

Do dog breed bans work?

Pit bull fans point to bite stats; ban backers cite that maulings stopped

Peter Marcus, DDN Staff Writer

Tuesday, March 3, 2009

Despite killing at least 1,667 pit bulls since 2005, Denver city officials cannot say with certainty whether a ban on the breed has made the city safer.

But officials say there is no evidence to indicate that the ban is not working. Proponents of the ban point out that since it was re-enforced in 2005, there has not been any serious pit bull maulings.

There has actually not been a serious pit bull attack in Denver since the 1989 mauling of Rev. Wilbur Billingsley, who was left with more than 70 bites and two broken legs. Before that, there was the 1986 death of a 3-year-old boy.

But empirical data suggests that breed-specific legislation does not work. Several other Denver metro towns and cities — including Englewood and Lakewood — examined dog bite data and decided breed-specific legislation is not as effective as stricter aggressive and dangerous dog laws, which hold owners responsible for their pets.

Between 1995 and 2006, Denver had almost six times as many dog-related hospitalizations compared to Boulder, even though Denver's population is less than twice that of Boulder. During that 12-year period, Denver experienced 273 dog-related hospitalizations, while Boulder experienced only 46, according to statistics provided by the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment.

Boulder imposes no breed-specific legislation.

In Denver, however, there has been a ban on pit bulls since 1989 following the mauling of Billingsley. The incident resulted in the City Council banning pit bulls from the city. In 2004, Gov. Bill Owens signed a bill prohibiting local municipalities from enacting breed-specific legislation. Denver challenged the statute and enforcement resumed in May 2005.

Since then, hundreds of pit bulls have been killed, though animal control officials do not know how many of the breed are still left in the city.

Watch out for Labradors!

What they do know, however, is that pit bulls do not lead the pack when it comes to bites in the Denver metro area.

Labrador retrievers are the most likely dog to bite, at 13.3 percent, according to data provided by the Colorado Association of Animal Control Officers and released last week by the Coalition for Living Safely with Dogs.

Pit bulls follow, at 8.4 percent, which is then followed by German shepherds at 7.8 percent.

The likelihood of a dog to bite also has to do with the popularity of the breed. Labrador retrievers are an extremely popular breed. But Michaela DeGraw, spokeswoman for the Colorado Veterinary Medical Association, points out that labradors are biting more than pit bulls, and there's no ban on labs.

"Are we going to ban labs just because they are at the top of the list?" asked DeGraw. "I think not."

Karen Delise, founder and director of research for the National Canine Research Council, said breed-specific legislation does nothing to educate owners on their responsibilities for owning a dog. She said without that component, there is no way to keep dog bites down.

"I find it interesting that the only area, region, county or city in Colorado with a breed ban happens to be the only county with a higher than normal rate of dog bite hospitalizations," she said. "The breed ban isn't working, it's not addressing education or irresponsible owners."

Englewood Mayor Jim Woodward said his city decided against breed-specific legislation because the research he conducted indicated that banning pit bulls would not cut back on dog bites. Because Englewood wanted a component that involved educating and holding owners responsible for their actions, it decided last summer to beef-up its dangerous dog laws rather than impose a ban.

"I have not seen any proof that (breed-specific legislation) is the way to go," said Woodward. "I think what we have come up with is much more progressive."

The mayor added that in speaking with code enforcement officers, they find the stricter dangerous dog ordinance much more effective because it supplies them with additional tools to go after irresponsible owners, as well as educate the owners on their mistakes.

Are we safer?

Denver Animal Control Director Doug Kelley is unable to say with any certainty whether the ban on pit bulls has made Denver a safer city.

"It's a hard question to answer," Kelley told the *Denver Daily News* in a recent interview. "We have not had a severe mauling or fatality involving a pit bull since its gone into effect. But then again, we continue to get more pit bulls every year ... it depends on how you define success."

Ban backer

Kori Nelson, a Denver assistant city attorney who lead the city's fight to re-enact its ban on pit bulls in 2004, called pit bulls a unique breed with inherently dangerous characteristics.

He said the ban is working as evidenced by the fact that there has not been a serious attack since the ban was enacted. "I don't know anyone who argues that pit bull bans or restrictions are designed to prevent all dog bites," he said. "It's designed to prevent maulings and death attacks by pit bulls."

Comparing pit bulls to grenades, Nelson said the purpose of banning the breed is to prevent unprovoked attacks. "Once a grenade goes off, the damage is already done," he said.

Hidden agenda?

The assistant city attorney also suggested a "secret hidden agenda" behind anti-BSL groups like the Coalition for Living Safely with Dogs and the Humane Society of the United States. Nelson pointed out that such groups rely on donations for their efforts, especially when the economy is down.

"It's politically incorrect for them to admit the truth of this, which is that pit bulls are more dangerous," said Nelson, who added that donations could come from anywhere, even including leaders of dog-fighting rings.

Meanwhile, the Denver health department said it is considering the recent dog bite statistics to perhaps in the future recommend a change in code.

"It's too soon to tell what we're going to do with that information, but we're definitely taking it into consideration as to whether in the future we should be doing any modifications," said health department spokeswoman Meghan Hughes. Delise says the city should act quickly on policy changes if it is to hope for less dog attacks.

"Dogs are the property, for better or for worse, of their owners," she said. "You can't write a law that a dog is going to be able to read. You need to write laws that hold owners responsible for the behavior of their dogs and for them to have care and control of their dogs."