



# Office of Public Policy

## TARGETING ‘DANGEROUS DOGS’

### WHY BREED-SPECIFIC LEGISLATION MISSES THE MARK

Each year in the U.S., on average, 16 deaths are caused by dog attacks<sup>1</sup>. While this number is relatively low, these rare but tragic occurrences often result in public outcry for lawmakers to take immediate action. And, unfortunately, the action many of them take is both unjust and ineffective.

#### LEGISLATING A ‘QUICK FIX’ ... THAT ISN’T

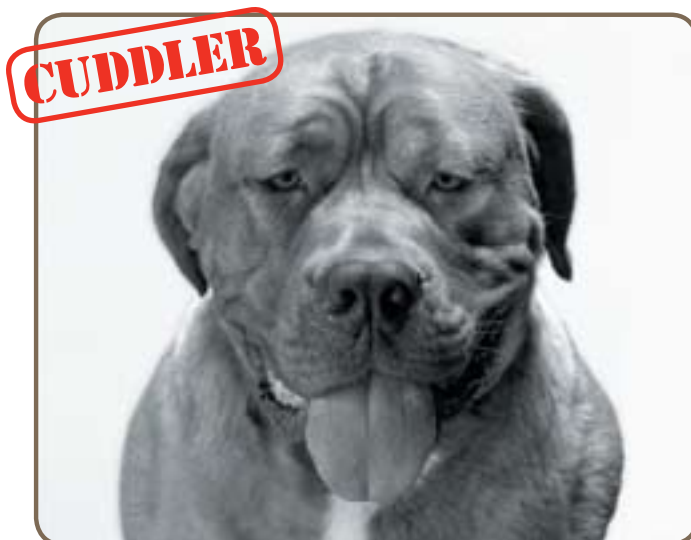
Certain breeds of dog have been demonized by intense media coverage of attacks by so-called “dangerous” breeds, such as the pit bull, while attacks by other breeds are covered only briefly, if at all. This feeds the public misconception about certain breeds and has prompted some state, county and municipal lawmakers to feel they must take action against those breeds to prevent dog attacks. Supporters of this type of provision (commonly called breed-specific legislation) argue that the only way to prevent dog attacks is to eradicate “dangerous breeds” from the community.

The most common type of such legislation completely bans all dogs of certain breeds — they must be removed from the area or be euthanized. Typically, the restricted breeds include bull-terrier type dogs, often referred to in legislation as “pit bulls,” as well as Rottweilers, German shepherds, chow chows, Doberman pinschers, huskies, boxers and mixes of these breeds. Cities that have implemented such a ban include Denver, Colo., Kansas City, Mo., and Jacksonville, Ark.

However, there is little to no evidence that these laws reduce dog bites and dog attacks. It is not specific breeds that are dangerous, but specific situations that create dangerous dogs.

#### WHY IT DOES NOT WORK

There is no system in place to track statistics on dog bites and attacks accurately in the U.S., and many incidents are never reported. All dogs can attack, regardless of their size or breed. The key to preventing attacks starts with responsible ownership — not breed bans.



<sup>1</sup>Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Breeds of Dogs Involved in Fatal Human Attacks in the United States Between 1979 and 1998. <http://www.cdc.gov/ncipc/duip/biteprevention.htm>

Legislation that targets specific breeds does not solve the problem because dog attacks tend to be the result of several factors. According to the American Veterinary Medical Association, these are:

- **Breeding** - Dogs that are bred to be aggressive will be aggressive, regardless of breed.
- **Socialization** - Puppies need to be socialized to learn how to interact with people.
- **Training** - Dogs need training so they will obey at least basic commands.
- **Health** - Some dogs bite because they are uncomfortable or in pain<sup>2</sup>.
- **Spaying/Neutering** - Ninety-seven percent of dogs involved in fatal dog attacks in 2006 had not been spayed/neutered<sup>3</sup>.
- **Tethering** - One out of every four fatal dog attacks involves a chained dog<sup>4</sup>.

There are also practical problems with breed-specific legislation. For example, it requires that dogs be classified as a certain breed, despite the fact that 31 million pet dogs are classified by their owners as “mutts.”<sup>5</sup> It also allows bad owners of non-banned breeds to continue to be irresponsible. And enforcement is burdensome and costly: A task force formed to study the impact of a county’s pit bull ban reported that, while the county spends more than \$250,000 each year to enforce it, “public safety has not improved as a result [of the ban].”<sup>6</sup>

### EFFECTIVE ALTERNATIVES

There are alternatives to breed bans — approaches that are effective because they address the real problem. Dangerous-dog laws must be breed-neutral and identify dangerous dogs based on their actions. Other effective approaches include enforcing leash laws; enacting animal-at-large and licensing laws with adequate penalties; enacting laws that prohibit chaining or tethering for excessive periods; and creating mandatory spay/neuter laws for shelters, as well as an aggressive education program, and providing low-cost spay/neuter services.

In addition, families need to be educated that children should never be left alone with dogs, and children must be taught to behave properly with and around dogs. Children receive almost half of all dog bites in the U.S., and nearly 80 percent are from the family’s or neighbor’s dog.

### ‘PUNISH THE DEED, NOT THE BREED’

Although the basic physical characteristics of a particular dog cannot be changed, a dog’s behavior certainly can be influenced by the people who raise it. Breed-specific legislation and the demonizing of certain breeds only furthers their appeal to irresponsible owners while scaring off potential suitable owners for those breeds. Dogs of all breeds deserve to be loved and have a home of their own.

If your community is considering breed-specific legislation, please contact American Humane’s Public Policy Office at (703) 836-7387 or [publicpolicy@americanhumane.org](mailto:publicpolicy@americanhumane.org) for the facts you need to propose effective alternatives.

## ON CAPITOL HILL



### Voicing Support for CAPTA

On June 26, 2008, Caren Kaplan, American Humane’s director of child protection reform, testified before a Senate subcommittee to express strong support for the reauthorization and strengthening of the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA). Shown here, she is thanked by Sen. Chris Dodd, chairman of the Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Subcommittee on Children and Families.

<sup>2</sup>The American Veterinary Medical Association, Dog Bite Prevention: A Community Approach. JAVMA, Vol. 218, No. 11, June 1, 2001. [http://www.avma.org/public\\_health/dogbite/dogbite.pdf](http://www.avma.org/public_health/dogbite/dogbite.pdf)

<sup>3</sup>ASPCA, Are Breed Specific Laws Effective? [http://www.aspc.org/site/PageServer?pagenam=cruelty\\_dogfighting\\_breedspecific](http://www.aspc.org/site/PageServer?pagenam=cruelty_dogfighting_breedspecific)

<sup>4</sup>Ibid.

<sup>5</sup>American Pet Products Manufacturers Association, 2007/2008 National Survey. [http://www.appma.org/pubs\\_survey.asp](http://www.appma.org/pubs_survey.asp)

<sup>6</sup>Report of the Vicious Animal Legislation Task Force, Prince George’s County, Md., 2003.