

Pit Bulls Are Not Our Friends

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Pit bull– type dogs in Canada today are estimated to number in the hundreds of thousands. But in the 1990s, there would have been relatively few. So their [characteristic mode of attack](#) was practically unknown in the legal community when, in June of 1997, seven- year old Sharon Reynolds of Kingston, Ontario, was [killed by a pit bull](#). Her mother, Louise, was wrongly charged for her death because the pediatric forensic pathologist on the case — now infamously disgraced for his incompetence — concluded that the eighty bite wounds on the child’s body were scissor stabs. Louise spent three and a half years in prison before forensic evidence cleared her.

Eighty wounds! It is freakishly rare for any dog other than a pit bull, Rottweiler, semi- feral husky, or wolf hybrid to inflict this kind of damage. At the time, most animal- control officers had never seen injuries of such severity. Today, unfortunately, dog bite– related trauma is recognized as a prevalent problem in North America — and as a result, public demand for dangerous- dog legislation is becoming increasingly common.

On April 17, after months of stalling and highly politicized public debate, Quebec introduced Bill 128, breed- specific legislation (BSL) primarily intended to eliminate pit bull– type dogs from the province. The provisions of the law exceed the recommendations submitted by a preceding working committee, making it North America’s most uncompromising and comprehensive dangerous- dog legislation.

Direct impetus for the bill sprang from last year’s unprovoked fatal mauling of a fifty- five- year- old Montrealer by her neighbour’s pit bull. But concern over dangerous dogs has simmered for years, and some municipalities — like the tourist towns of Saint- Adèle and Saint- Sauveur — already have a ban in place. For the large majority of the population who don’t follow this issue, it is hard to overstate the emotional intensity on both sides. As John Homans wrote in his 2012 book, *What’s a Dog For?*, “The fierceness and impacted rage in some of these disputes suggested to me they were about something else, and they are: the politics of dogs are a reflection, distilled and distorted, of the politics of people. They’re surrogates for our own conflicts.”

This loads any contemporary discussion about pit bulls with a variety of other cultural topics, such as identity politics and racial profiling. But after decades of following this issue — in which I have reviewed the academic literature, studied the available data, spoken with victims of pit- bull attacks and their loved ones, and forced myself to look at the gruesome photographs — my conclusion is that Bill 128 sets out a fair, reasonable, and humane pathway to a safer public environment.

I became caught up in the toils of dangerous dog– legislation advocacy fourteen years ago, and the issue continues to galvanize me every time a pit bull mauls or kills someone — especially a child. Unlike most in the pro-BSL camp, I did not come to this topic via a negative personal encounter with a dog. No one close to me has ever had such an experience, either. I am merely an engaged observer of the pit- bull wars. The issue first came to my attention in 2003, when I read an enlightening article from 1999 in *City Journal* magazine about the public safety hazard these dogs represent. Until then, I’d had no idea of how popular they had become, nor of the damage their presence in numbers could inflict.

In his article, Brian Anderson wrote about how the Bronx neighbourhood where he once lived had deteriorated, as pit- bull owners and their pets began to populate the local park. Seniors gradually abandoned their daily outings there, and the quarter’s former ambiance of general social reciprocity disintegrated. A rash of unsettling incidents, including attacks on other dogs, convinced Anderson this was no place for his family, and they decamped from the area. “We had learned that intimidating dogs can impair a neighborhood’s quality of life and give the sense that no one is in charge every bit as much as drug dealing, prostitution, or aggressive panhandling,” he wrote.

Anderson’s words got my full attention. I brooded over the undeserved fate of those who could not afford to move from that blighted neighbourhood. My most impassioned writing has always been sparked by cultural trends that begin with perceived rights but end with the erosion of civic harmony, and I had an immediate intuition that pit bulls and their owners might fit that paradigm. I was right.

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I watched with amazement as the pit- bull population proliferated following Hurricane Katrina in 2005, when thousands of rescues from New Orleans came to all corners of the US, their stories encouraging an uptick in national sympathy. That was soon followed by the [arrest](#) of Atlanta Falcons quarterback Michael Vick, for dogfighting and animal abuse. The case created an explosion in pit- bull advocacy by well- resourced institutions such as the Humane Society of the United States. Donations poured in, and the movement became a “[juggernaut](#).”

The blood- drenched statistics followed accordingly. *Animals24-7.org*, which publishes annual reports on serious human injuries and fatalities by dogs according to breed, [says that between 2007 and 2015](#), “2,793 pit bulls and close pit mixes have attacked 1,067 children and 1,189 adults in incidents in which 208 people were killed and 1,891 people were disfigured.” Rates have only gone up. Virtually all dog bite– related fatalities of domestic animals (including horses and cows) are committed by pit bulls. I’ve stayed with the subject out of sympathy for the victims. It strikes me as preposterous that there are

hundreds of websites that cater to pit- bull love — featuring endless photos of dogs dressed in tutus or posed with sleeping babies — but only one serious publication, *Dogsbite.org*, that is dedicated to giving a voice to the victims of dangerous dogs.

Pit- bull advocates present dogs as victims that need championing. They know the names of the dogs they believe deserve a second chance, but they usually don't mention the names of the human victims. Often, incidents involve a dog that had never before showed signs of aggression. One of the most horrific was [the case of Daxton Borchardt](#), a Wisconsin baby who was killed by his babysitter's two pit bulls — dogs she had raised from puppyhood. The story is unusually well documented, and its particulars fly in the face of all the mantras of the pit- bull lobby: the dogs were "fixed," they had never been abused, they were well socialized, they had a "good" owner, and there was no "provocation." Still, they attacked.

Statistics show that the more serious an animal- related injury is at a hospital, the more likely it is that the culprit was a pit bull — and the harder it becomes to believe that grave wounds are inflicted evenly across all big- dog breeds. Pit bulls represent 5 percent of the US dog population, but a [five- year review](#) of dog bite- related injuries in a Philadelphia pediatric hospital concluded that they were responsible for 51 percent of admissions. Rottweilers were responsible for 9 percent, and hybrids of the two, another 6 percent. The rest were the result of injuries inflicted by about thirty different breeds.

Based on their familiarity with injuries caused by dogs, some plastic surgeons have [spoken out](#) quite forcefully for a ban. "Starting about twenty- five years ago, my colleagues and I started to see disturbingly different types of injuries." Dr. David Billmore, professor and director of the Division of Craniofacial and Pediatric Plastic Surgery at Cincinnati's Hospital Medical Center, wrote in an editorial for *Cincinnati*. "Instead of a warning bite, we saw wounds where the flesh was torn from the victim. There were multiple bite wounds covering many different anatomical sites. The attacks were generally unprovoked, persistent and often involved more than one dog. In every instance the dog involved was a pit bull or a pit- bull mix."

BSL, such as Bill 128, helps to reduce these kinds of injuries — as has become evident from data gleaned after the inauguration of similar bans across North America. One year after imposing dangerous- dog ban in 2009, the mayor of Lancaster, California, suggested that there was a correlation between the new legislation and a 45 percent drop in violent gang crime that year. But BSL's most dramatic effect — and the fact that should have the most sway with pit- bull lovers — is to reduce the number of dogs who are put down. In fact, Bill 128 phases pit bulls out humanely, allowing current owners to keep pets that have shown no aggression.

Currently, an estimated million pit bulls are euthanized every year in North America. Presumably, many of those dogs had owners who were naïve innocents until their pit bull attacked their cat or a neighbour's pet — or even showed aggression toward a family member. There exist [quite moving testimonies](#) of how hard these owners worked to train their dogs and of the sorrow they felt in admitting defeat. With a ban on pit bulls in place, such tragedies and abandonments wouldn't occur in the first place.

In the last few decades, there has been exponential population growth in pit bulls as companion animals — a function they were never intended to fill when their breed was artificially constructed a few hundred years ago. The approximately 200,000 pit bulls in existence in 1970 were still largely confined to dogfighting and drug- dealing circles. Years could go by without a single dog bite- related fatality. Today, there are now at least 3.5 million pit bulls spread out across the US and Canada, and dozens of people are killed every year.

Yet the pit bull's image over four decades has shifted from that of an instinctive dog capable of terrifying viciousness to that of the canine equivalent of Anne of Green Gables — a feisty yet biddable child, seeking acceptance and kindness in a cruel world. How did the pit bull get its halo?

The humane movement was already underway when the 1970s shattered social and political norms, producing a new paradigm for human- canine relations. Just as Britain's obsession with social castes translated into a fixation on breeding lines in the 19th Century, the counter- culture in America, dominated by tropes of liberation, morality, and civil rights, began to fetishize dogs as victims. The objective of public safety is not to assign blame but rather to reduce harm by changing a dangerous environment; that is the essence of BSL.

This shift in attitude can easily be seen in academia, where pit- bull sympathy has become a signal of anti- racism virtue. California post- graduate student Harlan Weaver, for example, describes his PhD project as the result of "10 years of pit bull advocacy (and love)." In it, he explores "the ways that species, breed, race, gender, sexuality, class, ability, and nation are mutually shaped by relationships between humans and so- called dangerous dogs, 'pit bull- type' dogs in particular."

Another thesis by a sociology student at the University of Southern California examines the lives of young, inner- city pit- bull owners. In her introduction, Theresa Allen wrote: "Sociology has hardly considered non- human animals as subjects, especially as actors, significant in the network of relations of power and violence to oppression. Just as we understand certain populations as marginal due to their perceived status as 'other,' the pit bull, as a stigmatized breed belonging to a marginalized species, reflects a similar structure of power and oppression."

If you favour BSL, Allen alleges, then what you are really in favour of is racism: "By framing the bull breed as a bloodthirsty predator, we justify its destruction in the same manner that we justify gang sweeps, stepped up penalties for gang membership and punishment based on one's physical likeness to the stereotypical 'gang member.'"

Numerous writers have taken up these academic themes and repackaged them in more reader- friendly formats. Malcolm Gladwell, for example, aligns discrimination against pit bulls with the racialization of African- Americans in his book *What the Dog Saw*, arguing that classifying dogs indirectly sanctions racial profiling. In 2014, Tom Junod [wrote for Esquire](#) that "the opposition to pit bulls might not be racist. It does, however, employ racist thinking." Bronwen Dickey's 2015 book, *Pit Bull: The Battle over an American Icon*, purveys the usual defences, emphasizing the dog's positive qualities of courage, loyalty, and wholeheartedness while minimizing its depredations. That same year, Canadian author Douglas Anthony Cooper wrote a Dr. Seuss- style children's book, *Galunker*, about a battle- scarred rescue pit bull who is "as dangerous as a marshmallow." (I took Cooper to task for exploiting children's credulity in a [subsequent book review](#).)

After all of these conversations and arguments, it's easy to see why the successful passage of Bill 128 was a great blow to the pit- bull advocacy movement in Quebec, which had pulled out all its sophisticated lobbying stops to defeat it. In the anglophone press, pro-BSL commentary [like mine](#) had been overshadowed by forceful advocacy. Notably, two high- profile Montreal lawyers weighed in on the issue: Julius Grey and Anne- France Goldwater. Neither of them had ever previously demonstrated expertise in pit- bull genetics or dangerous- dog epidemiology, but they were both well versed in the language of rights.

"We have become so obsessed with safety — but only with those things that are fashionable — that we just give in to sudden attacks of panic," Grey told the *Montreal Gazette*. "Nobody talks about prohibiting boxing, or peanuts, even though those cause far more injuries than pit bulls." But the public does panic about many things when it comes to safety. For example, when hospitals reported a certain number of injuries from children falling off playground equipment, playground flooring was changed to prevent harm. Nobody blamed the children for tempting fate, argued that they should learn to avoid falling, or suggested reprisals for the schools involved — which is the thinking behind the "owner responsibility" model many pit- bull advocates recommend. The objective of public safety is not to assign blame but rather to reduce harm by changing a dangerous environment; that is the essence of BSL.

Both analogies in Grey's second statement are also foolishly untenable: peanuts, because they are banned in many venues on the off- chance that a child might suffer a life- threatening reaction to them; and boxers, because human fighting observes rules of combat. If boxers randomly punched out their neighbours or kids in parks, perhaps we *would* ban them.

Goldwater, on the other hand, told Radio Canada that distinguishing between dog breeds was akin to measuring the ears and noses of Jews in 1930s Germany. Such a comparison is clearly revolting: racial discrimination can be understood only by humans, and any application of the word to line-bred animals is insulting to victims of racism. The sloppy argumentation by these two commentators was, alas, not unique among intellectuals on this subject.

I have come to realize that the pit-bull advocacy movement is impervious to reason and evidence. Its core belief is that although other breeds' behaviour is dictated by genetic coding, such as the greyhound's instinct to run fast or the bloodhound's instinct to track, only the pit bull will remain immune if socialized carefully. Those who insist that pit bulls are as much prisoners of biology as all other breeds are called racist — when, truly, race has nothing to do with it.

Inquire about the disproportionate number of attacks on random strangers, and the advocate will say the dog was provoked (as though the [jolt of a car door opening](#) unexpectedly could justify assault). Inquire about attacks on family members, and they will insist the dog was not properly socialized. Note the rising number of pit bull-related fatalities in the news, and they will say media is biased. Mention that the police are forced to kill a disparate number of pit bulls, and they will say the police are biased, too, or that animal control officers routinely misidentify breeds — a truly bizarre accusation. In short, reasoning with pit-bull advocates is like bringing a butter knife to a gun fight.

BSL is the necessary gun in this battle. But the guy holding the gun has to have nerves of steel. Michael Bryant, the then-attorney general of Ontario who oversaw that province's 2005 dangerous-dog ban, told me he had never before been exposed to such hatred as during the bill's passage. He was still receiving hate mail for it nearly a decade later. I can sympathize, as my initial columns on the subject used to incite a tsunami of hate, in which some compared me to Hitler ("Mrs. Pitler") and wished me agonizing death — sometimes by a pit bull, which rather undermines their position.

Shortly after speaking with Bryant, I had a conversation with a former president of the Ontario Veterinarian Medical Association, which came out strongly in favour of repealing Ontario's pit-bull ban in 2012. He conceded that he was an expert in neither dog genetics nor behavior — subjects that are only cursorily covered in veterinary schools. He also admitted that veterinarians have a conflict of interest on this issue, since they benefit financially from treating dogs and risk losing business if they take a stand against any breed. He told me he wished his clients would simply adopt "Heinz 57" mutts — dogs that evolution produces.

But he did pay lip service to several widespread mantras ("bad owners, not bad dogs," "all dogs bite," "don't judge a book by its cover," etc.). The last question I asked him was whether he would recommend adopting a pit bull to a family with young children. Before he had a chance to think of the correct response, the words were out of his mouth: "No, of course not."

Barbara Kay - Columnist