

## Report in Brief

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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

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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

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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

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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

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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 Issues

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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).

## Spay and Neuter Statistics

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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.

## Shelter Statistics

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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.

## Companion Animal Relinquishment

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

The 2001 Purina American Pet Survey further identifies the biggest challenges to dog and cat ownership, which for dogs includes the perceived need for obedience training (15%), the animal's health (15%), cleaning up (10%), and ownership responsibility (10%). For cats, the challenges differ slightly and include the animal's health (13%), cleaning up (13%), ownership responsibility (7%), and obedience training (5%). These perceptions are relevant to the long-term success of the companion animal-human relationship, which is also critical to minimizing overcrowding in shelters.

**RESEARCH ON COMPANION ANIMALS \***

Year	Source	Finding
2008	Humane Research Council's <i>Animal Tracker</i>	Concern for animals caused 58% of people to spay/neuter their companion animal(s).
2008	Andrew Rowan, The Humane Society of the United States	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	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.
2007	Alley Cat Allies	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 COMPANION ANIMALS (CONTINUED) \***

Year	Source	Finding
2006	FIREPAW	This research study examines shelter and low-cost spay/neuter data from five community programs funded by Maddie's Fund to determine the overall effects on community spay/neuter and no-kill adoption.
2006	The Handsel Foundation	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.
2006	Ohio State University	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%.
2003	Spay USA	Successful spay/neuter programs require participation from veterinarians and shelters, in addition to public education.
2001	Purina	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%).
1997	Pecos People for Animal Welfare Society	64% of female companion animals were spayed, 49% of male companion animals were neutered.  51% 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%).
1994-1997	National Council on Pet Population Study & Policy	Provides estimates on companion animals entering and leaving animal shelters for the years 1994-1997.

\* 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 [HumanesSot.org](http://HumanesSot.org).