

Breed-Specific Legislation (BSL)

Toronto Humane Society opposes breed-specific legislation as it does not reduce the incidence or severity of dog bites, penalizes responsible pet owners and kills innocent dogs. A community approach to responsible pet ownership, one that focuses on the behavior of the dog and the owner, is the best way to protect public safety and promote animal welfare.

Recommendations

- Repeal the breed-specific elements of the Dog Owner's Liability Act and prohibit municipalities from enacting breed-specific by-laws
- Encourage pet licensing and give owners incentives to spay/neuter and identify their dogs
- Promote responsible pet ownership, including bite awareness programs for children
- Develop protocols to deal with dogs that have been professionally assessed as dangerous



History

In response to a series of high profile media stories in 2005, Ontario introduced legislation to ban pit bulls and toughen penalties for owners of dangerous dogs. It outlawed pit bull/American pit bull terriers, Staffordshire/American Staffordshire bull terriers and all dogs that look like them. The vast majority of stakeholders opposed the legislation, including the Ontario & Canadian Veterinary Medical Associations; Canadian Kennel Club; Pet Industry Joint Advisory Council of Canada; Canadian Association of Pet Trainers; Canadian Federation of Humane Societies and Toronto Humane Society.

In the US, the Centres for Disease Control and Prevention, the American Bar Association and the White House itself have spoken against breed-specific legislation, recommending instead a community-based approach to prevent dog bites. It is widely seen as bad law.

In 2012 the Ontario Veterinary Medical Association blamed BSL for the unnecessary euthanasia of over 1,000 dogs and puppies, many with no history of violence against people or animals.

Efficacy

Breed-specific legislation, including Ontario's pit bull ban, is problematic for many reasons:

- The law punishes dogs for their appearance, when aggression can result from many factors, including lack of training and socialization, lack of exercise and mental stimulation, poor breeding, mistreatment, health issues and failure to spay/neuter (which reduces aggression).
- It deprives owners of due process, with no objective method for establishing whether a mixed breed dog falls under the legislation's vague "pit bull" definition.



- The ban is unconscionable. As dogs are considered pit bulls unless proven otherwise, the law is open to abuse through false allegations and unfairly penalizes low income individuals, where an accusation can mean the de facto death of their dog.
- Focussing on breeds gives the public a false sense of security, as individual dogs may be dangerous, regardless of breed; and punishes many dogs that are not dangerous.
- It is costly to enforce, both for municipalities (through increased sheltering and enforcement costs) and the province (through lengthy, expensive and high-profile court cases).

Various jurisdictions have found that BSL does not work because it targets specific breeds instead of irresponsible owners. The Centres for Disease Control in the US noted that, not only is it virtually impossible to calculate bite rates for specific breeds, but dogs of any breed can become dangerous if they are raised to be aggressive and individuals who exploit dogs will simply turn to another breed. In an article written by Global News in 2016, statistics show that even after 10 years of BSL in effect in Ontario, the number of dog bites has increased.

Results

Restricting breed ownership has not reduced the incidence of dog bites. A survey of reported dog bite rates in 36 Canadian municipalities found no difference between jurisdictions with BSL and those without. Likewise, a 2010 Toronto Humane Society survey found no change in dog bites in Ontario in the years before and after Ontario's BSL.

Calgary, however, saw a five-fold reduction over 20 years – from 10 bites per 10,000 people in 1986 to two in 2006. Rather than banning breeds, Calgary uses strong licensing and enforcement plus dog safety public education campaigns.

The Future

Vancouver, Cincinnati and the Netherlands recently repealed their breed-specific legislation. Italy's banned breed list had grown to 92 breeds in 2003 before dropping to 17, then being repealed entirely in 2009. Twelve US states now explicitly prohibit breed-specific legislation.

These communities, like Calgary, recognize that a community approach to responsible pet ownership is both more effective and more humane than breed-specific legislation. Focusing on the behavior of the dog and the owner is the best way to protect public safety and promote animal welfare.

In 2016 Montreal enforced their own BSL. This legislation called for the ban of pit bulls and many other Breed-specific regulations that not all dog owners had to abide by. The by-law was in affect for about a year before it was suspended and amended in 2017. All mention of breed-specific legislation was removed from the by-law, instead this by-law says that pit-bulls must comply the same rules as all other dogs in the city.

If these great Cities, States and even Countries can repeal or outlaw BSL, Ontario can too!

