing to offer guidance and advice should you choose to draft legislation that will decrease the incidence of dog bites and aggression.

Also see our website www.nodogbites.org for information. I do hope you will reconsider your current ban. Please let me know if I can answer any other questions.

Best wishes,



Stephanie Shain
Director of Outreach
Companion Animals