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# Dog attacks prompt cities to look at pit bull bans

By M.L. JOHNSON, Associated Press Writer - Mon Jan 26, 4:07 am ET

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AP - A scar is seen above the eye of Melanie Sedlar Thursday, Jan. 22, 2009, in West Allis, Wis. The 12-year-old ...

MILWAUKEE - Jacqueline Sedlar and her 12-year-old daughter were walking home when the girl peered over a neighbor's fence and a pit bull took a chunk from her eyebrow.

Outraged, Sedlar contacted her city councilman, who introduced an ordinance banning pit bulls. But the mayor vetoed the ban in favor of an alternative "dangerous dog" ordinance that some say will be less effective in preventing attacks.

The controversy in the Milwaukee suburb of West Allis exemplifies the struggle communities nationwide face in trying to address dog attacks. Some have banned pit bulls - a broad

term that covers several breeds - and other breeds they consider most dangerous. But other communities are trying to "punish the deed, not the breed" with ordinances focusing on dogs with violent histories.

American emergency rooms treated an estimated 310,000 people for dog bites in 2007, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The estimate has fallen fairly consistently since 2001, when an estimated 366,000 bite victims were treated.

However, many dog bites do not result in hospital visits and are not reported, so no state or federal agency has a total count.

There's also no reliable data on whether some dogs are more likely to bite than others. A 2000 study cited by the CDC and other health agencies reports pit bull-type dogs were responsible for more bite-related deaths than other breeds from 1979 to 1998, but it cautions that may mean pit bulls are just more common than other types of dogs.

Still, that may help explain why pit bulls are the most frequent targets of proposals to ban or restrict specific breeds of dogs. The American Kennel Club reports 86 such proposals were introduced nationwide in the 2007-08 legislative season. Most were for municipal ordinances. It is not clear how many passed.

While most dog laws are local, Ohio has a 1987 state law requiring owners to confine purebred pit bulls as "vicious dogs" and buy at least \$100,000 in liability insurance.

Twelve states prohibit breed specific restrictions and bans.

Proposals for breed-specific laws often come in response to attacks, said Adam Goldfarb, a spokesman for the Humane Society of the United States. For example, a pit bull attack on an Omaha toddler in June resulted in proposals to restrict dogs there and in a number of other Nebraska cities.

South Milwaukee banned new pit bulls from its community after several attacks in the early 1990s, Mayor Thomas Zepecki said. Since then, there have been only a few incidents involving other breeds, he said. They are punished under a different ordinance.

"As far as I'm concerned, I wouldn't change it," Zepecki said of the ban.

Officials in Oshkosh, Wis., began considering restrictions on pit bulls and several other breeds after seeing the number of reported dog bites jump from 97 in 2007 to 125 last year.

But pit bulls were responsible for only about 14 percent of last year's reported bites, and health director Paul Spiegel said comments from the public and those who work with dogs now have the city looking at strengthening an all-breed ordinance that punishes bites instead.

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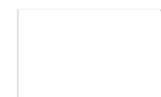


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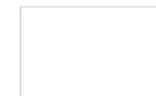
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Animal rights activists insist no breed is inherently vicious.

Dogs' breeding and training determine their aggressiveness, said Gail Golab, director of the American Veterinary Medical Association's animal welfare division. For example, Doberman pinschers were once "a big macho kind of dog" but have become more gentle and docile with breeding in recent years, she said.

The same could be done with pit bulls, which include American Staffordshire Terriers, Staffordshire Bull Terriers, Bull Terriers and mixes of those breeds.

The dogs were once bred for fighting, Golab said, but "there are pit bulls that are being bred now by responsible breeders that are not necessarily being selected for that aggressive phenotype."

In West Allis, the story of a pit bull attacking Melanie Sedlar touched Alderman Vincent Vitale, whose own daughter had been attacked by a bull terrier 15 years earlier. He proposed an ordinance banning new pit bulls in the community and requiring those already there to be penned or leashed and muzzled.

"I thought maybe it was good we enforce some rules about that type of dog," Vitale said. "Maybe the owner doesn't always see the dog can be vicious."

West Allis Mayor Dan Devine vetoed Vitale's ordinance last month, and the city is now considering a plan to fine the owners of dogs that chase or attack people and other animals.

"I just think that the residents would be better served with a law that would encompass all breeds of dog, all bad dog behavior, and not a specific breed," said Devine.

Jacqueline Sedlar, who owns a German shepherd mix, said she doesn't like to see any dog get a bad rap. But she fears the new plan will only punish, not prevent, future attacks.

"That particular breed is problematic. They were bred to go into the pit and fight," she said. "It's like a little time bomb waiting to go off."



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