Aggression, behaviour, and animal care among pit bulls and other dogs adopted from an animal shelter

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Abstract
Pit bull dogs are a focus of concern because of their reputation for aggression toward people and because they may be mistreated by owners who try to promote aggressive behaviour. This study followed 40 pit bulls and 42 similar-sized dogs of other breeds at an animal shelter. Three pit bulls and two dogs of other breeds were euthanised because of aggression toward people at the shelter, and the remaining 77 dogs were re-homed. Of these, one pit bull and ten dogs of other breeds were returned to the shelter because of alleged aggression. For the dogs that were retained for at least two months, owner reports of aggression in various situations (to strangers, to other dogs, etc) were similar for the two groups. Reported care of the two groups was also similar except that pit bulls were more likely to sleep on the owner’s bed and more likely to cuddle with the owner. Pit bull adopters were more likely to be under the age of 30, to rent (rather than own) their home, and to be adopting their first dog, perhaps because of a bias against pit bulls among older adopters. The study provided no evidence of greater aggression or poorer care among adopted pit bulls compared to dogs of other breeds.

Keywords: aggression, animal shelter, animal welfare, breed, dog, pit bull

Introduction
After an upsurge in serious dog-bite incidents in the 1980s, many jurisdictions instituted legislation limiting or banning ownership of certain dog breeds (breed-specific legislation). Affected breeds vary between jurisdictions, but ‘pit bulls’ (a generic term used for the bull terrier, pit bull terrier, Staffordshire bull terrier, American Staffordshire terrier, and the American pit bull terrier) have been a consistent feature in most breed-specific legislation.

Breed-specific legislation was first introduced at a national level in the United Kingdom with amendments to the Dangerous Dogs Act in 1991 prohibiting ownership and breeding of pit bulls and several other breeds. Several European countries, including Spain, Portugal, Belgium, Italy, Norway and The Netherlands then adopted national breed-specific legislation but with many variations. For example, Spain restricted the ownership of pit bulls; Norway, Portugal and The Netherlands banned pit bulls completely; and Italy banned or restricted ownership of many breeds. Some countries subsequently have repealed breed-specific laws. For example, The Netherlands and Italy repealed breed-specific legislation in 2008 and 2009, respectively, because it failed to reduce dog-bite incidence (Radio Netherlands/Expatica 2008; Government of Italy 2009).

Although public safety is the primary concern of legislators, the welfare of pit bulls is also of concern because pit bulls are thought to attract aggressive owners who keep the dogs for protection and use harsh training methods to promote aggressive behaviour. The risk of such treatment may explain why some animal sheltering organisations, including those not constrained by breed-specific legislation, choose to euthanise pit bulls rather than re-home them. This study followed a sample of pit bulls and a matched sample of similar-sized dogs of other breeds at an animal shelter. The goals were to assess whether pit bulls were more likely to show aggression or other problematic behaviour, and to assess whether pit bulls received good care from their adoptive owners.

Materials and methods
The study was conducted at an animal shelter of the British Columbia Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (BC SPCA) in Vancouver, Canada, one of 37 open-admissions shelters operated by this organisation. To accommodate re-homing, the BC SPCA often transfers adoptable dogs between its shelters. Some of the dogs in this study (both pit bulls and dogs of other breeds) were transferred to the Vancouver shelter from other shelters in Metropolitan Vancouver municipalities including shelters where local breed-specific by-laws precluded re-homing pit bulls. The