

Tyrone J. Burrows Jr. & William J. Fielding¹

Views of College Students on Pit Bull “Ownership”: New Providence, The Bahamas

The College of the Bahamas

ABSTRACT

This paper reports the finding of the first, known study of a Caribbean community's views on pit bulls. College students (375) provided their perceptions on a number of issues related to pit bull guardianship (“ownership”). Age, sex, and dog-owning status influenced some of their views. They saw pit bulls as being different from other dogs, but not all supported banning pit bulls. Some results reinforced the stereotypes associated with pit bull ownership: Most pit bull owners were under 19 years of age, and older respondents were more likely than younger ones to support a ban on pit bulls. Why different subgroups of respondents held their views would be a useful avenue for future research.

Keywords: Pit bulls, The Bahamas, Caribbean

New Providence, The Bahamas, has suffered from the “nuisances” of a dog over-population from the 1840s until the present day. Widely associated with the problem for most of this time was the local mongrel (“potcake”), the dog most commonly seen roaming the streets. Dogs roam the streets primarily because their guardians² (“owners”) do not confine them (Fielding, Mather, & Isaacs, 2005).

Since the 1980s, however, pit bulls have become the image dog of choice. The Bahamas, in common with other Caribbean islands, now consider pit bulls to be the most popular “breed” (Fielding, 2004). Concerns elsewhere of the dangers pit bulls posed to the human population accompanied this rise in popularity of pit bulls (Lockwood & Rindy, 1987). The concerns voiced in the 1980s by The Bahamas Humane Society (Pit bull menace, 1987), which focused on the danger pit bulls posed to humans, were realized in the 1990s and 2000s when pit bulls were associated with all the fatal dog attacks reported in New Providence. These events resulted in government’s refusing further importation of pit bulls; however, breeding of pit bulls remains unchecked, and the dogs are readily available (Burrows, Fielding & Mather, 2004). Fatal and non-fatal dog attacks elsewhere (Sacks, Sinclair, Gilchrist, Golab & Lockwood, 2000; Clarke et al., 1991; Gandhi, Liebman, Stafford & Stafford, 1999) have continued to confirm the view that pit bulls are dangerous—a view propagated by the media and supported by local animal welfare groups (Forbes, 1993).

Locally, pit bulls typically are portrayed as naturally vicious—a view that ignores the complexity of aggression (Bertani & Bracchi, 1999)—and associated with young male owners, dog fighting (Trained to kill, 2004), and the drug trade (Ban killer pit bulls, 2004). This has resulted in pit bull owners’ defending the breed as one that can make perfect companion animals (pets) and pointing out that both women and men own pit bulls (Glinton, 2004). However, members of the media also have reported dog attacks apparently not caused by pit bulls (Maycock, 2004); therefore, the “pack journalism” reported in North America (Cohen & Richardson, 2002) may not be as evident in The Bahamas as elsewhere.

Although many dogs in New Providence are kept for “security” or “protection,” these same dogs—including pit bulls—also are allowed to roam (Fielding & Plumridge, 2004). In addition, owners actively have abandoned pit bulls when the dogs have proved too hard for them to handle. These actions have given rise to a fear that guard dogs may attack pedestrians.

That a pack of roaming dogs caused one fatal dog attack substantiates this fear (Burrows et al., 2004). Also, residents have become concerned that because of breeding with pit bulls, unobtrusive, roaming potcakes may “turn vicious,” making walking the streets dangerous (Pit bull infiltration, 2001). Thus, local

considerations that may be absent elsewhere can make pit bulls appear threatening. Because pit bulls are associated with dog bites and fatal attacks, some governments have banned pit bulls or put in place regulations that apply only to certain types/breeds of dogs (United Kingdom, Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, 2003).

Currently, The Bahamas have only general legislation (laws relating to dog ownership were revised last in 1942) against “vicious” dogs and none on dog breeding (Bain, 2004). One local newspaper seems to have launched a campaign to have pit bulls banned (Bain), despite the fact that breed-specific legislation elsewhere has failed to reduce the incidents of dog attacks and dog bites (Seksel, 2002).

Studies in the Bahamas (Burrows et al., 2004) and elsewhere have shown that pit bulls often are abused animals associated with young males and street image (Delise, 2002). The negative publicity pit bulls have attracted has stigmatized pit bull ownership, which can be detrimental to both owners and animals (Twining, Arluke, & Patronek, 2001). Thus, how pit bulls are kept can be a cause for concern and give the impression that they are naturally vicious toward humans.

Against this background, The College of The Bahamas conducted a study in 2004 of 375 students and library users to assess the views of a college population toward pit bulls. The aim of the study was to find out students’ attitudes toward pit bulls. No data seem to exist that reflect the views of any section of Bahamian society on this emotive subject. The results would be useful to inform policy makers’ decisions with respect to any future legislation on dog ownership.

Methodology

Students and library users completed a short questionnaire. All questionnaires were anonymous, and participation was voluntary. Librarians, a student, and a lecturer solicited the input of students. Because almost no non-students use the library, it was anticipated that respondents would be 18 years or older. Respondents were classified by dog ownership status, gender, and age (<20 years old, 20-25, and >25 years).

It should be noted that convenience samples can produce biased results; therefore, this methodology constrains the extrapolation to wider populations. In The Bahamas, because the 18-25 year old age group represents about 20% of the adult population, the views of this age group could reflect that of the more educated dog owner of the near future. Also, given the educational efforts in recent years of the animal welfare groups to educate school children, this age group could be better informed than their peers on aspects of dog ownership.

Dog ownership status was expected to cause differences in attitudes. Dog ownership status was defined as (a) pit bull owner, (b) other dog owner, and (c) non-dog owner. A pit bull owner was defined as a person who owned at least one pit bull, even if the same person had other dogs; another dog owner was defined as an owner of any breed or type of dog other than a pit bull.

For each statement, a 4-point Likert scale was used (strongly agree, agree, disagree, strongly disagree) to assess the strength of feelings. Overall agreement or disagreement to the statements was obtained by classifications being collapsed to agree, disagree. This also permitted binary logistic regression analyses. Linear by linear associations (Everitt, 1992) were used to assess association between variables.

Results

A description of the responding sample is given in Table 1. When owners did not give a breed for the type of dog owned, they were classified as non-pit bull owners. The age and gender characteristics broadly reflect those of the College of The Bahamas (Planning Unit, College of The Bahamas, personal communication).

**Table 1. Characteristics of Study 375 Respondents
(3 Missing Values or Less for Each Characteristic)**

Modal age	Male	Pit bull owners	Other dog owner	Non-dog owner
<20 years (53%)	32%	6.4%	28.3%	65%

The pit bull was the most commonly owned breed and was found in 20% of dog-owning households (118 replies).

Overall, 36.9% of females owned dogs compared with 27.7% of males (Fisher’s exact test: $p = 0.10$). Although 26.5% of male owners chose to have pit bulls compared with 15.6% of female owners—and this outcome was in the expected direction—it was not formally significant (Fisher’s Exact test: $p = 0.128$, one sided test). Pit bull ownership was associated with age (X^2 : $p = 0.044$, $df = 2$, $n = 24$), with 54.2% of pit bull owners being under 19 years and 12.5% over 25 years of age. The level of pit bull ownership between those aged under and over 19 years was consistent for both genders (Fisher’s exact test: $p > 0.99$).

Table 2 gives an overall summary of the respondents’ agreement—after responses had been grouped into agree/disagree—to the statements posed in the survey. The results show that respondents thought that people should be allowed to own pit bulls, and there was little support for the negative aspects associated with pit bulls. Respondents clearly held owners responsible for the behavior of their animals.

Table 2. Overall Summary of the Results Classified by Type of Dog Ownership, Percentages of Each Ownership Group Agreeing (Strongly Agree, Agree Combined) with the Statement

	Pit bull owner	Other dog owner	Non-dog owner	Chi-square p -value
It’s OK for persons to have pit bulls guarding their houses	91.7	76.2	70.2	0.057 (0.001)
A pit bull’s behavior depends on the owners treatment of the dog	87.5	77.1	70.5	0.121 (0.054)
A pit bull is the best dog to have as a guard dog	62.5	34.3	35.1	0.025 (0.046)
Dogs should not have the same rights as humans	58.3	43.3	65.5	0.001 (0.018)
Pit bulls should be neutered	41.7	46.7	46.3	0.902 (0.400)
A dog should not kill an intruder	37.5	51.0	57.4	0.125 (0.531)
All dogs should be neutered	25.0	32.1	36.0	0.485 (0.635)
All pit bulls are vicious (by nature), and no kind of treatment (whether good or bad) will make them safe dogs	12.5	31.4	34.3	0.091 (0.020)
Pit bulls should be banned	4.2	26.4	28.1	0.039 (0.001)

Table 2 (cont.)

	Pit bull owner	Other dog owner	Non-dog owner	Chi-square <i>p</i> -value
There is nothing wrong with a pit bull's roaming the streets	0.0	4.7	3.7	0.548 (0.747)
Maximum number responding to each statement	24	106	243	

Statements in bold indicate those where the Chi-squared statistic was close to, or less than, 0.05. *p*-values in brackets indicate those statements showing when degrees of agreement/disagreement found from the full range of responses, strongly agree to strongly disagree, differed; that is, strength opinion varied.

From Table 2, it is clear that responses to the statements concerning the use of pit bulls for guarding were associated with the ownership status of respondents. For some statements, the responses showed differences with respect to the degree of agreement/disagreement (or depth of feeling) shown by the types of owners—not seen when only agreement/disagreement was examined.

As to the acceptability of keeping pit bulls as guard dogs, 45.8% of pit bull owners strongly agreed with the statement, compared with 14% or less in the other groups. Thus, the Chi-square analysis showed differences in extent of agreement/disagreement between the three groups of respondents (X^2 : $p = 0.001$, $df = 6$, $n = 371$).

Although not formally significant, the statement about a pit bull's behavior depending on the owner's treatment of the animal showed that respondents held different levels of extreme views. In this case, 50% of pit bull owners strongly agreed with the statement, compared with 23.8% or less with the other two groups (X^2 : $p = 0.054$, $df = 6$, $n = 370$). With regard to the statement that pit bulls are vicious by nature and no kind of treatment will make them safe dogs, 45.8% of pit bull owners strongly disagreed, compared with not more than 20.2% in the other two groups (X^2 : $p = 0.020$, $df = 6$, $n = 371$).

The three groups of respondents held similar views on neutering dogs. However, their responses with respect to neutering pit bulls showed they saw pit bulls as different from "all" dogs (Table 2). Although there was a strong positive correlation between the responses linear by linear association:

68.77, $df = 1$, $n=370$, $p<0.001$), the distributions of the two sets of answers were different (Sign test: $z = -3.558$, $p<0.001$, $n = 370$, number of ties: 210). Therefore, pit bulls were not seen in the same light as “all dogs.” Respondents wanted pit bulls treated differently from “all” dogs, at least with respect to neutering.

Wanting pit bulls banned was related to respondents’ seeing them as “naturally vicious” (linear-by-linear association, 78.7, $df = 1$, $p<0.001$, $n = 372$). However, when the respondents were classified by owner type, few pit bull owners thought this way; 4.2% (1 of 24 replies) thought that pit bulls naturally were vicious and should be banned, compared with 14.3% (of 105 replies) of other dog owners and 19.1% (of 241 replies) of non-dog owners. Logistic regression—including age, gender, and ownership as factors—indicated that the important factor influencing respondents’ wanting pit bulls banned was that they thought pit bulls naturally vicious (significance of this factor $p<0.001$, lowest significance of all other factors (age, gender) $p = 0.097$). However, this result may be due to the small number of pit bull owners in the sample, which may have prevented ownership status from having a larger effect.

This view contrasts with the realization that owners’ treatment of pit bulls influences their behavior. Table 3 shows that respondents’ attitudes were strongly negatively correlated (linear-by-linear association, 118.0, $df = 1$, $p<0.001$, $n = 370$). However, this view is influenced by respondent age and if the respondent thought that pit bulls are naturally vicious (both factors significant at $p<0.002$ from logistic regression).

Table 3. Reactions to the Statement that All Pit Bulls Are Naturally Vicious and the Response to Pit Bull Behavior Depends on the Owner’s Treatment

All pit bulls are naturally vicious . . .	A pit bulls’ behavior depends on the owner’s treatment of the dog				<i>n</i>
	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree	
Strongly disagree	7.9%	1.3%	36.8%	53.9%	76
Disagree	4.0%	11.4%	66.3%	18.3%	175
Agree	10.3%	41.2%	35.3%	13.2%	68
Strongly agree	33.3%	23.5%	21.6%	21.6%	51

Respondents who wanted pit bulls banned also wanted them neutered; those who did not want them neutered also did not want them banned (linear-by-linear association, 89.9, $df = 1$, $p < 0.001$, $n = 370$). A logistic regression showed that this reaction probably was dependent on age ($p = 0.051$) but independent of gender and dog-owning status ($p > 10$ for both factors from the regression).

Many respondents did not think that pit bulls made the best guard dogs (Table 4). This was associated with their objecting to people's owning pit bulls for that purpose (X-squared: 64.8, $df = 9$, $p < 0.001$, $n = 368$). Logistic regression showed that these attitudes persisted even when age, gender, and dog-owning status were taken into account (Significance of factor: It is OK for persons to have pit bulls guarding their homes, $p = 0.027$).

Table 4. Respondents' Reaction to a Pit Bull's Guarding a Home and that a Pit Bull Makes the Best Guard Dog

% within: It is OK for persons to have pit bulls guarding their houses	A pit bull is the best dog to have as a guard dog					<i>n</i>
	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree		
Strongly disagree	50.0%	30.6%	13.9%	5.6%		36
Disagree	17.7%	53.2%	21.0%	8.1%		62
Agree	13.1%	51.4%	29.9%	5.6%		214
Strongly agree	10.7%	26.8%	33.9%	28.6%		56

As several factors might influence the responses to the statements, binary logistic regression was performed to determine which factors, if any, influenced the responses. Table 5 gives a summary from regression analyses.

Table 5. Importance of Three Factors Influencing Responses (Agree, Disagree) to Each Statement (p Values From Logistic Regression)

	Age	Gender	Owner type
It's OK for persons to have pit bulls guarding their houses	<0.001	0.56	0.13
A pit bull's behavior depends on the owners' treatment of the dog	<0.001	0.81	0.30
A pit bull is the best dog to have as a guard dog	0.003	0.041	0.023

Table 5 (cont.)

	Age	Gender	Owner type
All pit bulls are vicious (by nature) and no kind of treatment (whether good or bad) will make them safe dogs	0.005	0.028	0.15
Pit bulls should be banned	0.006	0.14	0.12
A dog should not kill an intruder	0.014	0.043	0.061
There is nothing wrong with a pit bull roaming the streets	0.19	0.34	0.50
Dogs should not have the same rights as humans	0.27	0.93	<0.001
Pit bulls should be neutered	0.47	0.077	0.92
All dogs should be neutered	0.56	0.012	0.40

Owner type: Respondents were divided into pit bull owners, other dog owners, non-dog owners. Factors in bold are those that were significant at, or close to, $p = 0.05$.

From Table 5, it is clear that only two statements (the roaming and neutering of pit bulls) elicited a consistent response irrespective of age, gender, or dog-owning status of respondent. In addition, there were important differences in the reactions of respondents that do not depend always on their dog-owning status. The only response that depended only on dog-owning status concerned the rights of dogs; non-dog owners showed greater agreement than did dog owners. Otherwise, age and sex were more likely factors influencing responses than was dog-owning status. The issues relating to guard dogs and the acceptability of allowing dogs to kill intruders produced reactions that depended upon age, gender, and dog-owning status.

Discussion

The results from the study indicate that respondents had mixed feelings toward pit bulls. Overall, they did not want constraints put on the freedom to own this particular type of dog; however, they appeared to consider pit bulls different from other types of dogs. The results also show that different sections of the community can be expected to have different responses, depending upon their age, gender, and dog-owning status. Thus, policies that would

affect the entire community may not receive universal support. Also, media articles might have influenced some perceptions rather than the perceptions being based on facts. The results did not suggest that respondents simply were following the lead taken by the media. Thus, to some extent, our findings echo those reported by Cohen and Richardson (2002). However, our study tended to reinforce some common stereotypes: (a) males probably are more likely to own pit bulls than are females and (b) proportionally, young people are more likely than older people to own pit bulls.

Our results also suggested that attitudes might be more complex than found by Cohen and Richardson (2002) with dog-owning status, gender, and age being important factors—at least within a Caribbean society. The divisions within respondents mean that engaging society in constructive debate will require awareness of the standpoints held by people of different age groups, genders, and dog-owning status and an understanding of why these occur. Such divisions are not unique. They have been found in Bahamian perceptions toward pets in general and the neutering of dogs (Fielding et al., 2002).

Age clearly determined whether respondents thought people should own pit bulls. Older respondents were more likely to favor a ban than were younger respondents (Table 5). Overall, our respondents would not have supported a ban. However, the nature of this study limited the range of ages of respondents. Therefore, if the age-related trend continued, we might expect a greater overall support for banning pit bulls in the wider population than was observed here. This finding might link with younger, rather than older, people owning pit bulls.

Although many respondents did not want all dogs neutered, their attitude changed when considering the neutering of pit bulls. This suggests that pit bulls are viewed differently from “all” dogs. This change in attitude may suggest a wish to curb the pit bull population or show an appreciation for a reduction in aggression associated with neutering (Bertani & Bracchi, 1999).

At the very least, this change suggests that respondents want pit bulls cared for differently from dogs in general. That only pit bulls have been associated with all the fatal dog attacks on New Providence may have a bearing on this, as such events mark pit bulls as different from other dogs. Potcakes, the most common type of dog on the island, also are subject to negative publicity

(Fielding et al., 2005). Although potcakes are a nuisance, they—unlike pit bulls—are not portrayed as vicious.

Only a minority of respondents considered pit bulls naturally vicious. This, however, was an important factor associated with wanting pit bulls banned. The view persisted despite respondents' being aware that owners' treatment of pit bulls also influenced their behavior. This perception may indicate that some respondents think that pit bull owners do not, or are unable to, train their dogs to control their "natural" aggression. Seeing pit bulls as naturally aggressive reflects the view of some of the media and so might show the influence of media articles on the public. Such attitudes indicate that some people have limited understanding about the importance of training and socialization in determining the behavior of dogs (Bryson, 2000). The lack of people's knowledge on pet care combined with the wish to want certain types banned because of their reputation may be a cause of concern.

Table 5 shows that, overall, dog-owning status was the factor least often found to influence the responses. This shows perceptions—rather than facts related to dog ownership—often permeate society. Or, again, this may reflect a lack of knowledge on the part of dog owners, making them indistinguishable from non-dog owners. Although age and gender influenced the respondents' view of the viciousness of pit bulls, whether the respondent owned a dog did not. This again suggests that dog owners may be no better informed on this matter than non-dog owners. The lack of knowledge on pet-related matters in the Bahamas was identified in an earlier study (Fielding et al., 2005). One pit bull owner thought that pit bulls should be banned. We only can speculate as to why this should be; possibly, however, this owner had difficulties in caring for his pet or was concerned about how other owners looked after their pit bulls.

As expected, a greater percentage of dog owners than non-dog owners favored dogs' having the same rights as humans (Table 2). This view is consistent with pet owners in New Providence having a greater level of attachment than the anticipated attachment of non-pet owners. (Fielding et al., 2005). However, the difference is important as non-dog owners represent the majority of the population, and they could be influential in revising public policy toward dog ownership.

Pit bulls often are used as guard dogs; they often are used as such by guard dog companies (Ginton, 1994) and by individuals (Fielding & Plumridge, 2004). Many respondents, while thinking it was acceptable to use pit bulls as guard dogs, did not consider them the best guard dogs. Further, the use of dogs to kill an intruder proved controversial. Age, gender, and dog-owning status all influenced respondents' replies. Males were more likely than were females to support the idea of a dog's killing an intruder. This may reflect a "macho" image or female concerns about having a potentially dangerous dog—who may escape and even hurt the owners or others—in close proximity to family or children. The concern about allowing pit bulls to roam was almost universal, probably influenced by one of the fatal dog attacks (Smith, 2001).

These responses show there is room for more public debate and that any regulations aimed at curbing dog ownership or the use of dogs would generate much controversy.

Clearly, we need further research into the issues raised here. It would be valuable to know why certain subgroups of respondents have certain attitudes and why they hold them so tenaciously. Are their attitudes deeply ingrained, or does their chosen news source influence them? Are the age-related effects due to the greater exposure of older people to media or other information sources? If attitudes are "cultural," changes relating to dog ownership may be received with hostility, and this might mean that it will be harder to change mind-sets.

* William J. Fielding, The College of The Bahamas

Note

- 1 Correspondence should be addressed to William J. Fielding, The College of The Bahamas, Oakes Field, New Providence, The Bahamas. E-mail: wfru@hotmail.com We are grateful to Susan Plumridge of the School of Social Sciences and the librarians at the College of The Bahamas in assisting in the data collection. We also are grateful to the journal's editor and an anonymous referee for their help in suggesting improvements to this paper.
- 2 The words "owner" and "ownership" are used extensively in this paper. Preferred words would be "guardian" or "caregiver." However, for the purposes of this article, the Journal is accepting "owner" and "ownership."

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