

## Of Pit bulls and Moral Panics: Addressing a Contemporary Controversy

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**Project Overview:** This project addresses how numerous cities, municipalities, and even Provinces in North America have come to place legal bans on dogs defined as "Pit Bulls." This question is noteworthy because the Pit Bull has been viewed in the early twentieth century as a steadfast and loyal dog, ideal for adults and children, and less than 100 years later is so vilified that the breed has become legally stigmatized- the first time such breed- specific bans have been created. This is significant because, as Gladwell (2006) notes, while Pit Bulls are associated with attacks on humans, they are but one of many breeds documented to have attacked and injured persons. If this is the case, why are Pit Bull bans pursued, instead of other possible public policy responses (such as laws which penalize mistreatment of dogs which are also correlated with dog attacks)?



Stubby

### Theories:

1. **Constructivism:** Pit Bulls are viewed as the scapegoat for many of the violent crimes that occur against people and other animals. Evidence throughout history shows us how these dogs were once considered a true family pet, but are now seen as malicious and ruthless dogs. The physicality of the modern pit bull include; a strong muscular body, large skull, and powerful jaw muscles. "Pit bulls can bite with a force of almost 2,000 pounds per square inch- that's twice the force of a German shepherd or a Doberman Pincher" (Washington Post). Their strong jaws cause them to "hold and shake instead of biting and releasing, which is why they are sometimes called sharks on four legs" (Washington Post). Pit bulls are also associated with moral panics or social problems. "The term social problem is to indicate that something is wrong. In popular understanding, a social problem is not something like happy families, physically fit people, or schools that teach children to read. This is common sense: The name is social problem so it obviously refers to conditions evaluated as wrong because they create harm" (Pg. 6). People associate this breed with social problems or social stigmas because of how they are portrayed by the media as violent creatures. Many cities and provinces believe that by creating breed specific laws, that it will limit dog attacks and eventually wipe out a breed that they consider threatening and dangerous.
2. **Breed Specific Laws:** The idea of the Pit Bull ban by many has been called "animal racism." In 2003 the anti- breedist in Westbury, N.Y., challenged a local pit bull ban because the law judged the dog by "its breed rather than its actions. The court found the ban unconstitutional because it denied pit bull owners equal protection and due process. Most courts have found breed- specific laws constitutional, holding that owning a dog is not a fundamental right" (The Washington Post). Also, since pit bulls are not a true breed, it has made it even more difficult to assign what the dog actually is because a "pit bull" is composed of so many other breeds. Breed specific laws are put into place because of attacks that have been made against other people and animals. In the media the only dog attack stories that are shown are when a pit bull attacks a human being. "By 2000, pit bull fear and hype had reached such proportions that the breed was banned in more than two hundred cities and counties around the United States. Lost in all the legislation was the fact that for decades the pit bull had been considered one of the most loyal loving, and people- friendly dogs on the planet" (Jim Gorant Pg. 137).



3. **Essentialism:** Why is it that society believes that it is in the nature of pit bulls to fight, and be aggressive? Part of the reason that society views this dog as naturally aggressive is because of the owners that raise them to be violent. Pit bulls have ultimately become a growing member of urban decay. This idea illustrates a poor social structure, therefore the creation of drugs and drug dealers. This extremely loyal breed has become the icon for negative stigma because of the people who own them; in many cases drug dealers own pit bulls specifically in order to use them for protection and intimidation. "In the 1980's the American Pit Bull became the pet of choice for tough guys and thugs. How macho you were could be determined by how mean and vicious your pit bull was. People owning such dogs choose them for the very reason the rest of us fear them" (The Reporter).
4. **Methodology:** This project seeks to explore this phenomena through conducting a content analysis of newspaper accounts of Pit Bulls and legal proceeding regarding Pit Bulls in order to identify how Pit Bulls are typified (Best, 2008) and with what significant social problems are associated. This project will also examine other popular cultural artifacts, including music videos, and produce systematic patterns of both Pit Bull typification and association with various activities. Many newspaper accounts depict specific stories of pit bulls attacking young children and elderly people. According to the Toronto Star, many in Canada believe that, "The pit bull terrier is a potential killer. It's vise- like jaws can inflict terrible damage on other animals and humans, especially children, unable to defend themselves" (Warren Gerard, Toronto Star). Bandow of the Toronto Star also explains, "The reason you see more reports on pit bull bites, is that when a pit bull bites, it's not just a bite, it's a mauling. The dog has a highly developed prey drive, he sees biting as fun, as a game. It's his genetic program." It is here that this misconception causes fear among people because the media causes society to believe that pit bulls are killing machines, and their genetic make up in a sense makes them evil.



5. **History:** One of the most well-known and respected Pit Bulls was Stubby, a Pit bull who served as an aid and soldier to the 102d infantry division during WWI. Founded by Private John Robert Conroy on the Yale Campus, in 1917, Stubby became a beloved member of the training camp that Private Conroy and others were attending. When the soldiers were being transferred Private Conroy had smuggled the dog to a variety of places until finally Stubby had made a great journey to Germany. Stubby became the mascot for the 102d special division who were put on the front lines during February 1918. The soldiers, including Stubby were forced to live in harsh conditions in trenches during the war. At one point during their stay in the trenches the Germans launched a gas attack upon Stubby's infantry, the gas would cause the skin to be burned, blindness, and loss of limbs. This caused Stubby's first injuries; from this point on he became extremely sensitive to the slightest smell of vapor. This helped the infantry survive many other attacks. By the end of the war Stubby had been a part of 17 battles, and had saved many of his fellow soldiers. He was promoted to the rank of Sergeant, and was given many medals for his honorable efforts during the war (<http://awesomeplanet.blogspot.com/2008/02/sgt-stubby1917-1926a-pitbull.html>).



6. **Alternative Narrative Overview:** The process of this study will also consist of developing a more positive image of the Pit Bull breed. In light of our research efforts, any historical evidence founded will be used to reverse the detrimental damage that many have created when mistreating this specific breed. The creation of social stigma has caused almost irreparable damage, and therefore our analysis to the best of its ability will counteract such accusations made upon Pit Bulls. It was not long ago that these dogs were considered to be beloved family pets, with this project we hope to encourage this belief.



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