



# Exploring the Surplus Cat and Dog Problem

## Highlights of Five Research Publications Regarding Relinquishment of Pets

**W**hen the National Council on Pet Population Study & Policy first formed to research pet population dynamics it determined that nearly a third of the dogs and cats entering shelters were animals that did have homes but whose owners had rejected and relinquished them to an animal shelter. Anecdotal evidence was that most of these animals were not kittens and puppies, but adult animals whose chances of adoption from the shelter were not great. It was clear that if these animals could be kept in the home, and the human/animal bond strengthened, then euthanasia rate could be reduced significantly.

Part of the Council’s mission is to identify the numbers of animals of animals entering shelters, the reasons why they ended up there and how that population compares to the animal population that remain in homes.

### *Giving up on our best friends*

The evidence is clear. People are not in the know. When it comes to problem solving, some pet owners do not have adequate knowledge to determine solutions. They are unaware what may be contributing to the problems they face. Many are experiencing the results of unrealistic expectations. The bottom line? Animals, who otherwise might remain happily in their home are relinquished to shelters across the country.

### **REGIONAL SHELTER RELINQUISHMENT SURVEY**

To address this issue the NCPPSP performed the first in depth study of the characteristics of people relinquishing animals to shelters and of the ani-



### **THE TOP TEN REASONS WE GIVE UP OUR PETS**

#### **DOGS**

1. Moving
2. Landlord issues
3. Cost of pet maintenance
4. No time for pet
5. Inadequate facilities
6. Too many pets in home
7. Pet illness(es)
8. Personal problems
9. Biting
10. No homes for littermates



#### **CATS**

1. Too many in house
2. Allergies
3. Moving
4. Cost of pet maintenance
5. Landlord issues
6. No homes for littermates
7. House soiling
8. Personal problems
9. Pet illness(es)
10. Inadequate facilities

NOTE: The listings here represent responses given as reasons for relinquishment. Up to five reasons could be given for each animal as owners often cite multiple issues.

Animals relinquished for euthanasia due to illness or age, and animals turned in as strays were excluded from this list as these reasons do not necessarily represent breaking of the human-animal bond. Eight of the top ten reasons for both species are shared.

mals being relinquished. The protocol for the Regional Shelter Relinquishment Survey study was designed by a group of veterinary epidemiologists associated with major universities, and was carried out under their supervision. A great deal of data was collected analyzed and published as scientific papers in a peer-reviewed journal.

Trained teams of interviewers visited twelve shelters from four regions of the country to conduct interviews with people as they relinquished dogs and cats.

Those who participated in the Shelter Relinquishment Survey were asked a series of questions to provide insight about the pet, the owner, and the household in which they both lived. The questions addressed:

- the animal's health status
- the reasons for surrender
- the animal's species, breed or breed-type, age, gender and neuter status
- where the animal was acquired
- how long the person had the animal
- the price paid for the animal
- the animal's care
- veterinarian appointments
- the approximate time the animal spent outside
- how much training the animal had received (dog)
- behavioral issues
- the number of dogs and cats in the home
- the number & source of animals added to the household in the previous year
- how any other animals had recently exited the household
- characteristics of the owner - age, gender, ethnicity/race, income range, state of residence, and education level

**Location & Number of Participating Shelters:**

- Bergen County, NJ (1)
- New York City, NY (1)
- Knox and Anderson Counties, TN (2)
- Jefferson County, KY (2)
- Denver, Larimer, and Weld Counties, CO (3)
- Sacramento County, CA (3)

Participants were asked to answer a series of twelve questions intended to reveal their general level of knowledge regarding cats and dogs and their attitudes toward animals.

**NATIONAL PET-OWNING HOUSEHOLD SURVEY**

In order to have a standard of comparison with the general population, households in the United States that owned at least one dog or cat were surveyed to collect the same information. This survey, known as the National Pet-owning Household Survey (Household Survey), was conducted in conjunction with the American Veterinary Medical Association and had two phases. In the first phase, a list of 80,000 pet owning and non-pet owning households with diverse characteristics were contacted by mail. These households were selected as being representative of all U.S. households. From the responses to the first mailing, 7,399 households were selected to be a part of the second phase. Second-phase households included at least one dog or cat. About half had either a dog or a cat, and a small number had both species. Half of the households were selected based on the fact that a dog or cat had left the household during the previous year.

**HIGHLIGHTS OF RESEARCH**

Highlights of five scientific papers based on the findings of the Shelter Relinquishment Survey and the Household Survey are presented here.

**Human and Animal Factors Related to Relinquishment<sup>1</sup>**

This paper presented and evaluated the results of the Shelter Survey, in which interviews were conducted with 3,772 owners who relinquished a total of 3,676 dogs and litters of puppies, and 1,409 cats and litters of kittens. Stray or un-owned animals and animals for whom euthanasia was requested due to illness or old age were excluded from these data.

Reasons for relinquishment common to both dogs and cats included moving, landlord not allowing pets, too many animals in household, cost of pet maintenance, owner having personal problems, inadequate facilities for a pet, and no

homes available for littermates. Other reasons for cats were allergies in the family, house soiling, and incompatibility with other pets while other reasons for dogs were lack of time for them, illness of the dog, and biting.

Findings included that 30% of dogs and 6% of relinquished cats were purebred. Most animals were between 5 months and 3 years of age. Twenty-seven percent of dogs and 36.5% of cats were reported to live outdoors always or almost always.

The findings reported in this paper were consistent with studies performed by other researchers in other shelter settings.

### **Relinquishment Due to Health and Personal Issues<sup>2</sup>**

Because most of the people surrendering animals reported personal issues as one of the causes, this second investigation examined the Shelter Relinquishment Survey results to learn more specifically what those personal issues are and how they might be addressed so that owners could keep their pets. When all the various reasons for relinquishment that dealt with health or personal issues are grouped together they become the most prevalent cause of relinquishment for cats and the third most common for dogs. These issues were surpassed by behavior and housing concerns for relinquishment of dogs. Examples of the type of health and personal issues cited by those relinquishing pets included a birth or death in the family or a new job or other change that would require the owner to be away from home more. Allergies to the pet, primarily to cats, were also cited.

The characteristics of the people who relinquished pets due to health and personal issues were similar to those of people who relinquished for all other reasons. Seventeen percent of the people who were relinquishing their pet due to health and personal issues still had one or more other dogs or cats remaining in their home. More than one-third of people relinquishing a pet due to health and personal issues also reported another problem: for dogs, a behavior problem and for cats, too many animals in the home.

### **All Kinds of Reasons**

When asked why they were giving up their pet(s), survey participants were allowed to give up to five reasons. The reasons for surrender which survey participants gave included:

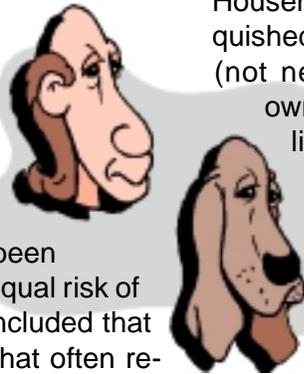
1. **Behavior Problems** - aggression to humans bites, aggressive to people
2. **Animal Behavior Problems** - animal-to-animal incompatible with other pets, aggressive to animals, killed another animal
3. **Animal Behavior Problems (other)** house soiling, inside destruction, escapes, outside destruction, too active, too vocal, attention, euthanasia requested due to behavior, not friendly, afraid, jumps on people, animal jealousy, pesters to be outside, chases people, chases cars, coprophagy, pica
4. **Requests for Euthanasia** due to illness, old age, young age, or other reasons
5. **Animal medical - health** ill, injured, surgery complications
6. **Animal Characteristics** wrong species, sheds, too old, too young, too mellow, wrong sex, not protective, too small
7. **Human Housing Issues** moving, inadequate facilities, landlord, not allowed by parents, inadequate fencing, zoning problems with the number or type of pet
8. **Household Animal Overpopulation** can't find homes for litter, too many animals in household, animal is pregnant
9. **Owner Lifestyle** allergies in family, children and pet not compatible, divorce, gift, new baby, owner personal problems, owner traveling, owner pregnancy, no time for pet, owner died
10. **Owner Unprepared /Inappropriate Expectations** cost, too much responsibility, owner fears disease transmission or damage, litterbox odor
11. **Other** No apparent owner, legal cases, body disposal, dead on admission, no reason given

Based on evaluation of the health and personal issues reported, the authors of this paper suggested ways to address this type of relinquishment. Their results suggested that education and counseling of pet owners before and after they acquire a pet, and providing temporary housing for pets when owners are experiencing a personal crisis may reduce relinquishment of pets.

## Moving and Relinquishment<sup>3</sup>

This third publication shed light on that common catch-all reason for relinquishment: “moving”. Moving was the most common reason given for relinquishment of dogs in the study, and the third most common for cats. Because relinquishers could give up to five possible reasons for giving up pets, the term “moving” was further defined. Those people who gave up pets because they were moving also said that their landlord would not allow pets, that parents or other people living in their household would not allow pets, or that their home had housing rules or restrictions. Others reported that their home was too small, had no yard, or had “no place to keep the animal”. More than half of these relinquishers also reported behavior problems in their pets, strongly suggesting that housing restrictions are not the only consideration when moving is given as the reason for relinquishment.

Statistics show that young people are more likely to have pets and more likely to move. This survey found that a large number of those relinquishing pets due to moving were also young pet owners, significantly more so than would have been expected if all age groups were of equal risk of relinquishing pets. The authors concluded that moving is an important life event that often results in the relinquishment of a pet to an animal shelter, and suggested that educational efforts stressing both companion animal selection and the process and difficulties of moving with dogs and cats might be best aimed at the young-adult members of the U.S. population.



## Behavior Reasons for Relinquishment<sup>4</sup>

This fourth study closely examined the behavioral reasons for which pet owners relinquish their pets to animal shelters. When all reasons for relinquishment that dealt with any type of behavioral problem are grouped together, then behavioral problems were the most common reasons dogs were given up and the second most common for cats. The authors found that households who had only a single animal were less likely to give them up for behavior problems, and that owners who added a second pet might encounter problems leading to

relinquishment of one or both pets. The authors suggested that careful counseling before acquisition of a second pet about how pets interact with each other might be preventative. Owners who relinquished dogs for behavior problems were likely to have owned them for less than three months, whereas cats were owned for 1 to 2 years before being given up, suggesting that intervention for dog behavior problems would need to be available as soon as the dog entered a household, and soon thereafter for cats.

## Failed Versus Successful Relationships<sup>5</sup>

Are the people who take their animals to shelters for relinquishment significantly different than those who retain their pets or dispose of them by other means, or are the animals themselves quite different? This article is the first to compare the information from the Shelter Survey to that of the Household Survey. The authors found that relinquished pets were more likely to be young, intact (not neutered), and of mixed breed. Animals owned for a short period of time were more likely to be relinquished; the longer the length of ownership, the less chance they would be given up. Contrary to what many shelter workers would expect, these data showed that dogs received as gifts were much less likely to be relinquished to an animal shelter than those who were acquired directly from an animal shelter, a friend, a pet shop, or as a stray. Dogs whose owners paid \$100 or more for them were less likely to be relinquished. Cats were rarely purchased, and the amount paid for a cat is not associated with the risk of relinquishment.

In general, dogs who soiled in the house, damaged things, were overly active, or were reported to be fearful were more likely to be relinquished. However, behavioral issues were not unique to the dogs relinquished at shelters. Veterinarians and other animal professionals should be concerned that behavioral problems are exhibited to varying degrees by the dogs who remained in homes.

Undesirable behavior played a lesser part in the relinquishment of cats than dogs. Cats who soiled in the house, damaged things, or were overly active were at greater risk.

It is disturbing to find that people had poor general knowledge about the animals they own. Significantly more of those relinquishing dogs and cats felt that the animal would be better off having a litter prior to being spayed. And approximately half of the owners in the Household Survey comparison group also wrongly thought this was true or did not know the answer. Those relinquishing dogs were less likely to know how often females could come into heat (estrus).

It is this lack of knowledge that might contribute to unrealistic expectations or inappropriate actions on the part of the owner. People need to know more about why animals behave the way they do, and more general knowledge about the animals they take into their homes to make for successful relationships. The authors suggested that education of pet owners about the general biology and behavior of dogs and cats might lessen the possibility of relinquishment of their pets. Veterinary clinics, animal shelters, pet stores, trainers and breeders could all be involved in proactive educational efforts to prevent the development of problems or to deal with existing ones. Data from these surveys suggest that the window of opportunity for intervention and education is a narrow one based on the length of ownership prior to relinquishment.

## REFERENCES

<sup>1</sup> *Human and Animal Factors Related to the Relinquishment of Dogs and Cats in 12 Selected Animal Shelters in the United States, published in the Journal of Applied Animal Welfare Science, volume 1, number 3, pages 207-226, 1998.*

<sup>2</sup> *Reasons for Relinquishment of Companion Animals in U.S. Animal Shelters: Selected Health and Personal Issues, published in the Journal of Applied Animal Welfare Science, volume 2, number 1, pages 41-57, 1999.*

<sup>3</sup> *Moving: Characteristics of Dogs and Cats and Those Relinquishing Them to 12 U.S. Animal Shelters, published in the Journal of Applied Animal Welfare Science, volume 2, number 2, pages 83-96, 1999.*

<sup>4</sup> *Behavioral Reasons for Relinquishment of Dogs and Cats to 12 Shelters, published in the Journal of Applied Animal Welfare Science, volume 2, number 2, pages 93-106, 2000.*

<sup>5</sup> *Characteristics of Shelter-relinquished Animals and Their Owners Compared with Animals and Their Owners in U.S. Pet-owning Households, published in the Journal of Applied Animal Welfare Science, volume 3, number 3, pages 179-201, 2000.*

### **VETERINARIANS AND OTHER ANIMAL PROFESSIONALS COULD MAKE A DIFFERENCE.**

It isn't just puppies and kittens anymore. There are other issues causing people to give up their animals, issues that most likely could be addressed in ways that would allow the animal to remain a part of the family.

People have unrealistic expectations. When those aren't met, they give up. Knowing why some human-animal relationships are unsuccessful is the first step toward prevention. From a mountain of data, some patterns and possible solutions are emerging.

The majority of dogs and cats relinquished had been in the home for less than a year. This leaves a narrow window of opportunity for salvaging the relationship. Education must be implemented during the initial health examination at a veterinary clinic. Here misconceptions can be clarified, obedience training can be recommended and potential behavior problems could be identified and/or discussed.

A few minutes of time in the clinic could result in years of trust, respect and loyalty from a client experiencing a lasting, successful relationship with a companion animal. Animal professionals are encouraged to utilize the information from this research to begin their own program of building successful human-animal relationships.



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- The Humane Society of the United States
- Massachusetts Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals
- National Animal Control Association
- Society of Animal Welfare Administrators

*Those more likely to be relinquished*

<p><b>DOGS</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ sexually intact</li> <li>■ obtained at little or no cost</li> <li>■ over 6 mo. when obtained</li> <li>■ most of day in yard or crate</li> <li>■ were more work than expected</li> </ul>	<p><b>CATS</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ sexually intact</li> <li>■ allowed outdoors</li> <li>■ without veterinary care</li> <li>■ frequent house soilers</li> <li>■ being more work than expected</li> <li>■ not fitting the expectations of a cat's role in the family</li> </ul>
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*Animals were less likely to be relinquished if...*

 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ S/he had regular veterinary care</li> <li>■ S/he participated in obedience training</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ The owner had read a book or other educational material about cat behavior</li> <li>■ S/he had veterinary care</li> <li>■ S/he was obtained as a stray</li> </ul>
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