

The most recent figures from the CDC's National Center for Health Statistics indicate that an American is more likely to die from eating a tainted hamburger than from a dog bite.

But what about pit bulls? Critics like to refer to the big-jawed animals as walking time bombs. Bryant compares them to assault rifles.

"They have been bred for their aggressivity and ferocity," McGuinty said this week. "If you have a ferocious chihuahua, it's not an issue."

Is any of this true?

In some cases, yes. Some pit bulls are bred and trained to fight. But then so are some other dogs.

Fashions change. Pit bulls may be considered fierce today. But in an earlier England, their gentleness with children earned them the nickname "nanny dogs." In early 20th-century America, they were one of that country's most popular family pets.

Most dog experts deny that the pit bull, or indeed any other breed of dog, is inherently vicious. The problem, most say, usually lies on the human side — with those who deliberately breed and train such animals to be vicious or with owners who do not understand how to deal with them.

As a 1997 Centers for Disease Control study notes: "Targeting a specific breed may be unproductive; a more effective approach may be to target chronically irresponsible dog owners."

The American Veterinary Medical Association echoed this sentiment in a 2001 report.

"Singling out one or two breeds for control can result in a false sense of accomplishment," wrote the organization's task force on canine aggression. Not only are the statistics, such as they are, misleading but the assumption that only big dogs cause problems is just plain wrong.

"Dogs from small breeds also bite and are capable of causing severe injury," the report says.

Those in favour of banning pit bulls point to Kitchener-Waterloo. That city says its decision to ban the breed in 1997 was a success.

In a sense, it was. In 1996, there were 18 reported pit bull attacks. In the last three years there have been only two — a result that is perhaps not surprising given the fact that, with some exceptions, any pit bull found inside the city limits is either shipped out of town or killed.

But have the total number of dog bite incidents in Kitchener-Waterloo declined? That is far less clear.

City officials say there are no clear statistics kept on bites inflicted by other breeds. Jamie LaFlamme, assistant manager of the local

humane society, estimates that each year an average of 10 dogs of other breeds are designated as dangerous animals subject to severe restrictions. But these figures, unlike the pre-bylaw statistics, do not include all reported bites, just the most serious.

Indeed even before 1997, it was unclear as to how much of a problem pit bulls represented for Kitchener. True, 16 pit bull attacks were reported in 1996. But in the same year, according to figures collected by the provincial health ministry, 85 German shepherd attacks were also recorded in the municipality. Yet there is no German shepherd ban.

Other jurisdictions that have tried pit bull bans are finding that they simply don't work.

Since 1991, the United Kingdom has banned, with some exceptions, four breeds of so-called dangerous dogs — including pit bulls.

et in 2001, the BBC reported that the number of people hospitalized because of dog attacks had risen 25 per cent over the previous five years.

In 1999, Cincinnati revoked as counterproductive a 13-year-old pit bull ban, replacing it with a bylaw that targets the owners of all vicious dogs. Other U.S. cities are following suit.

The main problem with breed-specific bans is that they don't prevent humans from finding other vicious animals.

In France, the Canada Safety Council reports, a ban on so-called dangerous dog breeds led some people to import Barbary apes as watch animals.

"The apes have strong limbs, sharp teeth and short tempers," says the council. "They attack humans on the head."

I do not know Michael Bryant, but he is said to be one of McGuinty's bright lights. If so, he may want to extricate himself from the pit bull hysteria — some of which he fanned — and consider matters more rationally.

He says a province-wide ban may be necessary to ensure that dogs banned in one community don't simply migrate to pit bull "resorts" or "Disneylands" in neighbouring towns. If he thinks that dogs trained as fighters loll around in Disney-style resorts, he should join a humane society inspector in a tour of some of these establishments.

Most bad dogs are raised in bad places and owned by bad people. Get the bad people — through serious provincial legislation to curb puppy mills, through serious police enforcement of the law against dog fights, through serious federal animal cruelty laws — and you've dealt with most of the problem.

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