

The Pet Overpopulation Crisis: How Training the Public Can Make a Difference

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Currently in the United States, more than 50 million dogs reside in roughly 38% of all households (Hart, 1995, p. 162). With dogs being such a popular pet, it is no wonder that there is a market for dogs. Unfortunately, in that market, the demand is for purebred puppies, not adult dogs. In fact, the supply of adult dogs greatly outweighs the demand for them. Because the demand for purebred puppies exists, vendors, such as irresponsible breeders and puppy mills, mass produce puppies for profit. However, there are not enough good homes for “man’s best friend” as an adult. The result, euthanasia, is an unfair byproduct. This article examines the pet overpopulation crisis, taking a closer look at the causes, the results, and the possible solutions. It is imperative that dog training professionals take advantage of the wealth of opportunities to educate dog owners about this horrible problem. After all, we, the consumer, created the market; therefore, we should be educated about the problems that come with it.

The Causes

The bottom line of the pet overpopulation crisis is that “the number of cats and dogs far exceeds the number of loving homes available” (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals [PETA], n.d.a, para. 3). One study focusing on human–animal relationships found that approximately 64% of puppies are abandoned within the first year of ownership in the United States (Arkow & Dow, 1984). Although there is a demand for puppies, there is little demand for adolescent and adult dogs, which is what puppies become in only a few short months. Every year, 6–8 million abandoned animals enter animal shelters; only about half of them are able to be adopted out into homes (Humane Society of the United States [HSUS], n.d.a). The rest are euthanized. The greatest consequence of

the pet overpopulation crisis is that too many animals compete for good homes. In order to battle pet overpopulation, it is important to know and understand the causes.

The responsibility for the pet overpopulation crisis is shared by irresponsible pet owners, backyard breeders and puppy mills. Although irresponsible guardians are not necessarily mass producing puppies, like some breeders and puppy mills, they are still a significant contributor to the problem. The reasons that people allow their dogs to breed are numerous. They include the choice to not sterilize their dog because of financial reasons or ignorance, the desire for their children to experience the “miracle of birth,” macho attitudes, and indifference (In Defense of Animals [IDA], n.d., para. 2–3). Also, many people breed their dogs because their dog is “special” and they want a puppy from their special dog. Unfortunately, there are many special dogs out there that need homes.

There are two types of breeders: responsible breeders and irresponsible breeders, often referred to as “backyard breeders.” A backyard breeder is any breeder who intentionally breeds dogs in a manner that does not meet the standards of a reputable breeder (discussed later in this article). These could be dogs ranging from mongrels to American Kennel Club (AKC) registered purebreds. Backyard breeders know little about genetics and temperament and will typically produce dogs with health and behavioral problems. Because backyard breeders know little about genetics and genetic defects, it is rare to see one offer puppies that are certified free of genetic diseases (Orthopedic Foundation for Animals certified, for example). Furthermore, backyard breeders are generally not inclined to maintain responsibility for their puppies for the rest of their lives. It is also

common for backyard breeders to stake their qualifications solely on their dog's papers. Whether or not the registration is recognizable or obscure, it is misleading to the consumer. "Buyers may be swayed by talk of 'papers' and 'AKC registration', but these papers cannot ensure good temperament or good health" (PETA, n.d.b, para. 12).

Puppy mills are the seedy underbelly of the pet market. "Puppy mills are facilities that produce purebred puppies in large numbers" (HSUS, n.d.b, para.1). They are able to thrive because of the high demand for purebred puppies. The puppies are typically distributed by brokers and pet shops (HSUS, n.d.b, para. 1). In fact, "even if a store claims that it doesn't buy from puppy mills, there is a good chance that it buys from a broker who does" (PETA, n.d.b, para. 4). Moreover, the Pet Industry Joint Advisory Council estimates that pet stores sell approximately 300,000 to 400,000 puppies annually, while "HSUS [the Human Society of the United States] estimates that number to be 500,000" (HSUS, n.d.b, para. 6). Brokers not only deliver puppies to pet stores, they distribute them to agents, and agents disperse the puppies to the public, usually under the guise of the innocent and unfortunate owner of a bitch that "happened" to get pregnant (McConnell, 2002, p. 125).

Puppy mills breed dogs for quantity, not quality. They are unconcerned with genetic defects and temperament issues that are allowed to pass from "generation to generation" (PETA, n.d.b, para. 11). Because of the lack of concern for the quality of the animals being produced, it is no wonder that the quality of the environment in which they are produced is equally substandard. "The animals are usually kept in squalid conditions, with just enough sustenance to keep them alive" (IDA, n.d., para. 6). In her book, *The Other End of the Leash*, Patricia McConnell recalls a visit to a puppy mill and the horrible conditions in which the dogs lived:

The last one I visited raised each litter in small, hanging wire cages. The urine and feces was supposed to fall through the wire, except, of course most of the waste

remained in the cage, so the puppies played in it for lack of anything else to do. Many of the dogs had serious physical deformities... Those problems can be serious and genetically mediated, so no responsible breeder would have bred them (McConnell 2002, p. 124-125).

So, the question remains; if the conditions in puppy mills are so abhorrent, why hasn't anyone shut them down?

The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), which is responsible for enforcing the Animal Welfare Act, has been ineffective at regulating puppy mill operations. Part of the problem is that the USDA does not regulate retail stores and has classified puppy mills as such (HSUS, n.d.b, para.7):

On May 11, 2000, a coalition of animal protection organizations and individuals filed a lawsuit charging the USDA with failing to halt cruel and inhumane practices at breeding facilities. The plaintiffs outlined the USDA's illegal actions in exempting pet dealers who were not retail stores from compliance with ... the AWA. On July 31, 2001, the U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia ruled that the language and history of the AWA clearly outlines that an individual who sells dogs and cats from his or her own premises is not a 'retail pet store'. Thus, the court found the USDA's exclusion of all commercial dealers who sell dogs and cats directly to the public is in violation of Congress' express intent under the AWA. Upon appeal by the USDA, the decision was overturned (HSUS, n.d.b, para. 9-11).

Puppy mills and other breeders who mass produce puppies are still going strong today. Ending the profit for those who contribute to pet overpopulation is one of the best strategies for fighting it. Additionally, McConnell warns potential adopters, "Whatever you do, don't let yourself get seduced by pet stores, 'agents' or 'no-kill shelters'" (McConnell, 2002, p. 128). There are several different causes for pet

overpopulation, but just one major result, euthanasia.

The Results

“Euthanasia is the act of inducing a painless death. The word itself comes from ancient Greek *eu* + *thanos* (‘good death’)” (Rhoades, 2002, p. 1). Euthanasia of healthy animals is a problem that exists due to the pet overpopulation crisis. There are not enough homes for all the animals—there is no place for them to go.

Because of the high number of unwanted companion animals and the lack of good homes, sometimes the most humane thing that a shelter worker can do is give an animal a peaceful release from a world in which dogs and cats are often considered ‘surplus’ and unwanted. PETA, AMVA, HSUS, concur that an intravenous injection of sodium pentobarbital administered by a trained professional is the kindest, most compassionate method of euthanizing animals. The American Humane Association considers this the only acceptable method (PETA, n.d.c, para. 3).

The other practices employed by shelters today are considered to be less humane, or may impose more risk to personnel than sodium pentobarbital injection. They include drowning, shooting, poisoning, gassing, decompressing, or injecting animals with a paralytic substance (Rhoades, 2002, p. xiv). The problem with gunshot and chloroform is that they can be dangerous to staff performing the euthanasia. Decompression and gas chambers cause a terrifying and painful death for animals. The use of T-61, an injectable solution, causes paralysis, particularly paralysis of the diaphragm, so that the animal suffocates, but initially is still conscious (Rhoades, 2002, pp. 132–133).

Nearly 4 million animals are euthanized in animal shelters every year. “Shelters cannot humanely house and support all of these animals until their natural deaths – they would be forced to live for years, lonely and stressed, in cramped cages and kennels, and other animals would have to be turned away because there would not

be room for them” (PETA, n.d.c, para. 1). Although the pet overpopulation crisis and its consequences look bleak, there are solutions.

The Solution

There are several ways we can battle the pet overpopulation problem. The first, and probably most important, is education. It is imperative to educate the public about the problem and how they can help to solve it. It is also necessary for communities to implement an aggressive spay/neuter campaign and program. Furthermore, it is important for people to adopt animals from shelters and breed rescue organizations, or—if they absolutely must have a purebred puppy—from a reputable breeder. “Education programs must be created to educate adults and children about the causes of over population and to help them realize that there are many wonderful animals waiting in shelters for caring families to adopt” (IDA, n.d., para. 7).

In a survey performed by the Massachusetts SPCA, the public was asked if they were aware of a pet overpopulation problem in their community. Thirty-nine percent of dog owners responded that they were (Massachusetts SPCA, 1991). Of course, this sample is not representative of the entire population, but it does offer us some perspective. It suggests that less than half of the community is even aware that there is a problem. As discouraging as this information is, the HSUS estimates that 72% of dogs owned in the United States are spayed or neutered (HSUS, n.d.c). This is good news, as many people are getting their dogs spayed or neutered anyway, despite being unaware of the pet overpopulation problem. It is possible that people will be more receptive to spay/neuter education than initially thought. However, it is pertinent to note that this is a percentage of owned animals. It has been my anecdotal experience that the number of unowned animals that are not spayed or neutered is equally high. Unfortunately, it takes only a small number of dogs to produce many, many puppies.

“In six years one female dog and her offspring can theoretically produce 67,000 dogs” (HSUS, n.d.a). This is just one female dog. And

when it is considered that more than 25% of owned animals are not spayed or neutered and most likely a high percentage of unowned animals are not spayed or neutered, it becomes clear how just a small number can be creating an epidemic. This is why spay/neuter programs are so important. The HSUS has seen a significant decline, 30–60%, in euthanasia in areas that have implemented a spay/neuter program. Specifically, spay/neuter programs are most effective if they have reduced fees or are somehow subsidized (HSUS, n.d.d, para. 2–3). Spaying or neutering an animal is still met with resistance by some people. Along with the reasons discussed earlier in this article, “reasons for not neutering female dogs include interest in breeding (44%), expense of surgery (26%), and concern about weight gain and personality change (26%)” (Beaver, 1999, p. 228). However, many of those notions are just myths. There are actually many benefits to getting a dog spayed or neutered. Animals that are spayed or neutered have lowered risks of cancer, and a lower incidence of behavioral problems. In fact, one study showed that behaviors such as mounting, urine marking and aggression appear to be reduced in neutered males (Hopkins, Schubert, & Hart, 1976, pp. 1108–1110).

Because not all veterinarians have experience performing pediatric surgery, they often recommend waiting until the animal is 6 months or older before spaying or neutering. However, spaying and neutering can be performed as early as 2 to 4 months. In fact, this is common practice among shelter veterinarians. Moreover, “it is cheaper and easier to neuter the younger animals as many clinics charge by weight” (Guerrero, 1997, para. 7). As well, it is beneficial to have animals spayed or neutered before sexual maturity to reduce the chances of copulation. Owners also notice more advantages behaviorally in animals spayed or neutered earlier; “by 2 years after ovariohysterectomy, dogs neutered at ages 7–10 weeks are considered by owners to be smarter than dogs neutered 6 months or later, and other undesirable behavioral side effects are reported lower as well” (Beaver, 1999, p. 229). Spay and neuter may be the most effective weapon against pet overpopulation; however, it is pertinent to note

research showing that, in order to be effective, it must occur at a rate of 85% (Nasar, Mosier, & Williams, 1984, p. 282). An effective program must be aggressive and highly accessible to all members of the community.

An animal shelter can be a wonderful place to obtain a dog. However, many people protest against going to animal shelters because shelters euthanize animals. As a result, many shelters have adopted some type of lowered-to-no euthanasia policy, and thus the “no-kill” term was born. Despite the popular term used by some animal shelters:

In reality all shelters are responsible for the euthanasia of dogs in their communities... Turning away un-adoptable dogs, or turning away dogs when a shelter is full, does not spare the lives of these dogs. It merely forces another shelter to do the deed. Nobody in the shelter field *wants* to kill animals (Sternberg, 2002, p. 23).

The problem with some “no-kill” shelters is that they have to turn animals away. They also do not euthanize dogs with temperament issues, and if they cannot adopt them out, will house them for the remainder of their life in confinement. Dogs housed long term in a kennel deteriorate emotionally and behaviorally. This is infinitely less humane than euthanasia. It is also unethical to make a potentially aggressive dog available for adoption to avoid euthanizing it. Euthanasia in animal shelters is a community problem because the community produces these unwanted animals. Furthermore, the unfortunate truth is that the community decides which animals are adoptable, not animal shelters. Many animal shelters have to make dogs available according to the demand of the people in the community. And generally people want puppies, purebreds, small breeds, and animals that look physically distinctive.

Despite this, an animal shelter can be an excellent resource and educational tool. Reputable shelters offer adopters animals that have been vaccinated, microchipped and spayed or neutered, and have gone through a formal behavioral or temperament assessment. For

people who must have a purebred, it is estimated that 25% of dogs in animal shelters are purebred (HSUS, n.d.a). Animal shelters can also refer potential adopters to good breed rescue organizations. As for those who still cannot bring themselves to set foot in an animal shelter, many shelters offer mobile and satellite adoption centers.

For people who absolutely must have a purebred puppy, the following is a list of things to look for in a responsible, quality breeder. First, a reputable breeder breeds dogs for the love of the breed, not to make money. Second, there should be a five-generation pedigree with a minimum of eight titles in the last three generations. Third, the puppy should be physically and temperamentally healthy and fit the breed standard. Fourth, the dog should be certified free of genetic diseases (Orthopedic Foundation for Animals, Canine Eye Registration Foundation, Brainstem Auditory Evoked Response) (Guerrero, 1997, para. 10). Fifth, the breeder should allow the adopter to meet the parents of the puppies, who should be friendly and sociable, and the adopter should also be able to see where the parents and puppies are kept. And finally, the breeder should demand that the adopter return the puppy to them if they do not wish to keep it. "Responsible breeders are appalled at the thought that their pups might end up clogging up animals shelters..." (McConnell, 2002, p. 127). There are enough dogs in this country, including purebreds. If people are choosing to breed, they (as breeders) and their dogs should be the best of the best. If not, to the animal welfare community, they are nothing more than backyard breeders.

So exactly how can the training community educate the public? There are ways that trainers can incorporate information about pet overpopulation into their regular education of dog owners. Add a pet overpopulation handout to the training handouts given out after class. Offer short, complimentary consultations to your students interested in getting another dog or thinking about breeding their current dog, and advertise this at the end of your first class. Offer temperament evaluating services for those who are ambivalent about adopting an adult dog. Make sure you discuss the health and behavioral benefits of spaying and neutering in your puppy classes. Even making information available on your website would be helpful.

Conclusion

The pet overpopulation crisis is simply described as a surplus of companion animals. It is caused by people who do not spay or neuter their animals and people who mass produce them. The result is euthanasia. Specifically, animal shelters are forced to euthanize because there are not enough loving homes in their communities for all the animals being produced. The solution is education, aggressive spay/neuter campaigns and low-cost programs, more adoption from animal shelters and breed rescues, and, as a last resort, purchasing a purebred puppy from a responsible breeder. Trainers are in an excellent position to educate pet owners. If the dog training community can take advantages of opportunities to educate the public, pet overpopulation may be a story that we tell our grandchildren one day.

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