

Mandatory Spay and Neuter Laws: The Elusive Truth



“Vet Tech” by Feral Indeed! on flickr.com.

Mandatory spay and neuter laws are once again in the news as both the city of New Orleans and the state of California consider passing one. The idea behind mandatory spay/neuter laws is intuitively appealing: since spay/neuter has proven effective for reducing the euthanasia of dogs and

cats but some pet owners are not having their pet altered, pass a law and make them do it. These laws have passionate advocates and passionate critics, but facts on their effectiveness are elusive.

Part of the problem is that the phrase “mandatory spay and neuter” describes several types

of laws that have different provisions. The first type requires spay/neuter for the average pet owner but exempts breeders with permits or pets with health issues that make the procedure risky. Another type is breed specific. For example, Hollister, California, is considering an ordinance that would require spay/neuter for pit bulls and Chihuahuas only. Some laws apply only to pet stores and out-of-town breeders.

Pros and Cons

The position of proponents of mandatory spay/neuter can be summarized briefly: pet overpopulation drives euthanasia rates and the most effective way to reduce overpopulation is to reduce the number of pets that can produce offspring. They claim that rates of euthanasia have dropped where the laws have been enacted.

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SNAP's mission is to eliminate the need for euthanasia in our community's shelters, to reduce the number of homeless animals, and to educate the public about the importance of spay/neuter.

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**SNAP is a Missouri
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SNAP at the C-Street Market This Summer

SNAP will be at the Commercial Street Farmers' Market every Saturday this summer. The market is located on historic Commercial Street at the Jefferson Avenue Footbridge and is open from 9 a.m. to 2 p.m. The Market runs through the end of October.

We accept cash, checks, and debit cards. (Tokens may be purchased through the market to redeem for our products). Our dedicated volunteers staff SNAP's table, which features all kinds of pet items, including stylish bandanas for every occasion, gourmet dog biscuits, and fun gifts to pamper pet lovers.

This is an important source of funds for SNAP, so please stop by and say hello - we'd love to meet you and your pets!

We'll return to PetSmart in November.



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A surprising number of arguments have been advanced against this straight-forward claim by a variety of opponents. The American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) has taken a position opposing mandatory laws because it is concerned such laws discourage pet owners from vaccination, health care, and licensing for their pets. AVMA instead supports an approach that includes: enforcing existing animal control laws, licensing pets, prohibiting the adoption of unaltered pets from humane organizations or animal control agencies, and public education.

Other opponents claim that the laws are difficult and costly to enforce and don't succeed in reducing euthanasia. A veterinarian may have trouble determining whether a female animal has been sterilized from a visual inspection, yet enforcement of these laws requires an animal control officer to make such a finding. Penalties are typically fines. Some ordinances give a grace period for compliance. But if an offender still doesn't spay or neuter his pet? The court's recourse may be to fine him. His pet is still not spayed or neutered. Other ordinances may call for impoundment or surrender of the pet. Given the high rate of euthanasia in many cities, this path most likely leads to the deaths of these animals, exactly what spay/neuter advocates are trying to prevent.



Photo One of "Feral Cat Clinic 7-19-09" by Feral Indeed! on flickr.com.

Opponents also argue that mandatory spay/neuter laws fail to consider where pets that end up euthanized are coming from. For example, feral and stray cats contribute greatly to shelter populations, yet altering these cats is typically not part of mandatory spay/neuter laws, since most are directed toward animals with owners. And some question the theory that the euthanasia problem is created by an "overpopulation" of pet animals, arguing that the problem is actually connecting animals available for adoption with those who want a pet.

Fun With Numbers

Since some communities have had mandatory spay/neuter laws for years, why not just look at the numbers of euthanasias in these communities to see if the laws were worked? Some of these numbers are available, but their

meaning is open to interpretation.

The Peninsula Humane Society of San Mateo County (PHS) fought in the 1990's for mandatory spay/neuter laws in the belief that such laws would reduce euthanasia rates. The first law they lobbied for was an additional fine of \$30 to \$40 for unaltered pets claimed from the shelter. The city of San Mateo passed such an ordinance. PHS was disappointed to find that some pet owners responded by abandoning their pet because of the additional cost.

Their next effort was a "breeding ban". This approach was no more successful. In the part of the county that adopted the ordinance, dog deaths went up 126 percent and cat deaths rose 86 percent. At the same time, pet

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licensing declined by 35 percent.

Los Angeles passed a mandatory spay/neuter law in 2008. In the years preceding passage euthanasia of dogs had declined from 22,675 in 2001 to 6,051 in 2007. One year after passage, the number had increased to 7,518 and in 2009 the number increased again to 7,624. But is the change in numbers attributable to the spay/neuter law or could other factors like California's tanking economy play a part? The data available is insufficient to make a reasoned judgment.

Santa Cruz County is a program proponents point to as a success. The county passed its ordinance in 1995. The county report euthanasia of cats decreased by 50 percent in the five years after a mandatory spay/neuter ordinance was passed. Critics counter that this statistic is misleading because data the program submitted to the California Department of Health Services shows that after the rate dipped in 1998, it began rising again, eventually surpassing the 1995 figure. Furthermore, Santa Cruz's rates of euthanasia are still higher than several other counties in Califor-



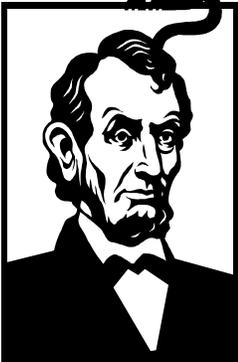
nia that do not have mandatory spay/neuter laws.

The euthanasia rate for dogs and cats has been steadily declining since the 1970's, in large part because of voluntary spay/neuter. If the euthanasia rate is already declining and continues to decline after a mandatory spay/neuter law is enacted, how much of the decline is due

to the mandatory spay/neuter law and how much would have happened anyway? It is impossible to tell.

Conclusion

The inconclusiveness of the data is something only a Zen master could love. For the rest of us, who would like to do the right thing to save some lives, there is little information but a lot of emotion on which to base our thinking about these laws. Unfortunately, the situation will remain that way until some work is done to collect good data and then analyze it properly. Maddie's Fund gave a grant to the Santa Clara County Animal Shelter in 2009 to collect and publish animal shelter statistics. Let's hope this is the start of a trend of collecting meaningful data so that communities can make evidence-based decisions.



Quotes about Cats

"No matter how much cats fight, there always seems to be plenty of kittens." ~ Abraham Lincoln

"There are two means of refuge from the misery of life - music and cats." ~ Albert Schweitzer

"If man could be crossed with the cat it would improve the man, but it would deteriorate the cat." ~ Mark Twain

The Bond Between Humans and Pets

A veterinarian believed there was more to the relationship between pets and humans than the pets' need for food and shelter. So Johannes Odendaal tested his theory. He measured the blood levels of chemicals related to relaxation, pleasure, and stress in human and dog pairs after they played and cuddled together. Some of the pairs were humans and their own dogs, while others were humans and unfamiliar dogs. In both humans and dogs, chemicals of pleasure increased after cuddling and play. In addition, the humans' level of the hormone cortisol which is released in response to stress, fell. The human levels of oxytocin, a hormone related to affection and bonding, increased the

most after playing and cuddling with their own dog.



Pet Fact

Genetic researchers have determined small domestic dogs likely originated in the Middle East. They traced the IGF1 gene, which determines small size, back to the Middle Eastern gray wolf.

Prior to this study, archeologists had found the remains of small domestic dogs that lived 12,000 years ago in the Middle East, providing further support for the theory.

The full text of the researchers' article is available for free at: <http://www.biomedcentral.com/1741-7007/8/16>.

Meeting Dates

Board of Directors Meetings

6:30 pm

June 21

July 19

August 16

Volunteer Meetings

6:30 pm

September 1

December 1

All meetings are held at the Library Center, 4653 S. Campbell, Room A, unless otherwise noted.



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The Humane Solution to Pet Overpopulation

YES!

I would like to become a member of SNAP to help reduce the number of unwanted animals born in Southwest Missouri. I understand that by becoming a member, I will receive a quarterly newsletter, acknowledgement on the SNAP website, and an invitation to SNAP's annual meeting. (Membership is renewable annually and is tax deductible. Payment may be made by check or money order.)

Name _____ Phone _____
Address _____
City _____ State _____ Zip _____
Email _____

- | | |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> \$15 Student/Senior (60 & over) | <input type="checkbox"/> \$125 Business |
| <input type="checkbox"/> \$25 Individual | <input type="checkbox"/> \$500 Lifetime |
| <input type="checkbox"/> \$40 Family | |

OR...

- ____ I want to help! Please send information about becoming a SNAP volunteer.
____ I want to support SNAP's work with the enclosed tax-deductible donation.
____ Please make a donation in memory of _____
____ Please send me information on estate planning .
____ I would like to "Sponsor-a-Spay." I am enclosing \$ _____ to sponsor:
____ A specific pet (indicate pet's name) _____
____ The pet at the top of SNAP's waiting list

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