

Why breed specific legislation does not protect the public from dangerous dogs

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Research conducted by animal behaviour experts challenges the basis of breed specific legislation designed to protect the public from 'dangerous' dogs.

A team from the University of Lincoln, UK, concluded that rather than making people safer, current legislation could be lulling them into a false sense of security.

Dr Tracey Clarke and Professors Daniel Mills and Jonathan Cooper from Lincoln's School of Life Sciences set out to discover the source of people's perceptions about 'typical behaviours' associated with different breeds of dog. Their findings were recently published in the journal

Human Animal Interaction Bulletin published by the American Psychological Association, in a freely available paper "Acculturation – Perceptions of breed differences in behavior of the dog (*Canis familiaris*)".

Professor Mills said: "This work provides good scientific evidence to explain why the pursuit by governments of breed specific legislation to reduce the risk of harm to citizens is not only doomed to failure, but also giving people a false sense of security, which may actually be making the situation worse."

The researchers applied a theory known as the 'contact hypothesis' - used by sociologists to understand the origin of racial stereotyping and other forms of prejudice.

They surveyed more than 160 people to examine if their contact with dogs influenced their tendency to believe populist and negative breed stereotypes.

They found significant variations in attitudes between people who owned dogs or had regular contact with them, and those who did not. More than half (54%) of respondents who identified themselves as "experienced or knowledgeable" of dogs disagreed with the statement that some breeds are more aggressive than others. Only 15% of respondents who said they had little or no experience of dogs held the same view.

Similarly, more than half of the "experienced" respondents felt there was no valid reason for breed specific legislation, whereas less than 1 in 10 of the inexperienced respondents felt the same.

The results were consistent with the prediction that not just the level but also the quality of contact with dogs are major influences on the tendency to believe populist breed stereotypes, despite scientific

evidence which challenges the validity of such generalisations.

The variability within a breed is nearly always greater than the variability between breeds for behavioural traits, meaning while there may be differences on average, when it comes to assessing the likelihood that a particular individual will behave in a certain way generalisations are often unsound. The type of person attracted towards certain breeds and encouraging certain behaviours may be a much better predictor.

It was discovered that a dog's visible characteristics informed strong attitudes, resulting in over-generalisation. Not only bull-breeds but also those with much more superficial characteristics such as being well-muscled, or even short-haired, were stigmatised more often as dangerous by those with less experience or knowledge of [dogs](#).

Attraction to certain types on the basis of their appearance, can then lead to these being preferred for use as a weapon or status dog, creating a self-fulfilling prophecy about their behaviour through environmental rather than genetic effects.

The team suggest that further scientific research is needed to improve understanding of the origins and basis of negative breed stereotypes, and that this in turn should be used to inform future legislation.

Provided by University of Lincoln

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