

# Homeless Pets, Public Health and Changing Public Perception

---

Margaret R. Slater  
Texas A&M University

## Outline

---

- Definitions and debates
  - History and perceptions
  - Conflicts and problems
  - What we know
  - Where might we go
-



## Definitions and Debates

## The Homeless Pet Problem

- "Pet overpopulation"
- "Pet surplus"
- Euthanasia a key discussion point
- Animal shelters often involved as points of high volume euthanasia
- Some millions of dogs and cats (and other species) housed and euthanized in the US each year

## "Pet Overpopulation"

- Too many dogs and cats born
- Breakdown of the human-pet bond
- Lack of formation of the bond
- Lack of redistribution of existing pets to homes that seek them
- A "right" to own pets rather than a privilege and responsibility
- Issue of supply vs demand

## Definition of the Problem

---

- ❑ Healthy animals unable to live out their lives because there are too many or because of abandonment or relinquishment by owners (Olsen)
  - ❑ “Pet surplus” is becoming more used
    - Implies there are homes that aren’t being accessed
  - ❑ “Homeless pets” is an even broader term
    - Recognizes the importance of free-roaming animals that aren’t in animal shelters
- 



## Types of Shelters

---

- Municipal or government owned
    - Paid by taxes and user fees
    - Often animal control officers, cruelty
  - Privately funded “shelters”
    - Non-profit, tax exempt organizations
    - May or may not have an actual building
    - May or may not accept all animals
  - Combination of above
- 

## Public Health

---

- Bites from dogs and cats
  - Rabies concerns
    - Cats most common domestic species
  - Other zoonotic diseases
    - Potential for infection vs real risks
  - Human health- emotional bond with animals
    - Disasters are a good example
  - Financial costs to all!
-



## Supply vs Demand for Dogs and Cats

---

- Tend to focus on supply
    - Sterilization
    - Puppy mills
    - Backyard breeders
    - Careless owners
  - But demand recognized in the 1970's and again recently as an important force
-

## Supply vs Demand

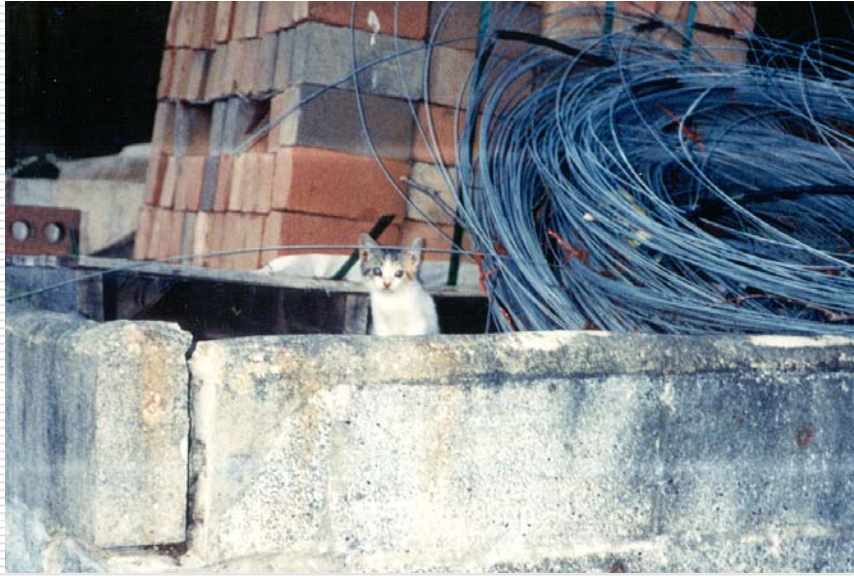
---

- But, we know that demand is crucial
    - MA residents drive to VA for a mixed breed puppy
    - Designer mix breeds on line
    - If the shelter doesn't have it or denies adoption, people WILL find a source
  - Need to consider marketing for shelters
    - Some are very successful
- 

## Supply vs Demand

---

- Geographic redistribution of existing shelter animals
    - Particularly to the northeast, mid-west
    - PetSmart Charities Rescue Waggin' with the ASPCA
      - Specific shelter partners
      - Strict health, transportation guidelines
    - Concerns about disease and management of programs
-



## History and Changing Perceptions

---



## Why the Focus on Homeless Pets?

- Human demographic shifts to cities
- Rising incomes and the ability to afford a pet
- Better health and nutrition for pets
- Control of fertility
- Increased numbers of cats as companions
- Rise of rabies in cats

## Free-Roaming Dogs and Cats

- Related to pet overpopulation
- Owned and unowned dogs and cats at large
- Public health and nuisance concerns
- Animal welfare issues
- Compliance with veterinary health recommendations
- Human-animal bond

## Free-roaming Pet Issues

---

- ❑ Owned pets allowed to roam may be injured, lost, killed, taken to shelter
  - ❑ Behavior and inappropriate expectations → abandonment
  - ❑ Intact pets and unowned animal reproduce, contributing to pet overpopulation
  - ❑ Bites, rabies, other zoonoses
- 



## Change in perceptions

- ❑ Relationships between people and pets
  - Changes in lifestyle and pet ownership
  - From child to vermin
- ❑ The increase in animal welfare and animal rights organizations
- ❑ The “no-kill” movement
- ❑ Changes in language about “pets”
- ❑ Changes in laws about animals



## The No-Kill Movement

---

- "is a revolution"
  - "a declaration...a listing of rights and principles"
  - Life for all treatable animals
  - Use of trap, neuter and return for feral cats
  - Address language used (put to sleep)
  - Promote spay/neuter and adoption
  - Accountability of shelters
- 

## Brief Recent History

---

- Papers on the need for data on pet overpopulation 1980's(Rowan)
  - Special section on pet overpopulation in key veterinary journal in 1991 (Olsen)
  - Formation of the National Council for Pet Population Study and Policy in 1992
  - Asilomar Accords
-

## Asilomar Accords

---

- ❑ August 2004
- ❑ To building bridges across varying philosophies
- ❑ To develop relationships between groups
- ❑ To create goals focused on significantly reducing the euthanasia of healthy and treatable companion animals in the United States
- ❑ Guiding principles of interactions
- ❑ Definitions of healthy, treatable
- ❑ Recommendations for statistics to track



## Conflicts and Issues

### Current Issues

- Lack of comprehensive data or knowledge
- Need to get data back to constituents
- Lag in public policy and legislation relative to knowledge and perception
- Usefulness of spay/neuter programs
- No-kill movement and it's role
- Trap, neuter and return of cats

## Limited Comprehensive Data

---

- No reliable national list of shelters
  - No reliable national data collection
    - Are some state level data
    - Vary in type of information and definition of "shelter"
  - Many shelters keep poor records
  - Many shelters not equipped to really analyze data and design interventions
- 

## Conflicting Mandates for Animal Control

---

- Old or no laws/ordinances to enforce
  - Costs
  - Accountability
  - Need for protection of public
  - Need to protect welfare of animals (cruelty)
  - Limited resources and personnel
  - Sometimes limited training
-



## Legal Considerations

---

- Need for ordinances and laws?
    - Mandatory licensing or registration of cats
    - Trapping of feral cats for euthanasia or adoption
  - Unenforceable/counter-productive laws?
    - Cat leash laws
    - Cat licensing
    - Limitations on numbers of pets
    - Feeding bans
    - Breed specific bans
- 





## Spay/Neuter

---

- Some question this as a cornerstone of pet surplus approach
  - Hard to document regional or city wide efficacy
  - Has to be a component of ending the problem
- 

## New Hampshire Spay/Neuter Program: 1994

---

- Funded by \$2 surcharge on dog licenses
  - For shelter adopters and low income
  - Small co-pay
  - Veterinarians provide some discount
  - In 7 years performed 29,658 surgeries
    - Cost of \$1.2 million
-

## New Hampshire Spay/Neuter Program: Results

---

- ❑ In the first 6 years of the program:
  - ❑ Euthanasia of pets/1000 residents dropped from +10% to 2.4%
  - ❑ Overall euthanasia rate dropped by 75%
  - ❑ Shelters admitted 39,000 fewer pets
  - ❑ Net savings of over \$2 million
- 



## Trap, Neuter and Return & the No-Kill Movement

---

- Non-lethal control method for cats
  - Long term goal is fewer cats
  - Ongoing caretaker will be most effective
  - Includes adoption of tame cats in colonies and young kittens
  - Must include vaccination for rabies
  - Ear-tipping or notching identification
- 

## Trap, Neuter and Return

---

- Only as of 2005 has HSUS supported trap, neuter and return
  - Still highly controversial in veterinary medicine
  - Growing support by the public
  - Very controversial with animal control and government
  - It requires a change in philosophy and approach
-

## What Do We Know?

### National Council for Pet Population Study and Policy

- Gather and analyze reliable data on homeless dogs and cats in the US
- Promote responsible stewardship
- Based on data, recommend programs to reduce unwanted pets in the US
- 12 organizations
  - Veterinary and epidemiologic
  - Animal protection
  - Pet products
  - Cat fanciers

## National Council for Pet Population Study and Policy

---

- Shelter statistics study
  - Regional shelter relinquishment studies
  - Just completed free-roaming cat population dynamics pilot and feasibility study
  - Ongoing regional shelter population index study
    - To develop a longitudinal measure of how a community is doing on live release rates from shelters
- 

## Shelter Statistics Study

---

- 4.3 million animals (1997, 1008 shelters)
  - 38% from animal control
  - 30% relinquished by owners
  - 15% other sources
  - 17% unknown sources
  - 24% adopted
  - 16% dogs & 2% cats reclaimed
  - 56% dogs & 71% cats euthanized
-



## Shelter Relinquishment Study: Animals

---

- Dogs more likely to be relinquished if
    - Sexually intact
    - Obtained at little or no cost
    - Over 6 mo old when obtained
    - Were more work than expected
  - Less likely to be relinquished if
    - Regular veterinary care
    - Participated in obedience classes
-

## Shelter Relinquishment Study: Animals

---

- Cats more likely to be relinquished if
    - Sexually intact
    - Without veterinary care
    - Frequent house soilers
    - Were more work than expected
    - Did not fit family expectations
  - Cats less likely to be relinquished if
    - Owner read a book about cat behavior
    - Cat had veterinary care
- 

## Shelter Relinquishment Study: Reasons

---

- Moving
  - Landlord not allowing pet
  - Too many animals
  - Cost
  - Personal problems
  - Inadequate facilities
  - No homes for litter mates
-



## Shelter Relinquishment Study: by Species

---

### Dogs

- Not enough time
- Pet illness
- Biting

### Cats

- Allergies in the family
  - House soiling
  - Incompatible with other pets
- 





## Shelter Relinquishment Study: Regional Differences

---

- Human health and personal issues
    - Allergies, no time, travel, divorce, death
  - For dogs
    - Highest rates in NY/NJ      37%
    - KY, TN, CO                      about 29%
    - Lowest rates in CA              18%
  - For cats
    - Highest in NY/NJ                  45%
    - KY, TN, CO                      about 36%
    - Lowest in CA                      23%
- 

## Owner Requested Euthanasia

---

- Animals that are brought to a shelter specifically for euthanasia service
  - Often included in total euthanasia #s
  - 24% of dogs and 17% of cats brought in for serious illness, old age and serious behavioral problems
    - Possible exception not using the litter box
  - Use of shelter as an alternative to vet clinic
    - Implications for population dynamics & pet surplus
-

## Implications

---

- ❑ Not puppies and kittens so sterilization may not be helpful
  - ❑ Lack of knowledge and appropriate expectations by owners
    - How best to address this?
  - ❑ How next to study the bond between people and companion animals?
    - Interdisciplinary and multiple disciplines
- 



## Options for Feral Cat Control

---

- Trap and remove
    - For euthanasia
    - Into sanctuaries
    - Into new locations
  - Kill on location (usually poison)
  - Trap, neuter and return (TNR)
    - Including adoption!
    - May be done with volunteers, donations
    - AC agencies around the US use it
- 

## TNR Benefits

---

- Sterilization decreases fighting, roaming, noise
  - No breeding so no litters, less stress
  - No unwanted kittens
  - Overall improvement in health
    - Gain in weight after neutering
  - Caretakers often report become more sociable, improved coat quality
-

## Merrimack River Feline Rescue Society

---

- Tourist town with feral cat complaints
  - Chamber of commerce, vets, public health
    - formal TTVARM program instituted
  - Many tame cats/kittens with no local shelter
  - Limited admission, cat only shelter
    - 8000 adoptions in 10 years
  - Expanded programs, building, website
- 



## MRFRS

---

- About 4000 cats in TNR program in the region in past 10 years
  - About 200 feral cats in town neutered originally
  - About 20 feral cats in town as of 2003
    - All senior cats, most > 12 years
    - In some areas, there are no cats at all
  - No kittens born on water front after 5 years
- 

## University of Central Florida

---

- 11 years, 155 cats total
  - After 5 years 68 cats remained on campus
  - In 2002 only 23 cats (15%) remaining
    - 7 year median duration of residency
  - 47% of cats were adopted
  - 15% disappeared
  - 11% euthanized, 6% died
  - 6% moved to nearby woods
-

## Other Research

---

- Teramo region of Italy
    - Pet ownership
    - Free-roaming dogs and cats
  - Small town Texas
    - Pet ownership
    - Free-roaming dogs and cats
    - Radio-tracking and cat abundance
- 



## Comparisons of Ownership

---

<b>Italy</b>	<b>US</b>
46% own pets	58%
33% own dogs	36%
15% own cats	32%
10% caring for cats	8-12%
40% pure bred dogs	50%

---

## Italy Results: Predictors of Sterilization; Interpretation

---

- Indoor only cats 8 times more likely to be sterilized as outdoor cats
  - Cats with vet visit 14 times more likely to be sterilized
  - Each year a cat aged increased the likelihood of sterilization about 40%
  - There were regional differences
-



## Small Town Texas: Predictors of Sterilization; Interpretation

---

- ❑ Cats considered to be companions 2x more likely to be sterilized than mousers
  - ❑ Cats with rabies vax 15 times more likely to be sterilized
  - ❑ Cats 2-<4 years 4 times more likely to be sterilized than cats < 2 years
  - ❑ Cats 4+ years 9 times more likely to be sterilized than cats < 2 years old
- 





## Where Might We Go?

## Patterns of Pet Care

- Pattern of level of care
  - Sterilization, vet visits, collars, indoors, companions, vaccinated...
  - These don't seem to be independent events
- Visiting the vet causes a higher level of care
- OR some commitment or belief causes a higher level of care including veterinary visits

## Commonalities

---

- Certainly are some patterns between countries and locations within US
  - Are there some regional differences
  - What are the common patterns for pet keeping in the US
  - What population dynamics vary by geography, urbanization, other?
- 

## What do we still need to know?

---

- What is a "normal" bond between people and their companion animals?
  - How do we get better data?
  - How to get the information back to the constituencies who need it?
  - How do we better influence public policy/legislation with data and current perceptions?
-

## Conclusions

---

- This is a complex, multifaceted problem
  - There are many different agencies and organizations involved in the situation
  - There are strong emotional responses
  - It is a community problem, not just pet owners or shelters
- 

## Conclusions

---

- We are in the middle of a period of change
  - We need find ways to change human behaviors, beliefs and actions
  - We need to create consensus, not divisions
  - Progress is occurring, we need to be creative in moving forward
-

