



Why Breed-Specific Legislation Does Not Work

We have all heard the heartbreaking stories: A child is brutally attacked by a dog. A beloved family pet or a farmer's livestock is killed or injured by a stray dog. Such stories are common, and everyone agrees our communities must be protected from dangerous animals.

When faced with this dilemma, many public officials have turned to breed-specific legislation (BSL) as a possible solution. Breed-specific legislation is any proposal or regulation that seeks to ban or place severe restrictions on owners of a particular breed of dog or dogs with certain physical characteristics, regardless of whether or not the individual dog is a problem in the community. The most well-known version of BSL automatically designates specific breeds as "dangerous". Other types of BSL include breed-specific mandatory sterilization requirements, liability insurance conditions, or higher licensing fees. By profiling dogs based on breed or appearance, BSL unfairly penalizes responsible dog owners without holding owners of truly dangerous dogs accountable.

This is why the American Kennel Club (AKC), the American Veterinary Medical Association, the National Animal Control Association, the American Bar Association, and a host of other respected national organizations oppose BSL and recognize the inequities, inherent fallacies, and ineffectiveness of such laws.

Policy and Implementation Concerns

There are a number of inherent problems with breed-specific legislation. Banning a specific breed punishes responsible dog owners who have well-trained dogs of that breed, while irresponsible owners who want a "dangerous dog" as a status symbol will simply choose another breed. Meanwhile, public officials are left to continue adding to a seemingly endless list of forbidden breeds.

BSL forces animal control officers to become breed-identification experts in order to determine whether a specific dog is on the list of regulated breeds. Some communities have attempted to define a dangerous dog as any dog that has certain physical characteristics. This forces local officials to focus on a dog's appearance rather than its behavior – and often results in incorrect identification. Denver, Colorado animal control officers are estimated to conduct as many as six breed identification evaluations each week – time that could be spent focusing on true animal control concerns.

Breed-specific laws also lead to increased costs to the community, as many owners abandon their household pets at local shelters because they are no longer permitted to own them or are unable to comply with the strict regulations imposed on them. In many cases, the owner must choose between relocating to a different town or relinquishing their dog. As a result, many dogs end up at municipal shelters where they must be housed and/or euthanized at the taxpayer's expense. For example, Denver, Colorado's breed-specific laws cost the city over \$6 million per year (estimate) to implement before voters overwhelmingly approved a repeal of the law's outright ban of "pit bulls" in 2020.

Did you know?

Some of the breeds commonly placed on banned lists, including American Staffordshire Terriers, Rottweilers, and German Shepherds, are regularly used as therapy dogs, search-and-rescue dogs, police/military working dogs, and service dogs for the disabled.

A Declining Trend



Across the United States, the American Kennel Club plays an active role in stopping breed-specific legislation. Each year, the AKC works with counties and municipalities that seek to repeal their breed-specific laws as they recognize its ineffectiveness in addressing concerns with dangerous dogs or irresponsible owners. While Denver's abovementioned 2020 repeal is certainly high profile, it is only the latest in a string of localities that recently renounced harsh BSL ownership bans. For instance, in March 2018, the City of Anamosa, Iowa, lifted a seven-year ban on "pit bulls" and dogs with similar characteristics. During the first 60 days after repeal, the city of just over 5,000 residents issued 180 new dog licenses; and in the first fiscal year following the repeal, the city experienced a 45% increase in the number of dog licenses issued, representing a 250% increase in licensing compliance from just two years before.

Another example comes from Wyandotte County (Kansas City), Kansas, which repealed its "pit bull" ban in May 2019. The nearly 30-year-old ordinance also banned American Staffordshire Terriers and Staffordshire Bull Terriers. During the ban, Kansas City's Animal Services spent one-quarter of their \$1 million annual budget on enforcing the ban. The Humane Society of Greater Kansas City was forced to spend additional money on "pit bulls" in their shelter because they could only adopt those dogs to people not located in the county, and "pit bulls" would spend significantly more time in the shelter than other dogs.

As a result of the significant cost savings that resulted from the repeal of its BSL ordinance, Wyandotte County's Animal Services are now planning to upgrade animal housing, hire additional staff, and microchip every shelter animal that didn't already have a microchip before rehoming.

Thus far, lawmakers in 19 states have also established fair public policy by enacting laws that are explicitly breed-neutral and preempt local governments from passing BSL.

Moreover, governments around the world have also recognized the inherent problems with BSL and are revising their dangerous dog policies. Italy, for example, banned over 90 breeds before repealing its breed-specific policies after six years of costly enforcement and ineffectiveness; and the Dutch government removed its "pit bull" ban after determining that it did not decrease dog bites or improve safety.

Better Alternatives

Time and time again, communities that have enacted BSL realize that if they truly want to address the problems of dangerous dogs and irresponsible ownership, then they need to focus on enacting breed-neutral animal control legislation that holds all dog owners accountable.

More effective ways of protecting communities from dangerous dogs include increased public education efforts to promote responsible dog ownership principles; strict, uniform enforcement of animal control laws (such as leash laws); breed-neutral guidelines that clearly define dangerous behavior based on stated, measurable actions for all breeds; establishing well-defined methods for dealing with dogs proven to be dangerous; and imposing appropriate penalties on irresponsible owners.



AKC's Government Relations Department is available to help communities develop dangerous dog policies based on these proven principles that properly and fairly protect residents, animals, responsible dog owners, and public safety alike.