

# Reasons for Relinquishment of Companion Animals in U.S. Animal Shelters

In personal interviews, people surrendering their dogs and cats to 12 animal shelters in 4 regions of the country discussed their reasons for relinquishing their companion animals and answered questions about their own characteristics and those of their pet. The interviews identified 71 reasons for relinquishment. Personal issues lead the class of reasons for relinquishment of cats and ranked 3rd among those given for relinquishment of dogs. The top 3 health and personal issues cited for giving up cats were allergies of a family member to cats, owner's personal problems, and a new baby. For dogs, the top 3 reasons cited were lack of time for the dog, owner's personal problems, and allergies. Analysis of these health and personal issues suggests that education and counseling before and after acquisition of a pet, as well as the availability of temporary accommodations for pets during times of personal crisis, may reduce relinquishments.

Understanding why keepers of companion animals surrender dogs and cats to animal shelters is a necessary step toward designing approaches to minimize relinquishments. In a large multicenter study conducted in 1995–1996, data were collected from 12 animal shelters in four regions of the United States with the objectives of describing the characteristics of (a) dogs and cats relinquished to shelters (i.e., demographic, animal care, acquisition-associated, household, and behavioral characteristics), (b) the individuals who are relinquishing the animals (i.e., demographics and knowledge of dog and cat husbandry), and (c) the nature and frequency of reasons for relinquishment that people reported as they surrendered animals (Salman et al., 1998). A total of 71 reasons and their

frequencies were identified. Similar causes of surrender were combined into 12 larger classes for further evaluation (Salman et al., 1998). Of the 71 reasons cited, 10 were broadly categorized as selected health and personal issues (HPIs). They included divorce, the owner's death, pregnancy, the birth of a child, personal problems, the need to travel, allergies in the family, the lack of time for an animal, incompatibility between a pet and child, and having received a pet as an unwanted gift. Although many of these events and circumstances are commonly part of human experience, educating, counseling, or identifying alternative strategies may modify the response of relinquishing a pet. Because HPIs are an important consideration in pet-ownership decisions, this article describes the demographic and household characteristics of people who re-linquinsh dogs and cats for health and personal reasons and summarizes the demographic attributes of their pets.

## **METHOD**

Between February 1995 and April 1996, trained interviewers who used a standard-ized form interviewed people that relinquished pets to animal shelters. Twelve animal shelters in six states were sampled. Salman et al. (1998) described the details of the design and the overall results. Briefly, people were asked about their pet's demographic characteristics, training, source of acquisition, length of being with owner, reproductive history, and behavior. People were also queried about their own demographic characteristics, knowledge of basic canine and feline husbandry, other animals in their household during the past year, as well as their reasons for re-linquinshing the pets. Owners could report up to five reasons for turning in their animals to a shelter.

To evaluate general knowledge about dogs and cats, relinquishers were asked to identify 11 statements regarding basic dog and cat husbandry as true, false, or don't know. By scoring correct answers as 1 and incorrect or don't know

answers as 0, owners could achieve a maximum score of 11. Only those animals whose relinquishers were interviewed and were knowledgeable about them were included in this report. Data were stratified by species (dog or cat) and by individual or litter. Because the study was descriptive, few statistical comparisons were made. When proportions were compared, the chi-square test of independence was used (Snedecor & Cochran, 1989). When the expected values in  $2 \times 2$  tables were 5 or less, Fisher's exact test was employed. In light of multiple comparisons,  $p < .01$  was considered significant.

## RESULTS

For cats, HPis were the leading class of causes of surrender more frequent than all behavioral categories combined. For dogs, these issues ranked third, following behavioral and housing concerns issues (Table 1). The 554 dogs relinquished for HPis were from 520 households. A total of 384 households relinquished the 488 cats

### Human Characteristics

With a few exceptions, the demographic characteristics of people submitting pets for HPis were similar to those of all relinquishers (Salman et al., 1998). Females were slightly more likely to relinquish dogs (53.2%) as compared with all relinquishers (48.9%) and were somewhat less likely to relinquish cats (54.1%) as compared with all relinquishers (59.9%). Fewer people citing HPis had a eighth-grade education or less (2–3% of dog and cat relinquishers) as compared to all people surrendering animals (10–12%). Fewer people citing HPis had an income level of less than \$27,500 per year (40–43%) compared with all relinquishers (44–49%). There were no statistical differences in the demographic characteristics of people relinquishing individual dogs versus those relinquishing cats for HPis.

## Household Characteristics

Animal movement in and out of households, particularly with regard to the species being surrendered, was high. More animals were added to than left these households in the year preceding the relinquishment. Among households relinquishing dogs for HPIs, 10.8% had dogs leave, and 50.6% had added one or more dogs in the previous year. Among households adding dogs, the added dogs were most commonly acquired from friends (36.7%), as well as from shelters (22.4%) or as strays (10.6%). Slightly fewer cats (6.5%) left households with HPIs, and considerably fewer (4.5%) were added. Among cat-relinquishing households for HPIs, a similar pattern was evident. A total of 10.6% households had cats leave, and 42.8% added at least one cat during the same period. In households adding cats, the most common sources of cats were strays (23.8%), friends (20.0%), shelters (12.5%), and family members (10.1%). Fewer dogs (6.9%) left households with HPI, and fewer still (3.7%) were added. Because the questionnaire requested the number of animals added during the past year including the animal being surrendered, we also looked at households in which the animal surrendered was owned for more than a year. Among these households, 73% of dog-relinquishing households (67.3% of cat-relinquishing households) had added another dog or cat, respectively, in the previous year, further emphasizing the high frequency of animal movement in these households. Only 1% to 3% of households with HPIs had taken other dogs or cats to shelters in the past year, but this represented 11.8% of dogs leaving dog-relinquishing households and 18.4% of cats leaving cat-relinquishing households. Less than 5% of households with HPIs had dogs or cats euthanized, die, or disappear during the same period.

Despite citing at least one health and personal reason, approximately 17% of households had one or more other dogs, cats, or both remaining at home. In addition to HPI reasons for relinquishment, more than 33% of people with other dogs at home reported a nonaggressive behavioral problem in the dog surrendered. Among people relinquishing cats and having another cat at home, 38.8% reported too many animals at home as another reason for relinquishment.

## DISCUSSION

The select HPIs relinquishment class includes a variety of reasons, some of which are events, such as births or deaths, occurring in people's lives and other circumstances, such as a new job or a need to travel, that arise, often depending on stage of life. As a class, HPIs were the leading reasons cited for relinquishment of cats and the third most common class of reasons for dogs. Allergies were the most common health and personal reason for relinquishment of cats and the third most common reason for dogs. Relinquishments because of allergies to cats were more than four times more common than for dogs. This is consistent with studies demonstrating a higher frequency of allergies among people to cats than to dogs (Eggleston & Wood, 1992). Dogs surrendered because of allergies had been owned for a significantly shorter period of time than cats brought in for the same reason. The reason for this discrepancy is unknown. Because the treatment of choice is avoidance of contact with the offending allergen(s), allergies to pets will continue to be an unpreventable reason for relinquishment. Despite the reported frequency of pet allergies, however, it seems probable that some of these relinquishments were not associated with true pet allergies. Rather than undergo expensive allergy testing, some people with allergies may have chosen to eliminate pets from their environment. Similarly, physicians may have recommended eliminating possibly offending sources (such as pets) in an attempt to alleviate symptoms before embarking on more expensive workups. In a survey of members of the American Academy of Allergists, 50% and 44% recommended removal of animals in the presence of asthma and rhinitis, respectively, regardless of the cause. Even in the absence of pet allergy, 34% still recommended removal of pets (Baker & McCulloch, 1983). In addition, citing allergies may be a socially acceptable means of justifying relinquishment for some people. The fact that 10.6% of those relinquishing cats and 11% of those submitting dogs because of allergies still had other cats and dogs at home, respectively, lends support to this possibility. To our knowledge, there is no literature documenting that some individual animals (or breeds) are more

allergenic than others. Some owners may believe, nonetheless, that one animal is responsible and relinquish it. The higher prevalence of reported allergies among people older than 50 (for cats) and among those of Hispanic descent (for dogs) may reflect differences in susceptibility, ownership patterns, popularity of this as an acceptable relinquishment reason, or other unexplained reasons.

## Reasons for Relinquishment

The regional difference in the frequency of reported allergies to dogs and cats was unexpected. The higher prevalence of dog and cat allergies as a reason for relinquishment in the Northeast may be explained, at least partially, by seasonal conditions and the urban environment that prompts them to be kept indoors for longer periods of time, leading to higher concentrations of pet allergens in the home. The fact that the New York and New Jersey region had a significantly lower proportion of dogs and cats spending some or most of their time outdoors supports this hypothesis. Personal problems were the second most common HPI cited. It may be difficult to make recommendations that lead to significant reductions in animals surrendered because of personal problems of the owner. The reason is sufficiently vague and comprehensive to make discussion of it difficult. People citing personal problems probably include those dealing with truly difficult issues (e.g., low income, unemployment), as well as those using this reason for relinquishment as an excuse for other reasons. The observation that a relatively large proportion (8–11%) of people with this reason request euthanasia (compared with other HPIs at < 5%) suggests that some may be making decisions while highly stressed. General attempts to provide good information to prospective owners and counseling for behavior problems that develop will probably help diminish animals surrendered for this reason. In contrast, careful counseling at the time of adoption (where possible) may successfully persuade some people to postpone the acquisition of a pet until it is more appropriate or may discourage others from acquiring an animal that is not compatible with their lifestyle. The fact that almost 70% of dogs relinquished because owners did not

have time for them (the animals had been owned 1 year or less) suggests that careful and sensitive questioning and counseling at the time of adoption could reduce surrenders for this reason. Similarly, people expecting a new baby may benefit from counseling at the time of pet adoption, as more than a third of the animals surrendered for this reason had been acquired within the preceding 9 months. Couples imminently planning to add to their families must understand, when considering the adoption of a pet, the time commitment that is necessary to care for a new baby and a new pet simultaneously. Among those having owned a pet for at least 1 year, more than 25% also reported a behavioral problem, suggesting that the arrival of a new baby may provide the additional stress needed to prompt some people to relinquish a pet. Conflicts between pets and children arise for numerous reasons, and for some families, conflicts will continue to be unavoidable reasons for relinquishment. In other cases, however, good advice from veterinarians, breeders, or trainers, with regard to teaching children proper handling of pets, selection of breeds without aggressive tendencies, as well as behavior modification of pets with aggressive tendencies may reduce relinquishments for this reason. It is unclear why conflicts between children and both dogs and cats were more commonly reported in California than in the New York and New Jersey shelters. It may reflect differences in the proportion of people with children in the two areas or possibly differences in socially acceptable reasons for relinquishment. Each of the other HPIs, such as death of owner or divorce, accounted for approximately 2% or less of total relinquishments. Helping to educate people about making provisions for the care of their pets after their death might reduce some of these relinquishments, but efforts are probably more profitably directed at other reasons. People who had sufficient knowledge to participate in the interviews in this study were predominantly the owners of the relinquished pet (85%) or another family member in the same household (15%). On average, these people incorrectly responded to 4 of 11 statements regarding basic pet husbandry. The need for continuing efforts at educating the public about the frequency of estrous cycles in dogs and cats, the desirability of neutering before a first litter, and the behavioral responses of multiple cats in a household was evident among those with HPIs. This lack of knowledge and the high prevalence of unneutered dogs and cats in this sample reinforce the need for

continuing efforts to convince people to get their animals neutered. Neutering would not only reduce births but would also enhance the attractiveness of some animals as pets, reducing undesirable behaviors such as spraying by male cats, straying from home, and fighting, which also lead to relinquishment. In the absence of a control group of households not relinquishing animals, it is unknown whether the lack of knowledge is associated with relinquishment. Regardless, encouraging neutering and enhancing understanding regarding reproduction can reduce the numbers of unwanted animals.