

The perils of pit bulls

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Nick spent several days in critical condition in the hospital but was recently upgraded to serious. Jourdan was released from the hospital recently and is recovering from her wounds. The dogs-- which apparently had no history of such aggression--were shot by police.

Every time there's a gruesome attack like this--as in 2003, when a woman jogging in Dan Ryan Woods was attacked and killed by a pack of pit bulls--the immediate, emotional response is to ban the dogs. Some communities, including Denver, Miami, Prince George's County in Maryland --and Ontario, province in Canada, --have done so. That has a visceral appeal, but the effectiveness of such laws is hard to gauge. And they also punish many law-abiding owners.

Statistics on pit bull attacks are sketchy. But what's out there is scary. A study, conducted by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the American Veterinary Medical Association, tracked dogs involved in 238 fatal attacks on humans between 1979 and 1998. The study found that pit bull type dogs were involved in about a third of the incidents. The study didn't prove the dogs are intrinsically more dangerous, but the prevalence of attack by pit bulls is no doubt far out of proportion to their population.

Many of these dogs are dangerous and volatile. When they attack, it is more likely they'll inflict serious damage because of the way they've been bred or trained to fight.

It has become clear, with attack after attack, that the laws must be tightened, focusing on both owners and dogs.

- First, the owners. The American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals is working with Illinois legislators to tighten a 2003 law that enabled prosecutors to charge dog owners with felonies if their dogs attacked after previously being identified as dangerous.

The ASPCA is pressing to change the law so an owner could face felony charges even if the dog did not have a history of aggression. That would apply only if the dog is not sterilized and the owners knowingly let it out.

That idea makes sense, in the same way that someone who drives drunk and plows into a pedestrian can be charged with reckless homicide. The legislature may also consider targeting that law against owners of more dangerous breeds. Owners should be on notice that such dogs, trained to fight or not, could land them in jail if they are allowed to get out and hurt someone.

- Next, the dogs. Here's a statistic that should guide lawmakers when they think about cracking down: the vast majority of dog-bite cases come from dogs that have not been sterilized.

San Francisco recently passed a law that required the sterilization of pit bulls, after the fatal mauling of a 12-year-old boy by his family's pit bulls. That's a smart step toward cutting attacks.

Unfortunately, no law will likely deter the gang bangers and others who seek dangerous pit bulls to intimidate others. But it may stop those who haven't fully thought through the perils of owning such a dog.

Not all pit bulls are dangerous. But sifting the dangerous from the rest is an imprecise science. As history shows time and again, many dog owners can't be counted on to know the difference, or to care.

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