

In 1989, the City of Denver defined what a “pit bull” dog is – and then passed an ordinance banning this type of dog. The City claimed that “pit bull” dogs were different from other dogs, that they posed a greater danger than other dogs, and that they inflicted injuries different from the injuries that a person might suffer from another dog. Since the law’s enactment, despite legal challenges supported by reams of testimony from animal experts, Denver has steadfastly maintained that their ban advances community safety and is an effective solution to reducing dog-bite related injuries.

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Is this true? Has banning the dogs defined by the ordinance reduced the number of dog bites, or averted severe dog bite-related injuries? Has the ban eliminated dog bite-related fatalities in Denver?

The answer to all these questions is: NO.

#### **REPORTED NUMBER OF DOG BITES:**

Official records from health departments and animal control agencies across the country show that the number of dog bites have plummeted to historic lows, despite the significant increase in both the human and dog population. Virtually all areas of the nation have recorded dramatic reductions in the number of reported dog bites over the past 35+ years (1971-2007). For example:

- Minneapolis shows an 86% reduction in reported dog bites, from 1,692 to 239.
- New York City has a 90% reduction in reported dog bites, from 37,488 to 3,776.
- Baltimore has seen a 91% reduction in reported dog bites, from 6,809 to 593.

Consistent with this trend, Denver has realized an 85% decrease in reported dog bites: from 3,361 in 1971 to 493 in 2006. However, Minneapolis, New York, Baltimore and other cities enjoy similar reductions in reported dog bites by managing the interaction between people and dogs with breed-neutral regulation.

There is no evidence that cities or counties that have enacted breed bans or restrictions have had a greater reduction in the number of reported bites when compared to cities or counties without breed bans or restrictions.

## WHAT ABOUT SERIOUS DOG BITES?

Over the past four decades, only a small number (5-10%) of all reported dog bites have been classified as serious (i.e., requiring suturing, surgery or hospitalization), regardless of the geographic area and regardless of whether that area had enacted or attempted to enforce breed specific laws.

Prior to Denver's ban on "pit bull" dogs, there was a highly publicized case in which two dogs\*, (neither of which was identified as a "pit bull" dog attacked a Colorado boy, injuring him so severely that doctors needed thousands of stitches to repair his life-threatening wounds. Denver either

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failed to notice, or assigned less significance to, the grievous injuries inflicted in this incident.

From 1994-1999, 39 children were admitted to a single Denver hospital (Children's Pediatric) for injuries associated with dogs bites. One of these children died. Of the 38 non-fatal incidents, 82% were not reported in the media at all. Denver officials have never discussed—correctly, in our opinion—banning the breeds/types of dogs that were alleged to be involved in the 38 cases. Nor have they considered banning the breed/type of dog identified in connection with the 1998 fatality.

In fact, Denver authorities continue to dedicate public resources to enforcing their "pit bull" ban and defending it from legal challenge, while citizens continue to suffer the same type of dog bite-related injuries as they did prior to the ban.

## FATALITIES:

Dog bite-related fatalities have always been vanishingly rare.

In 1986, Denver and Portland, Oregon, cities of approximately the same population, each had a dog bite-related fatality that involved a "pit bull" dog.

Later that year, 1986, Portland, Oregon enacted its Potentially Dangerous Dog Ordinance. This ordinance allows Portland Animal Control to identify a dog as dangerous according to its behavior. Happily, Portland has not had any additional human fatalities from dogs of any breed or type since 1986.

Denver enacted its breed ban in 1989. As mentioned above, in 1998, a Denver child succumbed to injuries inflicted by a dog not targeted by the breed ban.

It is no surprise that Denver has not seen any appreciable difference in the number or severity of dog bite-related injuries compared to cities without breed bans.

Breed bans endorse the profoundly mistaken notion that the breed of dog is the driving force behind an incident. Attempting to identify the breed of dog involved in an incident and then "classifying" the dog related injury to be a result of a breed-specific behavior will never prevent dog bite-related injury. It offers no useful information. We need to hold dog owners responsible for humanely controlling their dogs, and we need to educate parents/dog owners about dog safety, and the importance of supervising their young children when interacting with dogs.

## WHAT HAS DENVER ACCOMPLISHED WITH ITS BREED BAN?

Nineteen years later, Denver's Animal Care and

Control continues to confiscate and kill “pit bull” dogs, most of whom were family companions residing peacefully in their homes.

From 2005-2007, the City of Denver killed 1,667 “pit bull” dogs.

**A TIME FOR CHANGE:**

The City of Denver continues to squander public resources defending its breed ban against legal challenges filed on behalf of the City’s responsible dog owners. In 2008, responding to public outcry,

Denver Animal Care & Control finally allowed a “pit bull” dog named Forrest to be spared a lethal injection and be transported to another jurisdiction. Forrest has a safe, new home in another state.

Dogs contribute much to our lives. To reduce the incidence of dog bite-related injuries, beyond their already historically low levels, it is vital that we avoid reactive, uniformed policies, and make a serious effort to understand human and canine interactions.

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\*Interestingly, one of two breeds of dogs involved in this attack is of the same breed as that owned by Kory Nelson, Denver’s most radical and outspoken proponent of the city’s ban on “pit bull” dogs.