



Why breed-specific legislation is not the answer

Imagine you were told you weren't allowed to live somewhere or do something because you had a specific "look" about you that some people didn't like. Or maybe you look like someone who did something bad, even though you haven't done anything bad yourself. Imagine someone who's never met you decides that you're a bad person and a danger to society. They won't let you live in their neighborhoods or walk in their parks or streets. Is that acceptable?

It's not acceptable, but it's happening to dogs in our country and around the world. Breed-specific legislation (or BSL) targets specific breeds of dogs that are thought to be dangerous and makes ownership of these dogs illegal. This type of legislation might even mandate that shelter or stray dogs that fit a certain "look" be euthanized instead of placed in homes regardless of their background or temperament. Several cities and towns across the United States and Canada have adopted BSL measures, ranging from placing restrictions and requirements on dog owners to outright bans on owning any "pit bull-type" dogs.

Frequently BSL focuses on dogs with a certain appearance or physical characteristics instead of an actual breed. "Pit bulls" are the most frequent victims of BSL despite being a general type rather than a breed, but specific breeds are also sometimes banned including Rottweilers, Dobermans and boxers. BSL can be tough to enforce, especially when a dog's breed can't easily be determined or it is of mixed breed. A [recent study](#) showed that even people very familiar with dog breeds cannot reliably determine the primary breed of a mutt, and dogs are often incorrectly classified as "pit bulls." By generalizing the behaviors of dogs that look a certain way, innocent dogs suffer and may even be euthanized without evidence that they pose a threat. Responsible dog owners are forced to give up their dogs or move. Cities and states spend money enforcing restrictions and bans instead of putting that money to better use by establishing and strictly enforcing licensing and leash laws, and responding proactively to target owners of any dog that poses a risk to the community.

Any dog can bite, regardless of its breed, and more often people are bitten by dogs they know. It's not the dog's breed that determines risk -- it's the dog's behavior, general size, number of dogs involved and the vulnerability of the person bitten that determines whether or not a dog or dogs will cause a serious bite injury. Dogs can be aggressive for all sorts of reasons. A dog that's bitten once can bite again, and a dog that's never bitten could still bite.

Don't rely on breed stereotypes to keep yourself safe from dog bites. A dog's individual history and behavior are much more important than its breed, and since you don't always know a dog's history or behavior, it's not a good idea to make assumptions. Instead, concentrate on prevention: educate yourself, teach children about proper interactions and behaviors with dogs, and learn how to recognize risky and escalating situations with aggressive dogs. These steps -- not BSL -- will lead to fewer dog bites