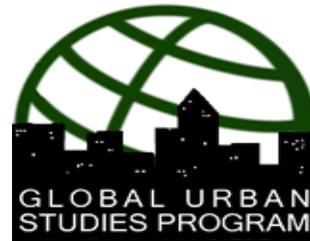




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A POLICY BRIEF FROM THE GLOBAL URBAN STUDIES PROGRAM

“PIT BULLS,” PERCEPTIONS, AND PUBLIC POLICY



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“PIT BULLS” PERCEPTIONS, AND PUBLIC POLICY

Pit bull” is not a breed, but simply a term used to describe a variety of mixed-breed dogs with similar characteristics. DNA tests of pit bull-looking dogs often come up with unexpected results; one dog that looked like a pit bull turned out to be 40 percent poodle (<http://www.pickthepit.com/>).

The research reported in this GUSP Policy Brief focuses on public perceptions of pit bulls, the validity of these perceptions, and how this impacts public policy. A century ago, pit bulls were good natured family pets, celebrated war heroes, therapy dogs, television stars and loved companions of the rich and famous. But since the 1980’s “pit bulls” have been transformed from a family pet into a problem animal. Media hype on dog attacks has swayed the public into believing that all dogs that look like “pit bulls” are dangerous or vicious. This in turn has led to a dramatic increase in Breed Specific Legislation (BSL) and in “pit bulls” entering shelters or animal controls.

In every decade, a breed of dog becomes *the* representative of canine evil. In the 1960s, it was the German Shepherd; in the 1970s, the Doberman Pinscher; since the 1980s, it has been the pit bull.¹ Stereotypes portraying these breeds as dangerous have been repeatedly

publicized in the media yet most of the dog breeds that carried the stigma of viciousness in the past are now again members of the “respectable” dog community.² Society today is considered pit bull adverse. Pit bull ownership is banned in many communities, insurance companies deny coverage to pit bull owners, and many shelters do not adopt them out regardless of whether or not a community ban exists.³ Yet, the term pit bull is used arbitrarily to describe mixed breed dogs and pure bred dogs of similar phenotype facilitating the spread of urban legends and misperceptions.⁴ This “category problem” is critical to perceptions of “pit bulls,” and is clearly visible in the findings reported

According to the American Temperament Test Society, 86 percent of American pit bull terriers tested had a good temperament. That is better than 121 other breeds including golden retrievers and beagles (<http://atts.org/breed-statistics/>).

here showing highly polarized images and opinions about these types of dogs.

The Media and Problem Animals

Media (print, televised, and social) representations not only inform the public, but play an important role in contextualizing policy discourse by the use of frames: the words, narratives, pictures, and symbols used help readers identify the most logical arguments and perspectives to reduce ambiguities in the environment.⁵ The media also have an important role in mediating material risks and the social construction of them.⁶ The images and stories portrayed can transform the notion of dogs as pets to one of dogs as the objects of “moral panic” that threatens societal values.⁷

With pit bulls, the media found an opportunity to offer audiences a melodrama; they have been portrayed for the past three decades as the archetype of canine evil.⁸ In order to sell papers and increase television ratings, pit bulls have been stereotyped as unpredictable beasts that kill and maim without discretion.⁹ Objectively such media representations are

inaccurate. The American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) Task Force on Canine Aggression and Human-Canine Interactions concluded that there is no specific breed or type of dog associated with dog bite incidents.¹⁰ The Task Force noted that dog bites happen because people are unaware of normal and anticipated canine behavior. Dogs from any breed or mix of breeds could bite under specific circumstances based on heredity, early experience, socialization and training, health (medical and behavioral), and human behavior.

The pit bull has become an outlaw that is commonly associated with the image and identity of his/her owner.¹¹ Media descriptions of the typical pit bull owner often portray them as “white thugs” or “poor urban blacks and Latinos” who keep their dogs in “dope dens,” training them to become as aggressive as possible.¹² Pit bulls are also stereotyped due to their

Breed bans are impractical. Even if particular breeds could be identified as high risk, “absurdly large numbers of dogs of targeted breeds” would have to be removed from a community in order to prevent even one serious dog bite-related injury.

http://nationalcanineresearchcouncil.com/uploaded_files/tinymce/NNB%20now%20available%20in%20JAVMA%20dated.pdf

Breed bans are expensive due to the costs of enforcement, kenneling, euthanasia and litigation. The cost of maintaining a single suspected pit bull throughout the entire determination and appeals process has been found to be \$68,000 (Hussain, 2007, Fordham Law Review).

association with dogfighting. While the panic associated with Pit bulls is mostly derived from media reports that depict them as a menace, they have also been also viewed as victims of a society that does not protect them.¹³.

METHODOLOGY AND DATA

The research for this report involved interviews with 56 adults based on purposive sampling; participants were animal control officers and volunteers, dog rescue group members, humane society staff and volunteers, veterinary students, faculty and staff from the Michigan State University (MSU) College of Veterinary Medicine, clients of the MSU Small Animal Clinic, and MSU sociology students. Respondents were

selected based on their level of experience or knowledge about pit bulls; 48% responded negatively and 55% responded positively when asked: “Do you think that certain breeds of dogs are inherently aggressive?” Fourteen percent of the study participants were pit bull guardians. When asked to identify the factors upon which they based their responses, 93% indicated personal experience, 57% education, 18% rumors, 23% media and 19% other.

The data collection tool was the Personal Meaning Map (PMM) which involves asking individuals to record the words, ideas, images, or phrases that come to mind related to a specific concept, word or image (in this case, “pit bull”). This allows participants to explain their perceptions and provide more specific understandings from their own cognitive frame of reference. There were seven conceptual themes

identified based on participant responses (categories are not mutually exclusive):

Finally, breed bans are ineffective; cities and countries that have established such bans have not recorded any reduction in the rate of dog bites, according to the National Canine Research Council.

- I. Theme one (68% of respondent's answers) consisted of perceptions regarding the unpredictable, dangerous behaviors of pit bulls. These images were the most frequently mentioned by participants. The following statements/themes were given: the use of pit bulls as guard dogs, pit bulls are not good with small children, they bite and kill people, they have lock jaw, they are aggressive, they are one breed, they come from various breeds (Bulldogs, Boxers, Perro de Presa Canarios, Bull terriers, Staffordshire terriers, Mastiffs) and they can tolerate pain and endure brutal wounds.
- II. Theme two (64% of the respondent's answers), the second most common set of images, consisted of perceptions about pit bulls being gentle, loving and loyal companion animals: pit bulls are eager to please their guardian, are gentle even with very young children, can be great as therapy, search and rescue or police dogs, are no different than other breeds and are not inherently aggressive to humans. A popular perception in theme two was that pit bulls are very willing to please their owners, even when abused.
- III. Theme three (59% of answers) consisted of perceptions regarding the media-induced stigma of pit bulls. The data indicated that there is nervousness among humans towards pit bulls and their bad reputation comes from the media; the term pit bull negatively stereotyped the dog's character. Because their reputation overshadows individuals, people might be afraid to adopt them and they are unwanted as companion animals.
- IV. Theme four (57% of the respondent's answers) pertained to the scary and intimidating physical appearance of pit bulls. They were considered to be the most powerful dog, very muscular, scary-aggressive, ugly, not cute, short haired dogs with big heads, the most powerful-big jaws and cropped ears. Their boxy head was considered to be intimidating.
- V. Theme five (55% of responses) consisted of the following perceptions: pit bulls are status symbols, associated with gangs, not traditional pets, over-bred by illegal breeders and receive abusive training; there is a proxy association of pit bulls with their owner

status. The owners are responsible for training their dogs to be good or bad, they are also responsible for over breeding and breeding for hostility and they should be held responsible for their dog's behavior. Pit bull's behavior depends on how they are raised. Pit bulls are bred and raised for the wrong purposes by ignorant owners and illegal breeders; as a result there is a high population of pit bulls in certain areas and they are often abused. These dogs were associated with ghettos, violence, poverty, gangs, and the inner city. "Pit bull" was also considered to be a culturally constructed masculine concept and a dog that is mostly a status symbol associated with oppression rather than a traditional pet.

- VI. Theme six (46% of responses) consisted of perceptions that pit bulls are victims of animal cruelty and abuse. The following words and phrases were used by the participants: pit bulls are misunderstood, misrepresented, better dogs than their reputation-when treated well behave well, neglected, victims, abused, not cared for properly, chained, live in the basement, victims of animal cruelty.
- VII. Theme seven (7% of respondent answers) was a policy-focused category that included thoughts regarding Breed Specific Legislation (BSL), breed banning and the high population of pit bulls in Michigan. Policy themes were the least commonly raised images.

In summary, this study revealed that respondents had vague and polarized definitions and perceptions regarding pit bulls: Polarized perceptions and over-inclusive definitions contribute to lack of effective communication and policy responses that address the most common causes of dog bites which typically have human rather than canine roots. The most important take-away is that there is a great deal of misinformation about pit bulls even among people who are in a position to be knowledgeable. There is clearly a need for education to ensure that policies and laws are evidenced based.

Policy Implications

With the exception of the media theme, the most frequently mentioned themes are internal to the pit bulls themselves: that they are variously dangerous and wonderful and that they are scary looking. This suggests that education is needed to inform veterinary professionals and their students, as well as laypeople and public officials, about the actual traits and characteristics of pit bull-type dogs. This should start as educational modules in K-twelve classrooms since research has indicated many misperceptions already present at early ages.¹⁴ It seems that veterinary schools would do well to focus attention on breed identification and traits generally, and for pit bull-type dogs specifically. This would also allow medical professionals to transmit accurate information to their students and clients. Animal control personnel also share mixed images of pit bulls; since they are responsible for their rescue and, in many cases, decisions about adoptability and euthanization, this is a serious concern. Special training modules for animal control and shelter personnel appear warranted. Further, education regarding responsible dog ownership and canine behavior is a means to inform people about canine anticipated behaviors, reinforce the human-canine bond, and reduce dog bites and other behaviors that result in disruption of the bond.

Owner education materials and programs could be provided by animal shelters and controls as part of the adoption and licensing process, at community forums, and at veterinary offices.

The least mentioned themes—the risks from bad owners, the pit bull as victim, and policy solutions—are all external to the dog itself and relate to societal issues more generally. This too raises concerns since society, not the dogs, appears to lie at the root of the pit bull “problem.” Public policy can go a long way in addressing both negative images and treatment of pit bull-type dogs. While animal cruelty laws are on the books in most jurisdictions, they are often unenforced, typically due to resource constraints.¹⁵ Laws that protect the animal victims of abuse from irresponsible owners and breeders should be more strictly and proactively enforced.

The common approach to the pit bull “problem” as evidenced by breed specific legislation (BSL) is tantamount to treating only the symptoms of a disease (i.e., killing all pit bulls), while the disease itself (i.e., irresponsible owners and breeders) is never targeted. A reality check is in order when communities are tempted to turn to a breed ban, particularly as it relates to pit bulls:

- Pit bull” is not a breed, but simply a term used to describe a variety of mixed-breed dogs with similar characteristics. DNA tests of pit bull-looking dogs often come up with unexpected results; one dog that looked like a pit bull turned out to be 40 percent poodle (<http://www.pickthepit.com/>).
- According to the American Temperament Test Society, 86 percent of American pit bull terriers tested had a good temperament. That is better than 121 other breeds including golden retrievers and beagles (<http://atts.org/breed-statistics/>).
- Breed bans are impractical. Even if particular breeds could be identified as high risk, “absurdly large numbers of dogs of targeted breeds” would have to be removed from a community in order to prevent even one serious dog bite-related injury. http://nationalcanineresearchcouncil.com/uploaded_files/tinymce/NNB%20now%20available%20in%20JAVMA%20dated.pdf
- Breed bans are expensive due to the costs of enforcement, kenneling, euthanasia and litigation. The cost of maintaining a single suspected pit bull throughout the entire determination and appeals process has been found to be \$68,000.
- Finally, breed bans are ineffective; cities and countries that have established such bans have not recorded any reduction in the rate of dog bites, according to the National Canine Research Council.

To solve the pit bull “problem”, laws that protect all dogs from abusive owners and breeders should be reinforced. The fact that there appears to be a trend toward the repeal of BSL indicates that public policy may be moving beyond such simplistic solutions.¹⁶ The absence of mentions of other policies that could be used to address treatment of pit bulls suggests that the media, veterinary schools, and educational programs would be well-served to highlight the spectrum of policies that could be implemented in this regard: anti-tethering ordinances to ensure that dogs are not chained outside or used for guarding purposes, enforcement of mandatory licensing and vaccination regulations, more active dog fighting surveillance, and greater transparency in animal shelter policies, for example.

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- ¹⁵ Reese, L.A. (2015).
- ¹⁶ www.antibsl.com/bsl-cities-us