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## **Dealing with reckless owners and very dangerous dogs**

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When it comes to laws that regulate “dangerous dogs,” there is at least one fact that is hard to dispute: 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. The more vexing and contentious issue arises in figuring out how to best address this. While many states, including New York, Texas and Illinois, favor laws that identify, track and regulate dangerous dogs regardless of breed and prohibit “breed-specific” laws that either regulate or ban a certain breed of dog, some local governments have enacted breed-specific laws. However, the problem of “dangerous dogs” will not be remedied by the “quick fix” of breed-specific laws.

There is no evidence that breed-specific laws—which are costly and difficult to enforce—make communities safer for human families or for the companion animals who are a part of so many households. And it turns out, such laws also have negative and wholly unintended consequences.

For example, a task force formed in 2003 to study the effectiveness of the Prince George’s County, Maryland, pit bull ban estimated that the county spends more than \$250,000 each year to enforce the ban. Further, in a report to the County Council, the task force 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).” The task force recommended that Prince George’s County repeal the ban.

Breed-specific laws also cause unintended hardship to responsible owners of entirely friendly, properly supervised and well-socialized dogs who happen to fall within the regulated breed category. Regulated breeds, it is worth noting, have expanded in some localities to include not just American pit bull terriers, American Staffordshire terriers, Staffordshire bull terriers, bull terriers and Rottweilers, but also a variety of other dogs, including American bulldogs, mastiffs, Dalmatians, chow chows, German shepherds, Doberman pinschers and any mix of these breeds. Although these dog owners have done nothing to endanger the public, they may be required to comply with onerous regulations. Sadly, these responsible caretakers may be forced to choose between costly compliance and giving up their beloved companion.

Moreover, in their study of human fatalities resulting from dog bites, the United States Centers for Disease Control (CDC) did not support the breed-specific approach. They cited, among other problems, the inaccuracy of dog bite data and the difficulty in identifying dog breeds (especially true of mixed breeds). They also noted the likelihood that as certain breeds are regulated, those who exploit dogs by making them aggressive will merely turn to other, unregulated breeds.

Significantly, the CDC also noted how many other factors beyond breed may affect a dog’s tendency toward aggression—things such as heredity, sex, early experience, reproductive status and socialization and training.

These last two concerns seem well-founded given that more than 70 percent of all dog bite cases involve unneutered male dogs, and that an unneutered male dog is 2.6 times more likely to bite than is a neutered dog. In addition, a chained or tethered dog is 2.8 times more likely to bite than a dog who is not chained or tethered. Further, 97 percent of dogs involved in fatal dog attacks in 2006 were not spayed/neutered; 78 percent were maintained not as pets but rather for guarding, image enhancement, fighting or breeding; and 84 percent were maintained by reckless owners—abused or neglected, not humanely controlled or contained, or allowed to interact with children unsupervised.

Perhaps the most unintended yet harmful consequence of breed-specific laws is their 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 dog owners to control their dogs, regardless of breed.

Unfortunately, these laws are often only enforced when a tragedy occurs, rather than as a routine function of law enforcement and animal control.

**Solutions**

Recognizing that the problem of dangerous dogs requires serious attention, the ASPCA seeks effective enforcement of breed-neutral laws that hold dog owners accountable for the actions of their animals. The ASPCA believes that this is the most reliable way to control aggressive dogs and reckless owners.

(Source: The American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals)

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