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Numbers test conventional wisdom on "pet overpopulation"

by Merritt Clifton

"I'm looking for the numbers that prove..." information requests to ANIMAL PEOPLE often begin.

We welcome the opportunity to share information, and usually can e-mail prompt responses. Yet often the numbers don't "prove" what the callers want to establish. Frequently the data calls into question the very premises behind the arguments that the callers want to make. Quite often, the numbers suggest rethinking a tactical approach.

For example, among the data most frequently requested from us is "proof" that "mandatory" dog and cat sterilization reduces animal shelter intakes and killing of homeless dogs and cats, and--usually received as part of the same inquiry--that reduced shelter intakes and killing translate into lower animal control costs.

Despite possible local exceptions, neither hypothesis holds up as a broad premise. "Mandatory" dog and cat sterilization does not really exist because, even where laws have been passed to try to achieve it, it is a goal which cannot be enforced by existing or affordable legal mechanisms. Further, because enforcement is inherently weak, any influence that such legislation might have cannot be measured.

The problem is that "mandatory" dog and cat sterilization relies upon licensing for enforcement. Nationally, studies of licensing compliance show that only 15% to 25% of dogs and a negligible percentage of cats are licensed. Only a few U.S. jurisdictions can demonstrate licensing compliance of as high as 40%. Yet more than 70% of pet dogs are sterilized, nationwide, and more than 85% of pet cats, ranging from about 70% in the South and lower Midwest, to more than 90% in the Northeast and along the West Coast.

Therefore, licensing compliance would have to be from two to six times greater than it is, depending on the region, for "mandatory" licensing to have any visible influence at all. In theory, including licensing in the cost of sterilizing a dog or cat would be more successful, except that adding the licensing fee to the price of surgery might become a disincentive to sterilization. Proponents of license-enforced "mandatory" sterilization typically propose that dog and cat licensing should be pursued more vigorously, but enforcing any law that is routinely broken by more than about 5% of the public tends to be hopeless, because taxpayers are unwilling to invest in--or put up with--law enforcement at more aggressive levels.

What demonstrably does work to further increase sterilization compliance are targeted free or subsidized sterilization programs, with animal transportation to and from clinics included, directed at the non-compliant portions of the pet-keeping population. These tend to be the oldest pet-keepers, the youngest, and those with the least household income.

Putting the funding necessary to enforce--or even pass--"mandatory" sterilization into targeted sterilization instead would seem to be an obvious shortcut to the goal.

Yet proponents of mandates tend to forget how we came to have much higher rates of pet sterilization than of licensing in the first place, when licensing laws had a 150-year head start. The short answer is that pet-keepers were sold on sterilization as advantageous to themselves, their animals, their community, and the environment. Selling licensing has not been as successful in the U.S., though selling licensing as a low-cost means of ensuring the return of lost pets has proved conspicuously successful for 20 years in Calgary, Alberta, which now has 90%-plus dog licensing compliance. ANIMAL PEOPLE has spotlighted the Calgary success four times in seven years without any U.S. cities attempting the same approach, possibly because the Calgary numbers seem impossible by U.S. standards.

Proponents of either "mandatory" sterilization or any sort of taxpayer-subsidized sterilization program typically build their pitch to politicians on the premise that fewer incoming animals will permit animal control budget cuts, or at least hold down annual increases.

Superficially, this sounds reasonable, but actuality is exactly the opposite. Just killing animals is relatively inexpensive, especially when the public brings unwanted litters to shelters by the tens of thousands. As shelters receive fewer surrendered and found animals, animal control personnel are able to spend more time responding to calls that require them to spend time afield. Staff time per animal handled shoots up. As killing decreases, moreover, impounded animals spend more days apiece in cages. The animal volume falls, but the number of days on which each cage is full tends to remain the same. Thus fewer animals require, cumulatively, the same amount of care. A parallel myth is that reduced shelter killing brings increased revenue associated with doing more adoptions. This may happen, for a time, as prospective adopters are demonstrably much more likely to visit shelters when they do not have the feeling that choosing one animal to adopt is condemning others to die, but as the numbers of incoming puppies and kittens fall, adoptions tend to follow killing in a downward trend.

What all of this means is that programs intended to further reduce shelter killing need to be introduced and promoted for what they can realistically be expected to do, rather than with promises that cannot be kept and expectations that cannot be met.

The present 10-year plateau in shelter killing may indicate that we are approaching the point of having to redefine the problem long described as "pet overpopulation. The plateau in the numbers of animals killed does not actually represent lack of progress, since the numbers of pets and pet-keeping households are growing, even as shelter admissions and killing hold even. Relative to the total numbers of dogs and cats in the U.S., anti-"pet overpopulation" efforts have never been more successful.

In some parts of the nation, however, some numbers appear to have bottomed out while others are rebounding. The owned dog and cat populations are, overall, both reproducing at or below the replacement level, but the intake of pit bull terriers and pit mixes is up fivefold in less than a decade, and total cat intake is holding approximately even. Pit bulls and outdoor cats, presumed feral by many standards, now make up at much as 75% of some big cities' shelter animal intake.

Approximately half of the two-plus million dogs killed in shelters in recent years have been pit bulls and pit mixes, with the percentage rising as the numbers of other dogs coming into shelters continues downward. The Humane Society of the U.S. has estimated that as many as 400,000 pit bulls per year are used in connection with dogfighting. As the total U.S. pit bull population appears to be about 3.5 million, based on samplings of classified ads, it could be that more than one pit bull in 10 is bred or used for fighting (if the HSUS estimate holds), and these dogs, or their offspring and litter mates, may constitute a grossly disproportionate number of the pit bulls who are impounded for violent or menacing behavior.

How many of the two-plus million cats killed in shelters have been true ferals may be vigorously disputed, but the most easily handled cats are adopted out first, while the least gregarious have the worst prognosis. Neuter/return to control feral cat populations has achieved impressive results over the past 15 years, but there is increasing resistance from birders and others to practicing neuter/return in many of the places where cats are most abundant and problematic. Often the opponents successfully seek legislation to keep cats indoors, or on private property, and to forbid using neuter/return. The predictable result is more shelter killing and more feral cats to be "controlled" instead of fewer.

Perhaps "pet overpopulation" does not really describe the plight of feral cats and pit bulls bred for fighting. Perhaps new tactics and strategies must be developed to prevent their births, and deaths.

The numbers do not exist yet to "prove" that any new approach will work any better than those used now. But the numbers do seem to indicate that something new is needed to make further progress.

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