

# Pit bull Dogs

Invited testimony

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## Background

By training, I am an ecologist with a public health background with a doctorate from The Johns Hopkins School of Public Health, Baltimore Maryland. From 1974-1979 I directed the Bureau of Animal Affairs, in the Department of Health, City of New York. From 1979-1990, I have directed the *Center for the Interaction of Animals and Society* at the University of Pennsylvania's School of Veterinary Medicine. Since 1990, I have been the Dorothy N. McAllister Professor of Animal Ecology and Director of the *Center for the Human-Animal Bond* at the School of Veterinary Medicine, Purdue University. For more than two decades, I have conducted studies on the interaction of people and their pet animals,<sup>1</sup> the epidemiology and behavior of animal bite injury,<sup>2</sup> and the epidemiology of rabies.<sup>3</sup> I have served as a consultant on the reporting of animal bite and animal control for the Centers of Disease Control (CDC) and several municipalities around the country. Over the years I have become familiar with many aspects of animal control legislation<sup>4</sup> and it is my honor to be asked to comment on the legislative proposals in Ontario's Bill 132 addressing the issue of dog attack especially as it relates to the apparent increase in serious attacks and injury associated with "pit bull-like" dogs.

## Serious Dog Bites

Dog bite is extremely common,<sup>5,6,7</sup> perhaps epidemic,<sup>8</sup> and there is little doubt that the laws and regulations that address animal ownership and supervision require revision.

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<sup>1</sup> Beck AM and Katcher AH: *Between Pets and People: The Importance of Animal Companionship*. West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 1996.

<sup>2</sup> Beck AM: *The Ecology of Stray Dogs: A Study of Free Ranging-Urban Animals*. Baltimore, York Press, 1973. Republished, West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 2002.

<sup>3</sup> Beck AM, Felser SR, and Glickman LT: An epizootic of rabies in Maryland, 1982-84. *American Journal of Public Health* 77: 42-44, 1987.

<sup>4</sup> Beck AM: The impact of the canine clean-up law. *Environment* 21(8): 28-31, 1979.

<sup>5</sup> Beck AM and Jones B: Unreported dog bite in children. *Public Health Reports* 100:315-321, 1985.

<sup>6</sup> Beck AM, Loring H, and Lockwood R: The ecology of dog bite injury in St. Louis, Mo. *Public Health Reports* 90:262-269, 1975.

<sup>7</sup> Beck AM: The epidemiology and prevention of animal bites. *Seminars in Veterinary Medicine and Surgery (Small Animal)*, 6(3): 186-191, 1991.

<sup>8</sup> Harris D, Imperato PJ, and Oken B: Dog bites--an unrecognized epidemic. *Bulletin New York Academy of Medicine* 50:980-1000, 1974.

There are different underlying reasons for very serious or fatal dog bites:

1. While most bites are not serious, chance alone dictates that some will be at the serious end of the injury distribution;
2. Certain types of dogs actually bite a victim in ways more like a predatory attack inflicting multiple bites or tearing of flesh;<sup>9</sup>
3. Breeding and the inherent characteristics of certain breeds or types of dogs;
4. Socialization; and
5. Training of a dog to be more attack prone.

In all cases, the attack is more serious when the victim is more vulnerable because of age; the very young and older adults are less able to defend themselves or escape.

### **Pit Bull Attacks**

A representative sample of fatal dog bites was studied by using the National Center for Health Statistics and a computerized searching of news stories.<sup>10</sup> They identified 157 dog-related fatalities from 1979 to 1988, and 70 percent of the victims were under ten years of age. The neonatal (infant) mortality rate, 294.9 deaths per 100 million per people each year, was nearly 370 times greater than the rate for adults of 30-49 years, 0.8 percent (Table 1). More than 50 % of all deaths were of children under age four, and 70 percent were under age ten. Pit bulls accounted for 41.6 percent of all fatal bites where dog breed was reported, and pit bulls were implicated more than twice as often when the attack was caused by loose dogs. As in other studies, deaths of infants were mainly caused by single animals in the home.

Later studies still demonstrate that pit bull dogs account for the majority of fatal dog attacks. These animals account for more than 30% of all fatalities and are more than half of the dogs involved in deaths as often more than one is involved (Table 2). While there are many factors contributing to dog attacks, including whether or not the animal(s) were restrained, it also appears that some breeds are more and some breeds are less prone to attack.

One of the major questions remaining is whether fatal attack is just one end of the spectrum of the bite problem—from the trivial nip to the bite that kills, or the result of a special set of circumstances. The epidemiological information indicates that there are risk factors that influence fatal dog bite, and they include breed of dog. “Breed differences do occur in regard to behavior. Problems with a particular breed, however, may vary according to its popularity, its general location, and over time. National trends do occur, but the fact that a certain breed ranks high on a list of problem dogs may not be significant. Popular breeds will necessarily be represented in higher numbers for any given problem. Only when the rate of a certain problem in that breed is higher than the distribution of the breed in the canine population can it be considered a breed-specific problem.” (p.13)<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Borchelt PL, Lockwood R, Beck AM, and Voith VL: Attacks by packs of dogs involving predation on human beings. *Public Health Reports* 98:57-66, 1983.

<sup>10</sup> Sacks, JJ, Sattin, RW, Bonzo, SE: Dog bite-related fatalities from 1979 through 1988. *JAMA* 262:1489-1492, 1989.

<sup>11</sup> Beaver, BV: *Canine Behavior: a Guide for Veterinarians*. Philadelphia: W.B. Saunders Co., 1999.

There are no accurate estimates of the number of dogs per breeds in the U.S. However, 30-50% of U.S. dogs are registered by the American Kennel Club (AKC) and there is no evidence that some breeds are more or less likely to be registered.<sup>12</sup> Therefore registrations appear to be an unbiased estimate of relative breed popularity. It appears that compared to their popularity, there are breeds that are less prone to fatally bite, even breeds larger in stature than the pit bull (Table 3). There are also breeds whose attack rate no more or no less than expected relative to their popularity (Table 4). Lastly, there are breeds that are more prone to kill and pit bull dogs are significantly over represented (Table 5). While pit bulls are not specifically registered by the AKC, combining all Bull Terriers and Staffordshire Bull Terriers is presented as a surrogate for the pit bull population. Even if one questions the validity of the AKC approach, no one argues that the pit bull population no larger than 2-9% of the dog population yet accounts for nearly 30% of the fatal attacks on humans. This attack rate is significant from both a common sense and statistical perspective.

A typical epidemiological approach is not possible for the study of fatal attacks from pit bull dogs as they are relatively rare and the total pit bull population is not precisely known. Nevertheless, the increased incidence of pit bull attacks reported globally, even as the total dog population is decreasing, or at best is stable, suggests that the problem of pit bull attacks are not simply a random deviation from the basic injury rate to be expected to occur when people and dogs interact.

The most benign explanation is that attacks from "pit bull-like" dogs are now better reported because of increased social awareness. I do not personally believe that is the total explanation. There is evidence that serious dog bite attacks are reported regardless of breed. In addition, using a variety of registries as estimates of the pit bull population, it is apparent that attacks from them are far more than expected compared to other breeds of the same size or even larger.

Breed history and genetics are often recognized, people are not surprised when herding dogs herd. The AKC reports breed history and behavioral tendencies. While the AKC does not have a listing for pit bulls, the breed was developed from two recognized breeds. The AKC does describe those breeds' behavioral tendencies; for the Staffordshire Bull Terrier: "Early in the 19th century the sport of dog fighting gained popularity and a smaller faster dog was developed" and for the Bull Terrier: "As fighting dog or 'gladiator' of the canine world, such a dog had to be of great strength, agility, and courage."<sup>13</sup>

The United Kennel Club does register the American Pit Bull Terrier (APBT), which it describes as such: "Because most APBTs exhibit some level of dog aggression and because of its powerful physique, the APBT requires an owner who will carefully socialize and obedience train the dog. The breed's natural agility makes it one of the most capable canine climbers so good fencing is a must for this breed."

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<sup>12</sup> Dale E. Garside, American Kennel Club, Director, Electronic Reporting, personal communication, 2005.

<sup>13</sup> American Kennel Club (AKC). 1997. *The Complete Dog Book-19<sup>th</sup> Edition, Revised*. New York: Howell Book House. 1997.

“Aggressive personalities are both made and born. This means that traits, such as those for guarding, as with the German shepherd, can be inherited.”(p.11).<sup>14</sup> If herding dogs herd then pit bulls can be explained to be aggressive and in need of special supervision. Pit bull-like dogs are not only more likely to bite, but inflict more serious injury to people and other dogs when they do bite. It is important to note the difference between bites and serious attacks. While all breeds of dogs can and do bite on occasion, pit bulls (due to their inherent fighting nature, strength and high pain threshold) have a much higher potential of being involved in a serious attack than most, if not all, breeds. There is no doubt that the fear of pit bull dogs is reasonable and social tension about them should also be considered when a community is developing policy.

### **Bill 132**

I have reviewed many legislative provisions that involve a ban on pit bulls and/or deal with dangerous dogs generally. I have reviewed Bill 132 and it is one of the most complete I have seen.

The provisions regarding all dangerous dogs are appropriate. The significant penalties and restitution to victims that can be ordered against an owner are appropriate and may very well influence owners to be more responsible. It is also prudent for legislation to encompass dogs that have proven to be a threat to public safety as this proposed legislation does, rather than limiting offences only to dogs that have already bitten or attacked.

Regarding the pit bull ban in Bill 132, it strikes a balance and realistically solves a real problem. It allows current owners to keep their pets under certain restrictions that are in the interests of public safety (the sterilization, leashing and muzzling requirements).

### **Opposition to Pit Bull Bans**

There have been objections to the pit bull management laws including:<sup>15</sup>

1. identifying the breed;
2. “ban the deed not the breed” / “breed profiling”;
3. over/under inclusive; and
4. breed is not the only factor in fatal attacks.

### Identification

The definition of pit bull in Bill 132 is a common one. Including recognized breeds that are commonly recognized as pit bulls dogs and dogs that that have the appearance and physical characteristics that are substantially similar to the identified breeds is a common, reasonable approach though it significantly impacts on specific owners and breeders. Subjectively judging a breed has worked with other “dangerous” dog ordinances and the banning of wolves and their hybrids. Even a jury has its subjective aspects.

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<sup>14</sup> Beaver, BV: The Veterinarian’s Encyclopedia of Animal Behavior. Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1994.

<sup>15</sup> Lockwood R, Rindy K: Are "pit-bulls" different? An analysis of the pit bull terrier controversy. *Anthrozoös* 1(1): 2-8, 1987.

“Ban the deed not the breed” / “breed profiling”

Often subjective assessment has been called breed profiling, though many appear happy to blame the owner, owner profiling. This argument has been used when fighting gun control—people not guns kill. However, since not all people behave well, and accidents do occur, it is best to lessen access to at least automatic weapons. Like any ban, such as gun control measures, there will be a vocal group of ideological detractors. And, like bans such as gun control, this ban is responsible as it solves the problem of the inherent danger of serious attack faced by the majority of people while respecting the continued ownership of pets by a minority of people. The value of pet ownership is reflected in this bill through its grandfathering provisions.

It is insidious to compare breed legislation with the profiling some may inappropriately apply to different human groups. We profile dogs because they were selectively bred to have behavior tendencies and physical attributes for perceived human purposes. The aggressive nature and physical strength of the pit bull is at odds with the role dogs now play in modern society.

Over/under inclusive

It has been argued that breed specific legislation is often guilty of being at times “over inclusive” in that not all members of the breed attack. At times legislation has also been accused of being “under inclusive” as not all attacking dogs are of the breed in question.<sup>16</sup> What should be appreciated is that public health identifies risk factors that impact on health—almost every risk factor has exceptions, e.g., many know cigarette smokers live long and healthy lives, but few deny that the greater good is served by legislation that restricts smoking.

Breed and fatal attacks

Breed is a factor in relation to fatal attacks. There are other factors; however, these other factors do not detract from the logic of a pit bull ban. Age of the victim and escape of the dog are also common factors. Age is not a risk factor that can be changed therefore, we should increase our diligence regarding how we manage our animals because the youngest and oldest are the most common victims. Escape is often a problem for animals and the community. One of the reasons society often restricts the ownership of wild animals in cities is because escape would be a problem for the animal and the community. Analogously, this is truer for pit bull dogs than for any other breed. Most breeds show less aggression the farther they are away from their own territory.<sup>17</sup>

**Why do no “experts” such as veterinarians and human societies, support a ban?**

It is my view that the opposition to a pit bull ban is driven by:

1. An ideological belief by some that a ban is “breed profiling” and discriminatory (which I discussed above).
2. A worry about losing one’s constituency (i.e. business type concern).

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<sup>16</sup> Marmer L: The new breed of municipal dog control laws: are they constitutional? *Cincinnati Law Review* 53:1067-1081, 1984.

<sup>17</sup> Rubin HD, Beck AM: Ecological behavior of free-ranging urban dogs. *Applied Animal Ethology* 8: 161-168, 1982.

3. The slippery slope argument. On this point, I note that Bill 132 deals only with pit bulls and does not allow other breeds or types of dogs to be added by regulation.

The pit bull defenders have formed a very ideological, vocal and strident special interest lobby which has no tolerance for those opposed to them. While this lobby may not reflect the views of the majority of the public, they have captured the industry. Those in the industry that may agree with, or be sympathetic towards, a ban do not speak out against the anti-breed ban “party line” as they then become the subject of intense criticism within their profession and in the media. I have experienced this myself and have become somewhat of a target by speaking out.

Some may be surprised that many veterinary associations defend pit bulls or are at least quiet on the ban issue. Veterinary associations are composed primarily of private practitioners who are less familiar with the public health literature and interact with pit bulls only in practice settings accompanied by dedicated owners; such dogs are less likely to demonstrate aggressive behavior.

I have reviewed the transcript of the testimony of Dr. Bonnie Beaver, who chairs the Task Force on Canine Aggression and Human-Canine Interactions for the American Veterinary Medical Association. She testified to the Standing Committee on the Legislative Assembly on January 27. Specifically, Dr. Beaver said, “For many, many years he [Beck] had followed and condemned breed-specific bans.” I have never said anything about breed-specific bans to Dr. Beaver and it is not in any of my writings. I have reported on animal bite and attack for many years but this is the first time I have been asked to share my opinion about breed-specific bans. Over the years I have reluctantly come to the conclusion that such bans are in the best interest of people and their companion dogs.

There are still many in our cities that do not appreciate any dog or their owners. Veterinary and humane societies and breed registries have done important work in helping dog ownership fit better into society but their efforts are minimized every time a dog kills a person. These organizations should take the lead in making sure the dog population is safe for people and dogs. The dog population will be safer without pit bulls and that will benefit all other breeds and their owners.

## **Conclusion**

There are hundreds of kinds of domestic dogs available, the vast majority do well, even thrive in society. For many, companion dogs play the role of a family member, often, a member with the most desired attributes. For some, dogs afford increased opportunities to meet people, while for others they permit people to be alone without being lonely. It would be sad if the wonders of the dog-human bond were lessened or lost because of the unsafe behavior of pit bulls.

Pit bulls are different; like a wild animal they need complete supervision as escape is disastrous for them and the community. They're not suited for an urban environment. I believe we should open our eyes and take a **realistic** approach to pit bulls. Those opposed state that if all pit bull owners took the intensive steps necessary to control this particular type of dog (training, socializing, supervision around other animals and people, especially children, etc.) and if all members of the public, especially children, would

behave properly around pit bulls, then there would not be a problem. I do not feel that this is realistic nor would it eliminate pit bull attacks given:

- that realistically, governments cannot feasibly monitor each pit bull owner and all those that interact or come across pit bulls;
- that this is not fiscally prudent for governments,
- that this argument seems, at least in part, to blame the victim; and
- the inherent nature and strength of pit bulls.

Pit bulls are like a “loaded gun.” Like guns, in the wrong hands there is great potential for serious harm to humans and pets. Even in the hands of the “innocent” there is serious potential for harm as is evidenced by the common media reports of attacks where pit bull owners are reported as saying they were responsible and never had a problem until the attack in question. It is therefore my opinion that the legislation being proposed in Ontario takes a pragmatic and realistic approach to public safety in relation to pit bulls and other dangerous dogs.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Alan M. Beck".

Alan M. Beck, Sc.D.  
February 3, 2005

Table 1

**Dog Bite-Related Fatalities and Death Rates, by Age and Sex, United States, 1989–1994**

Age group	Number of Deaths (Death Rates*)		
	Males	Females	Total
<1 month	3 (298.5)	2 (208.5)	6 (305.4)
1-11 months	4 (36.2)	8 (75.8)	12 (55.5)
1-4 years	18 (38.3)	9 (20.1)	27 (29.4)
5-9 years	11 (19.5)	6 (11.2)	17 (15.5)
10-29 years	4 (1.8)	1 (0.5)	5 (1.1)
30-49 years	5 (2.2)	5 (2.2)	10 (2.2)
50-69 years	3 (2.5)	8 (5.8)	11 (4.3)
≥70 years	<u>6</u> (11.5)	<u>14</u> (16.9)	<u>20</u> (14.9)
<b>Total</b>	<b>55 (7.4)</b>	<b>53 (6.8)</b>	<b>109 (7.1)</b>

\* Per 100 million population per year.

Sacks JJ, et al: Fatal dog attacks, 1989-1994. *Pediatrics* 97:891-895, 1996

Table 2

**Breeds of dogs involved in human dog bite-related fatalities between 1979 and 1998, using death-based and dog dog-based approaches**

Breed	Death-based approach			Dog-based approach		
	Purebred	Crossbred	Total	Purebred	Crossbred	Total
Pit bull-type	66	11*	76*	98	20	118
Rottweiler	39	6*	44*	60	7	67
German Shepherd Dog	17	11*	27*	24	17	41
Husky-type (includes at least 2 Siberian)	15	6	21	15	6	21
Malamute	12	3	15	13	3	16
Wolf-dog hybrid	0	14	14	0	15	15
Mixed-breed(NOS)	0	12	12	0	47	47
Chow Chow	8	3	11	8	13	21
Doberman	9	1	10	12	1	13
Saint Bernard	7	1	8	7	1	8
Great Dane	7	1*	7*	11	2	13
Labrador Retriever	1	4	5	1	7	8
Akita	4	0	4	4	0	4
Sled-type (NOS)	3	0	3	12	0	12
Bulldog	2	1	3	2	1	3
Mastiff	2	1	3	4	1	5
Boxer	2	1	3	4	1	5
Collie	0	3	3	0	6	6
Bullmastiff	1	1	2	1	1	2
Hound-type (NOS)	1	1	2	1	1	2
Retriever-type (NOS)	1	0	1	1	0	1
Chesapeake Bay Retriever	1	0	1	1	0	1
West Highland Terrier (NOS)	1	0	1	1	0	1
Terrier-type (NOS)	1	0	1	1	0	1
Japanese Hunting Dog (NOS)	1	0	1	1	0	1
Newfoundland	1	0	1	1	0	1
Coonhound	1	0	1	1	0	1
Sheepdog (NOS)	1	0	1	1	0	1
Australian Shepherd	0	1	1	0	3	3
Rhodesian Ridgeback	1	0	1	1	0	1
Cocker Spaniel	1	0	1	1	0	1

\*A purebred dog and a crossbred dog of this breed were involved in a single fatality; therefore, that breed is counted only once in the total column.

NOS = Not otherwise specified.

Sacks et al. Breeds of dogs involved in fatal human attacks in the United States between 1979 and 1998. *JAVMA* 217: 836-840, 2000

**Fatal Dog Attack 1965-2001**Table 3 **Breeds Lower than Expected**

<b>Breed</b>	<b>Fatal %<sup>1</sup></b>	<b>AKC %<sup>2</sup></b>	<b>p value</b>
Mixed breed <sup>3</sup>	13.0	49.0	0.000
Golden Retriever	1.0	5.9	0.000
Labrador Retriever	0.7	16.1	0.000
Dachshund	0.7	4.4	0.002
Briard	0.3	0.03	0.001
<u>Bulldog</u>	<u>0.3</u>	<u>1.6</u>	<u>0.080</u>

<sup>1</sup>single dog involved<sup>2</sup>AKC registrations, 2002<sup>3</sup>APPMA 2002 survey for mixed breedsTable 4 **Breeds No different that Expected**

<b>Breed</b>	<b>Fatal %<sup>1</sup></b>	<b>AKC %<sup>2</sup></b>	<b>p value</b>
Great Dane	1.7	0.8	0.17
Bull mastiff	0.7	0.6	0.24
West Highland	0.3	0.8	0.37
Brittany Spaniel	0.3	0.8	0.36
Old Eng. Sheepdog	0.3	0.2	0.43
Irish Setter	0.3	0.2	0.55
Newfoundland	0.3	0.3	0.64
Airedale Terrier	0.3	0.3	0.89
<u>Basenji</u>	<u>0.2</u>	<u>0.1</u>	<u>0.31</u>

<sup>1</sup>single dog involved<sup>2</sup>AKC registrations, 2002Table 5 **Breeds Higher than Expected**

<b>Breed</b>	<b>Fatal %<sup>1</sup></b>	<b>AKC %<sup>2</sup></b>	<b>p value</b>
Pit Bull <sup>3</sup>	18.8	0.2	0.000
Rottweiler	10.9	2.3	0.000
German Shepherd	8.2	4.9	0.009
Siberian Husky	6.8	1.3	0.000
Malamute	5.5	0.2	0.000
Chow Chow	3.8	0.2	0.000
St. Bernard	3.4	0.5	0.000
Doberman	2.4	1.2	0.070
<u>Akita</u>	<u>2.0</u>	<u>0.4</u>	<u>0.000</u>

<sup>1</sup>single dog involved<sup>2</sup>AKC registrations, 2002<sup>3</sup>AKC Bull Terriers + Staffordshire Bull Terriers