

Companion Animals (volume 2)

An HRC Research Primer



Report in Brief

This primer summarizes the latest research covering the overpopulation of companion animals in the United States, along with related issues including free-roaming and feral animals, spay/neuter, relinquishment, and shelter statistics. For additional information about companion animals, see the separate HRC primer, *Companion Animals (volume 1)*.

The Bottom Line

Overpopulation of companion animals is a serious problem in the United States, resulting in overcrowded animal shelters and widespread euthanasia. The severity of the situation stems from breeding operations and lack of awareness and action by animal owners/guardians to sterilize their pets and keep them separated from potential mates. The problem is exacerbated by ongoing relinquishment of companion animals, and the large populations of feral cats that continue to reproduce at alarming rates. This HRC primer summarizes the available research regarding these and related issues.

How to Use this Information

By understanding the relevant facts and magnitude of the issues surrounding the overpopulation of companion animals, advocates can develop strategies to address the factors contributing to the problem. This may involve identifying specific points of leverage in the data regarding people's relationships with and actions relating to companion animals.

HRC Information

HRC is a nonprofit organization dedicated to maximizing the effectiveness of animal advocates by applying professional, cost-efficient, and informative consumer and market research methods.

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Introduction and Overview

In a perfect society, companion animals reside happily and harmoniously with their human owners or “guardians,” a term that some animal advocates prefer. However, there are certain problems and social costs associated with having companion animals, including overpopulation, for which some animals pay with their lives. Of course, many factors contribute to the overpopulation of companion animals and many problems result from it as well, for both animals and people.

Two main causes of companion animal overpopulation are unnecessary breeding and irresponsible ownership, including the failure to sterilize and keep animals separated from potential mates, as well as ongoing relinquishment of companion animals to shelters. These factors directly lead to massive overcrowding of animal shelters and ultimately needless deaths to address the problem.

This primer reviews and summarizes the available research about companion animal ownership, relinquishment, and related animal sheltering issues, which directly correspond to the problem of overpopulation. For additional information on other companion animal issues, including estimates of the number of animals in U.S. households, please refer to the separate HRC research primer, *Companion Animals (volume 1)*, available on HumaneSpot.org.

Ownership and Community Issues

Free-roaming companion animals are the basis for many problems inextricably linked to overpopulation. Allowing companion animals to roam freely in an unsterilized state often results in unexpected and unwanted litters, contributing to the problem of overpopulation. Additionally, allowing domestic cats to have access to the outdoors can dramatically impact local wildlife populations. Although the majority of people with companion animals take at least some measures to prevent these problems, many do not, leading to pet relinquishment and consequently to the overcrowding of animal shelters.

According to research conducted in 2007 by the American Kennel Club, one-third of dog owners do not fence their yards to contain their pets. Although this does not necessarily mean that a third of dogs are free-roaming, it does indicate that a significant number of dogs may have the ability to wander and engage in behavior leading to undesirable consequences. Free-roaming cats, on the other hand, are an even more significant problem. As the most populous companion animal in the United States, the numbers of cats being allowed to roam is arguably more of a concern; Ohio State University found that 40% of Ohio cat owners allow their cats to go outdoors.

The problem of free-roaming cats, however, is more complex. It is not limited to owners who allow their pets to roam outdoors; it also extends to the large population of feral cats who live and survive in a semi-wild state, often without human involvement. Uncontrolled in large numbers, feral cats continuously reproduce. Efforts to control these populations, including TNR (trap-neuter-release) programs, re-homing, and the disdainful method of “trap and destroy” appear to have a modest impact on slowing overall population growth. For example, TNR programs are thought to be effective at stabilizing a feral cat population only if they reach at a 70% or higher sterilization level (Animal People, 2003).

RESEARCH ON OWNERSHIP AND COMMUNITY ISSUES*

Year	Source	Finding
2009	PetSmart Charities (Sterilizing Pets isn't a Priority for New Owners)	About 38% of companion animal owners aged 18 to 34 years old have not sterilized their pets; nearly one-quarter (24%) of those 55 and older also had not done so. As a result, 13% of all dog owners and 19% of all cat owners ended up with litters, more than half of them unintentional.
2009	Alley Cat Allies (Population Characteristics and Neuter Status of Cats Living in Households in the United States)	Family income was the single strongest predictor of whether pet cats are neutered: 96% of cats in households with annual family incomes ≥ \$75,000 were neutered while only 51% of cats in households with annual family incomes < \$35,000 were neutered.
2008	Andrew Rowan, The Humane Society of the United States (Companion Animal Statistics, Everything You Did Not Think You Needed to Know as a Shelter Director)	Dr. Rowan provides a comprehensive set of data relating to companion animals, including: number of dogs and cats; trends in the populations of owned dogs and cats; calculating the number of "owned" dogs or cats in your community; regional differences; number of animal groups; feral/stray cat numbers; dog/cat source analysis; and sheltering data.
2008	Ohio State University (Community-based Approach Best Bet to Control Free-Roaming Cats, Survey Suggests)	40% of Ohio cat owners allow their animals to go outdoors. 49% believe laws should prohibit owners from letting their cats roam free. Nearly half believe local governments should be responsible for controlling free-roaming cats. 60% support spay/neuter laws for cats. 48% support the use of tax dollars to subsidize spay/neuter programs.
2005	East Carolina University Center for Survey Research (Survey on Poop: Half Don't Scoop)	In North Carolina, 47% of urban dog-walkers, 49% in the suburbs, and 59% in rural areas say they rarely or never pick up after their dog; about 57% of men said they rarely or never picked it up, compared with 46% of women.

Spay and Neuter Statistics

The sterilization procedures for controlling companion animal populations are “spay” for females, and “neuter” for males. These procedures permanently inhibit an animal’s ability to reproduce and are important preventative measures needed to control the numbers of unwanted companion animals that result from free-roaming animals and intentional breeding operations. Spay/neuter may offer the most hope in reducing the companion animal overpopulation problem, although the biggest barriers to widespread implementation are its expense and a lack of knowledge among pet owners.

Public support for regulations mandating that owners sterilize their companion animals is evident, and several studies have quantified this support. For example, a 2008 Ohio State University study found that 60% of respondents support passing a spay-neuter law for cats, while nearly half of all respondents

support the use of tax dollars to subsidize these programs. Meanwhile, other studies show that providing spay/neuter programs can be effective to some extent and they are the most effective when targeted at low income populations. However, despite the existence of low-cost spay/neuter programs in many areas, mandatory sterilization could potentially discriminate against disadvantaged pet owners.

RESEARCH ON SPAYING AND NEUTERING *

Year	Source	Finding
2008	Humane Research Council's Animal Tracker (Wave 1)	Concern for animals caused 58% of people to spay/neuter their companion animal(s).
2006	The Handsel Foundation (Findings from the Handsel Foundation Research on Program Evaluation, with Focus on Spay and Neuter)	A summary of the problems facing animal groups with respect to evaluation of spay/neuter programs, which includes unique measurement challenges. There is also evidence that spay/neuter programs are the most effective when targeted to low income populations.
2003	Spay USA (Case Study: Companion Animal Over-Population Programs in NJ, NH, and ME, and a New Program for ME)	Successful spay/neuter programs require participation from veterinarians and shelters, in addition to public education.
1997	Pecos People for Animal Welfare Society (Pet Overpopulation Study)	64% of female companion animals were spayed, 49% of male companion animals were neutered. 51% of respondents knew about low-cost spay/neuter programs. Reasons for not sterilizing companion animal include age (20%), animal doesn't roam (19%), desire to breed (15%), sterilization might harm animal's health (8%), cost (5%), and don't believe in sterilization (1%).

Shelter Statistics

Nowhere is the problem of companion animal overpopulation more obvious than in animal shelters across the country. Current and accurate estimates are nearly impossible to generate due to lack of reliable reporting methods among sheltering agencies. The most comprehensive data on record is more than a decade old. The Shelter Statistics Survey, 1994-1997, compiled by the National Council on Pet Population Study & Policy, surveyed a large sample of both government and private shelters that house more than 100 animals. The final tabulations found that somewhere in excess of 4.3 million animals entered shelters in 1997, while about 4 million "left" shelters through adoption (24%), reclamation (10%), or euthanasia (64%).

These statistics represent only a portion of the actual numbers of animals euthanized, as only a sampling of U.S. shelters participated in this study. However, from this data, we know that *at least* 2.5 million animals were euthanized in 1997 alone, and the current number is likely to be significantly higher due to population growth and under-representation at the time of the original study. More recent estimates provided by the Humane Society of the United States (HSUS) show that among the 4,000-6,000 animal

shelters that exist in the United States, approximately 6-8 million dogs and cats enter shelters each year. Of these animals, 30% of dogs and 2-5% of cats are reclaimed, while 3-4 million are adopted and another 3-4 million are euthanized each year.

Some animals in shelters are lost companion animals. A survey by Sainsbury Pet Insurance found that in the United Kingdom people were most likely to search for missing companion animals by canvassing the neighborhood (68%) and talking to their neighbors (65%) and searching the local shelters (40%). One way people protect against the loss of a companion animal is microchipping. Lost companion animals who have microchips are found in 3 out of 4 cases (Ohio State University).

RESEARCH ON SHELTERS AND COMPANION ANIMAL RELINQUISHMENT *

Year	Source	Finding
2009	PetFinder.com (Economy Forcing Many Pets into Shelters)	Three-fourths (74%) of animal adoption organizations have seen an increase in pets being given away or abandoned, compared to the same time on year prior (2008).
2009	Sainsbury’s (Sainsbury's Pet Insurance Research Reveals Missing Animal Trends)	People in the United Kingdom are most likely to use the following methods to search for a lost cat or dog: personal search of the neighborhood (68%); quiz neighbors for details (65%); search local shelters (40%); inform police (15%); offer rewards (13%); place ads in the local newspaper (8%).
2009	Berg Publishers (Reasons for Relinquishment and Return of Domestic Cats to Rescue Shelters in the UK)	In the United Kingdom, 60% of cats entering shelters were given up by their owners, 19% due to owner circumstances, 7% for behavioral reasons, and 5% because of the occurrence of allergy or asthma among owners.
2008	Fundacion Affinity (More than 150 Thousand Pets Were Lost or Abandoned in 2008 [Spain])	In 2008 in Spain, more than 118,000 dogs and 38,700 cats were recovered from the streets. 14% of these dogs had been lost, while the remainder had been abandoned. Of the cats recovered, 5% had been lost, while the remainder had been abandoned. The reasons given for animals being left at shelters included: change in the animal's behavior (16%); moving (12%); end of hunting season (11%); arrival of a child (10%); loss of interest in the animal (9%); hospitalization or death of owner (3%)
2007	Ohio State University (Microchips Result in High Rate of Return of Shelter Animals to Owners)	Owners of companion animals that had been implanted with microchips recovered their pets in three out of four cases; the return-to-owner rate for microchipped cats was 20 times higher and for microchipped dogs 2.5 times higher than the rates for all stray cats and dogs entering shelters.
2007	Alley Cat Allies (U.S. Public Opinion on Humane Treatment of Stray Cats)	81% believe it is more humane to leave a stray cat where she or he is than to have the cat put down (14%).

RESEARCH ON SHELTERS AND COMPANION ANIMAL RELINQUISHMENT *, CONTINUED

Year	Source	Finding
2006	Ohio State University (Survey of Animal Shelters Says Dogs Fare Better Than Cats)	Ohio animal shelters reported that, since 1996, the number of dogs they received decreased by about 16%, while the number of cats taken in increased by 20%. And while the number of dogs euthanized decreased by 39%, the number of cats euthanized increased by 14%.
2001	Purina (The State of the American Pet Survey)	The biggest challenges of dog ownership include obedience training (15%), health (15%), cleaning up (10%), and ownership responsibility (10%). For cats, the challenges include health (13%), cleaning up (13%), ownership responsibility (7%), and obedience training (5%).
1994-1997	National Council on Pet Population Study & Policy (The Shelter Statistics Survey, 1994-1997)	Provides estimates on companion animals entering and leaving animal shelters for the years 1994-1997.

Companion Animal Relinquishment

Relinquishment of companion animals impacts shelters by increasing expenses and overcrowding, ultimately resulting in the euthanasia of a majority of these animals in an attempt to control populations. Consequently, it is important to examine the reasons why people bring their pets into animal shelters in the first place. According to the National Council on Pet Population Study & Policy, the top ten reasons for the relinquishment of companion animals are shown in the following table.

REASONS FOR OWNERS RELINQUISHING DOGS AND CATS TO SHELTERS *

Dog Relinquishments	Cats Relinquishments
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Moving • Landlord issues • Cost of pet maintenance • No time for pet • Inadequate facilities • Too many pets in home • Pet illness • Personal problems • Biting • No homes for littermates 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Too many in house • Allergies • Moving • Cost of pet maintenance • Landlord issues • No homes for littermates • House soiling • Personal problems • Inadequate facilities • Doesn't get along with other pets

* Source: Details for all of the research studies cited in this primer, as well as *Companion Animals (volume 1)*, are available to registered users of HRC's HumaneSpot.org.