

## Canadian owners report that “pit bulls” make good pets, just like other dogs.

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The role of most dogs in Europe and North America is as companions to human beings. Recognizing that a wide variety of dogs make satisfactory household pets, author Janis Bradley recently reviewed the available literature in order to explore the relevance (or lack thereof) of a dog’s breed to its suitability as a companion pet. She concluded on the basis of her review that, “even among purebreds, breed is an unreliable predictor of behavior,” and that “most of the behaviors associated with specific breeds are only tangentially related to desirable and undesirable qualities in pet dogs.” Bradley also pointed to the considerable number of mixed-breed dogs in the North American canine population, whose origins are not documented. “Pet dog selection,” Bradley advised, “should focus on the dog as a multi-faceted individual.”<sup>1</sup>

A study published in 2011 by the Universities Federation for Animal Welfare<sup>2</sup> poses a related question: Are the assumptions underpinning discriminatory regulation of “pit bulls” borne out based upon their performance as companion pets? The study, which was supported by the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada and by the Animal Welfare Program of the University of British Columbia, interviewed persons who had adopted “pit bulls” or other similar-sized dogs from the British Columbia Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (BC SPCA), asking whether their pet ever acted aggressively or exhibited “other undesirable behavior.” If the assumptions underlying breed specific regulation are correct, one would expect the owners of “pit bulls” to answer “yes” more frequently than the adopters of “other breeds.”

The authors described a “pit bull” as a dog believed to be an “American Staffordshire Terrier, American pit bull terrier, pit bull terrier or crosses of those breeds.” While not all jurisdictions in Europe and North America define “pit bull” in precisely the same terms, the one employed by these authors is similar to the one included in the breed specific regulations of those BC communities that have elected to regulate “pit bull” dogs differently from others. Researchers included a dog in the “pit bull” group on the basis of a visual inspection of facial structure, body shape and coat length. There is no indication that any of the dogs, all of whom had either been picked up as strays or been surrendered, had arrived at the shelter accompanied by pedigree documentation. We presume therefore that the shelter staff and researchers assigned breed descriptors to all of the dogs, “pit bull” or otherwise, on the basis of visual inspection, and that the descriptors assigned to all of the dogs are thus subject to the uncertainty and lack of correlation with DNA breed analysis that Dr. Victoria Voith et al have documented.<sup>3</sup>

Were “pit bulls” more likely to show aggression and other problematic behaviors than similar-sized dogs of other breeds? Not according to the BC adopters, all of whom had owned their dogs for more than

two months at the time they were interviewed. Adopters of “pit bulls” did not report a higher proportion of dogs as exhibiting problem behaviors than did the owners of other dogs. Nor did “pit bull” adopters describe problem behaviors, in the few dogs in which they did occur, that differed in frequency or degree from those reported by the adopters of the other dogs.

The results of this study echo those reported by researchers in Germany, Spain and the United States. Behavior evaluations of regulated dogs in Lower Saxony, Germany showed that dogs of the regulated breeds did not show more inappropriate aggressive behavior than did a control group of Golden Retrievers.<sup>4</sup> A paper published in 2011 based on owner reports in Spain concluded, “dogs classified as dangerous do not seem to be more aggressive than the rest.”<sup>5</sup> An analysis of hundreds of owner surveys, which was much publicized in the United States, reported that the rate of aggression towards human beings was extremely low across all breeds, with a smaller percentage of the “pit bulls” being described by their owners as showing owner-directed or stranger-directed aggression than was the average for all of the dogs included in that study.<sup>6</sup>

The authors of the BC study concluded, “The results of this study support the inclusion of pit bulls in well-managed shelter adoption programs and the use of screening for aggression of all shelter dogs.” The assumptions underpinning breed specific regulation are no more relevant to a dog’s suitability as a human companion than they are to the reduction of dog bite incidents.”<sup>7</sup>

The complete report is available for purchase at:

<http://www.ingentaconnect.com/content/ufaw/aw/2011/00000020/00000004/art00001>

<sup>1</sup> J Bradley, “The Relevance of Breed in Selecting a Companion Dog,” An NCRC Vision Series Publication, 2011.

<sup>2</sup> A MacNeil-Allcock, NM Clarke, RA Ledger, D Fraser, “Aggression, behaviour, and animal care among pit bulls and other dogs adopted from an animal shelter,” *Animal Welfare*, 2011: 20:463-468.

<sup>3</sup> V Voith, E Ingram, K Mitsouras, K Irizarry, “Comparison of Adoption Agency Identification and DNA Breed Identification of Dogs,” *Journal of Applied Animal Welfare Science*, 12:253-262, 2009; AR Boyko et al, “A Simple Genetic Architecture Underlies Morphological Variation in Dogs,” *PLoS Biology*, August 2010, Volume 8, Issue 8, e1000451.

<sup>4</sup> SA Ott, E Schalke, et al, “Is There A Difference? Comparison of Golden Retrievers and Dogs Affected by Breed Specific Legislation Regarding Aggressive Behaviour,” *Journal of Veterinary Behavior*, (2008) 3: 134-140.

<sup>5</sup> AG Martinez, GS Pernas, et al, “Risk factors associated with behavioral problems in dogs,” *Journal of Veterinary Behavior* (2011) 6, 225-231

<sup>6</sup> DL Duffy, Y Hsu, JA Serpell, “Breed differences in canine aggression,” *Applied Animal Behaviour Science*, (2008), doi: 10.1016/j.applanim.2008.04.006

<sup>7</sup> National Canine Research Council, “World-wide Failure of Breed Specific Legislation,” available at

[http://www.nationalcanineresearchcouncil.com/uploaded\\_files/tinymce/World-wide%20Failure%20of%20BSL.pdf](http://www.nationalcanineresearchcouncil.com/uploaded_files/tinymce/World-wide%20Failure%20of%20BSL.pdf); see also G Patronek, M Slater, M Marder, “Use of a number-needed-to-ban calculation to illustrate limitations of breed specific legislation in decreasing the risk of dog bite-related injury,” *Journal of American Veterinary Medical Association*, vol 237, Number 7, October 1, 2010.