

## Human and Animal Factors Related to the Relinquishment of Dogs and Cats in 12 Selected Animal Shelters in the United States

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Since the 1940s, perceived companion animal overpopulation in the United States has been an important issue to the animal welfare community (Moulton, Wright, & Rinky, 1991). This surplus of animals has resulted in millions of dogs and cats being euthanized annually in animal shelters across the country. The nature and scope of this problem have been notoriously difficult to characterize. The number of animal shelters in the United States, the demographics of the population of animals passing through them, and the characteristics of pet owners relinquishing animals are poorly understood. What portion of these animals are adopted or euthanized, why they are

relinquished, and their source of acquisition are all questions for which there have been little data. Consequently, we are no closer to answering the fundamental question of how and why many animals are destroyed each year in shelters (Arkow, 1994).

In the 1970s, as the result of a number of articles in both the scientific and popular press, efforts were undertaken to resolve the overpopulation problem, although no scientific research had been done to characterize the nature of the problem or evaluate the efficacy of interventions (Rowan & Williams, 1987). The most prevalent belief at that time was that most of the companion animals coming to shelters who were subsequently euthanized were puppies and kittens, and the solution to the problem was to decrease the birth rate by promoting aggressive spaying and neutering programs (Arkow, 1991). Others promoted a broader approach, including sterilization programs, enhanced pet owner education, and tougher animal control ordinances and enforcement (Wright, 1986).

Although the number of sheltered animals being euthanized has declined over the past 20 years (Rowan & Williams, 1987), it is still unclear which, if any, of these changes has been most effective (Wilson & Rowan, 1985), or whether other factors unrelated to the intervention strategies are responsible (Arkow, 1991). Individuals in the shelter community report that while shelters still euthanize large numbers of kittens, most dogs in shelters are young adults exhibiting potentially resolvable behavior problems that owners are ill-equipped to handle (Caras, 1993; Rollin, 1991). Anecdotal and unsubstantiated reports state that 50% to 70% of all euthanasias are the result of behavior problems (Spencer, 1993). Recent studies of individual shelters have begun to identify both human and animal characteristics that may put animals at increased or decreased risk for relinquishment (Patronek, Glickman, Beck, McCabe, & Ecker, 1996x, 1996b).

More data are needed to characterize the companion animal surplus in the United States. Different groups have attempted to provide solutions, but have not coordinated their efforts or provided adequate evaluation of the success of implemented programs (Wilson & Rowan, 1985). The National Council on Pet Population Study and Policy (NCPSP) was created in 1993 (Olson & Salman, 1992) to address these concerns and coordinate three epidemiological studies:

1. The *National Household Survey*, designed to characterize the population of dog and cat owners and the acquisition, ownership, and disposition of these pets.
2. The *Regional Shelter Survey*, designed to characterize the dogs and cats entering shelters, the population of people relinquishing them, and the reasons for relinquishment.
3. The *Shelter Statistics Study*, created to update a list of all shelters and impoundment facilities in the United States. This instrument continues to collect statistics on the number of animals entering these facilities and their disposition.

This article describes the *Regional Shelter Survey* study. Descriptive statistics addressing questions such as "What are the most common reasons for relinquishment for dogs and cats to shelters?" and "What are the characteristics of people surrendering animals to a shelter?" are presented.

## THE REGIONAL SHELTER SURVEY

### Shelter Selection

Shelters were selected by principal investigators in four regions. The regional principal investigators were in New York (Cornell University, College of Veterinary Medicine), Tennessee (University of Tennessee, College of Veterinary Medicine), Colorado (Colorado State University, College of Veterinary Medicine and Biomedical Sciences), and California (University of California at Davis, School of Veterinary Medicine). The investigators were selected to use existing resources, giving consideration to geographic diversity, ability, interest, and commitment of investigators.

### Role of Investigators

Regional investigators were encouraged to select shelters that were likely to be representative of those in their locations and to attempt to include those from urban, suburban, and rural areas. Selection of shelters was also based on the willingness of shelter administrations to cooperate with data collection. Shelters not routinely euthanizing animals (i.e., "no-kill" shelters) were excluded from the study. Twelve shelters in the United States were selected. They were located in Bergen County, New Jersey (1); New York City (1); Knox and Anderson Counties, Tennessee (2); Jefferson County, Kentucky (2); Denver, Larimer, and Weld Counties, Colorado (3); and Sacramento County, California (3).

A personal interview form was designed to be completed by people surrendering their cats and dogs to animal shelters. The questionnaire, a copy of which is available from the senior author upon request, was reviewed and revised several times by the authors and the Scientific Advisory Committee of NCPPSP prior to field-testing. Field tests were conducted in four shelters in three states before the questionnaire was finalized. Three major categories of questions were included.

### *Animal Relinquishment*

Questions were asked as to the number of animals surrendered and the health status and reason for surrender (i.e., possible adoption, euthanasia).