



ALLEY CAT RESCUE

AN ALLIANCE FOR CAT PROTECTION



Feline Insights 2024: A Report

This report is published as part of Alley Cat Rescue's commitment to help stray and outdoor community cats in the United States and around the world through the promotion of humane, nonlethal care that saves and improves cats' lives.

Key issues affecting cats:

Overpopulation: This is a significant problem leading to overcrowded shelters, euthanasia of healthy cats, and community cat colonies. Uncontrolled breeding among stray and community cats exacerbates the problem.

Abandonment and Stray Cats: Many domestic cats are abandoned by their owners or born as strays. These cats often struggle to survive on their own, facing hunger, disease, and injury.

Health Issues: Domestic cats are susceptible to various health problems, including obesity, dental issues, infectious diseases, and parasites. Proper veterinary care and responsible pet ownership are essential to address these issues.

Feline Overcrowding in Shelters: Shelters often become overcrowded with cats, leading to euthanasia due to lack of space and resources. Adoption, spaying, and neutering programs aim to mitigate this issue.

Addressing these issues requires a multifaceted approach, including responsible pet ownership, public education on cat welfare, spaying and neutering programs, effective management of community cat populations, and collaboration between government agencies, animal welfare organizations, and communities.

Pet Cat Demographics

Numbers of Households with Cats

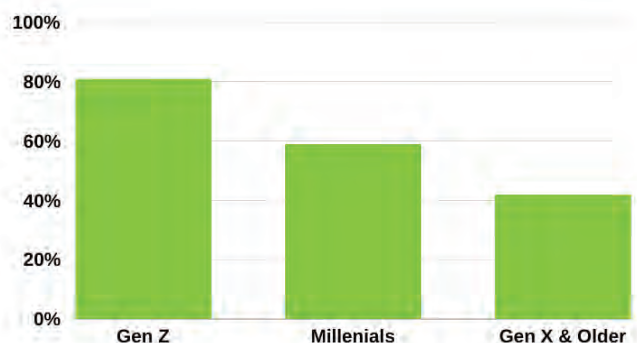
Cat adoption rates rose beginning March 2020, and about 87 percent of cats adopted at that time were still with their adopters over one year later (“New ASPCA Survey: Vast Majority of Dogs and Cats Acquired During Pandemic Still in Their Homes”).

In total, the American Pet Products Association (APPA) estimates that around 46.5 million, or 29 percent of American households have at least one cat (Megna). That makes them the second most popular pet in the U.S.A., behind dogs. That is quite impressive considering that 25 percent of pet cats were not sought out but taken in as strays from off the streets, and another 25 percent were acquired from friends or acquaintances (Buchholz).

A survey conducted by Forbes Advisor and last updated in December of 2022 revealed a higher preference for cats among adult pet parents between 18 and 27 years old (81 percent) than any other age group. Millennial pet parents, who are those between 26 to 41, are the next largest group of cat caretakers at a distant 59 percent. At the other end of the scale are pet parents between 58 and 76 years old, only 42 percent of whom have cats (Tilford).

APPA data reports that 85 percent of household cats are sterilized (spayed or neutered) (“Pets by the numbers”), while

Generational Trend Pet Parents Who Have Cats



the Mars Petcare report puts the number at only 77 percent. The Humane Society of the United States (HSUS) points out that many cats are eventually spayed after already having at least one litter. There is still work to be done to convince people to sterilize cats by four months old, before litters of kittens are born. HSUS also reports that households with lower incomes are much less likely to have access to veterinary care and, therefore, to sterilize their pets. HSUS estimates that as much as 88 percent of pets in underserved communities are not spayed or neutered (“Pets by the numbers”).

Best Friends found that the overall percentage of sterilized pet cats has been recently trending downwards (“Animal Welfare Stats”). This may be due to the pandemic, during which spay/neuter surgeries in general decreased 17 percent in the Midwest, 15 percent in the Northeast and West, and 11 percent in the South (Guerios et al). Another likely cause for the decrease is due to a nationwide shortage of veterinarians and technicians.

The high ratio of backlogged spay/neuter surgeries plus young animals born in 2020 and 2021 who need to be sterilized, to the number of existing veterinarians is overwhelming. Dr. Julie Levy, who co-authored a study that revealed the depth of the decrease in sterilizations, referred to this perfect storm as a “compounding vicious cycle” (Cannon, “Millions of Pets”).

Declawing

Declawing, or onychectomy, of pet cats was once a common practice in U.S. households. Fortunately, objection to declawing has grown among the general population and veterinarians throughout the past decade. The American Animal Hospital Association and American Association of Feline Practitioners have official statements opposing elective declawing of cats. The American Veterinary Medical Association takes a weaker stance against declawing, discouraging it but ultimately deferring to individual veterinarians’ best judgment (“AVMA Revises Declawing Policy”).

Declawing is illegal in 40 countries. Sadly, the U.S. is not one of them despite popular support for such a law. An online poll conducted by Today’s Veterinary Nurse found that 84 percent of 2,000 respondents supported a ban (Delamarter). In 2019, New York became the first state to institute a statewide ban on declawing. Maryland followed suit with its own statewide ban in March of 2022, and in that same year, anti-declaw bills were introduced in one-quarter of states (The Humane Society of the United States).

Though no other bans have yet been passed at the state level, Illinois, New Hampshire, New Jersey, Rhode Island, Massachusetts, Michigan, and Virginia all have bills currently being heard. Multiple cities in seven states - California, Colorado, Missouri, Pennsylvania, Texas, Washington, and Wisconsin - already have their own bans. Eight California cities, including Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Berkeley, have bans.



Animal Shelter Demographics

Mars Petcare spearheaded a countrywide survey and published the data they collected in a 2024 report, “United States: State of Pet Homelessness Project.” Their report estimates the number of cats in shelters to be 2.1 million.

The general trend over the past half century has been a decrease in euthanasia rates, for dogs as well as cats (“Animal Welfare Stats”). Cats are still, as they have been for a long time, at higher risk

than dogs for being euthanized in the shelter system; according Best Friends' data, cats make up 55 percent of animals euthanized ("Animal Welfare Stats"). According to Shelter Animals Count's 2023 report, 330,000 cats were euthanized last year. Yet the dangers cats face in shelters go beyond euthanasia. Cats' immune systems are weakened by stress and crowded shelter rooms mean deadly diseases spread easily. The report also notes that about 111,000 cats died from other causes while in shelters.

Best Friends reports that 52 percent of the country's shelters are "no-kill," meaning they have a save rate of at least 90 percent. Best Friends labels Texas and California as "top priority" states that euthanize over 37,000 animals per year, and shelters in North Carolina, Florida, and Alabama as "high priority" states, with annual euthanization totals between 14,500 to 37,000 ("National Dashboard").



Caution: When reviewing and interpreting the most recent shelter data, note that it reflects the heavy influence of COVID-19 lockdowns. Limited staffing caused many shelters to turn community cats away rather than admit and euthanize them. Had shelters been operating as usual, Alley Cat Rescue suspects that the euthanasia totals over the past three years would have been significantly higher.

Intake is beginning to resume again and in 2023, 70,000 more cats entered shelters than exited them ("2023 Annual Analysis"). Shelter overcrowding will likely continue to worsen as the community cats who were refused by shelters and left unaltered have had generations of offspring outdoors. On the other hand, some shelters have implemented more restricted, managed intake to regulate the inflow of animals and this slows the intake process. A concern is that this could leave more cats breeding on the streets. All cats refused by shelters due to overcrowding must still be vaccinated and sterilized.

Animal Welfare Laws

Several states in the U.S. are known for having relatively strong animal welfare laws compared to others. Some of these states have comprehensive regulations covering various aspects of animal care and protection.

- California is frequently recognized for having some of the most comprehensive animal welfare laws in the country. These laws cover a wide range of issues, including animal cruelty, pet sales, spaying and neutering requirements, and protection for animals in research.
- Illinois has enacted several laws aimed at protecting animals, including regulations on pet sales, animal cruelty, and the welfare of animals in research facilities.
- New York has implemented various animal welfare laws covering topics such as animal cruelty, pet sales, and the regulation of pet dealers and breeders.
- Massachusetts is known for its strict regulations on animal cruelty, as well as laws addressing issues like pet sales, and the treatment of animals in research.
- Oregon has enacted laws aimed at protecting animals from cruelty and neglect, as well as regulations on issues such as pet sales, and the treatment of animals in research.
- Washington has implemented various animal welfare laws covering topics such as animal cruelty, pet sales, and the regulation of animal shelters and rescue organizations.
- Rhode Island has enacted laws aimed at preventing animal cruelty and neglect, as well as regulations on pet sales, and the treatment of animals in research.

These states often rank highly in terms of the strength and comprehensiveness of their animal welfare laws, but it's important to note that animal welfare standards can vary within states, and there may be ongoing efforts to improve laws and regulations in other states as well.

Outdoor Community Cats

It is estimated that there are around 35 million stray and feral community cats in the U.S. (“United States State of Pet Homelessness Project”). A feral cat is considered “wild” because she fears people, and this fear usually presents itself as defensive aggression. A stray cat is one who is acclimated to people but has escaped from her home.

Estimating Outdoor Cat Numbers

It is notoriously difficult to accurately estimate the number of community cats living within a city, let alone across the country. Beginning in 2018, several animal welfare and environmental conservation groups joined forces to create and execute a procedure that resulted in the most thorough count of cats (pets, strays, and feral cats) in a city as possible. They focused on the whole of Washington, D.C. and titled the project the D.C. Cat Count.

The D.C. Cat Count used four methods to count cats. Indoor pet cats were counted via a survey sent to sample groups of citizens. Camera traps and transect counts (described by D.C. Cat Count as involving “walking along a designated route, or transect, that follows existing roads and pathways and recording all cats that are observed”) were used to count outdoor cats. Data from 2016 through 2020 from D.C.’s only municipal shelter, the Humane Rescue Alliance, was a fourth method.



The project concluded with an estimate of 200,000 total cats living in D.C., and 3,000 of them being feral and without human caretakers (Fenston). The organizations involved in the D.C. Cat Count hope that their methods can be used as a guide by other organizations to arrive at good estimates of their own local cat populations. More accurate counts of outdoor cats will lead to more accurate estimates of birds and other wildlife killed by cats annually, and that could help combat the concerns and sometimes outright hysteria of anti-cat environmentalist groups. Accurate numbers will also help TNR groups better budget and strategize annual projects.

The Global Success of Trap-Neuter-Return

Trap-neuter-return (TNR) refers to the management of community cat populations through trapping, sterilizing, and returning the cats to their home where they were trapped. Studies and TNR projects from the United States and numerous other countries serve as evidence that TNR saves cats’ lives and is the most effective method of managing free-roaming cat populations.

After eight years of a TNR program in San



Rome, Italy

Jose, California, the county shelter reduced its cat euthanasia rate from 66.6 percent to 34.9 percent (Edinboro and Fairbrother). A TNR program, which was complemented by a spay/neuter voucher program, in Aiken County, South Carolina resulted in a 50 percent decline in animals euthanized (Cleveland). After a 14-year (1999-2013) TNR program at the Ocean Reef Community in Key Largo, Florida, a population of 455 community cats was reduced by 55 percent to 206 cats (Kreisler et al).

Italy should serve as a beacon of compassionate community cat management policy. A national bill passed in 1991 gave community cats protection against harm or removal, ordered spaying/neutering by the Veterinary Services of the Local Health Unit, and institutionalized the cats' care. A sterilization campaign throughout Rome took place that same year. After nine years of TNR programs, a survey on 103 cat colonies was carried out that showed positive results; colonies decreased in size from between 16 - 32 percent (Natoli). However, the decrease would have been more significant were it not for a 16 percent overall rate of new cats arriving due to pet cat breeding and abandonment (Natoli). The important lesson from this is that the most successful large TNR programs must include community education about proper care of pets.



South Africa is a region with a unique community cat problem because unaltered cats there put the African wildcat species (*Felis lybica cafra*) at risk through hybridization. *Felis lybica* are the only wild cats known to breed with domestic cats in nature, and crossbreeding is reducing the world's population of pure African wildcats.

South African TNR programs offer strong examples of the effectiveness of TNR in reducing outdoor cat populations. One program on the campus of the University of KwaZulu-Natal's Howard College led to a 38 percent reduction in the number of cats on campus (from 55 to 34) after four years (Swarbrick and Rand; Tennant and Downs). Another campus program at the University of the Western Cape has not only succeeded in reducing the number of cats from 356 to 128 as of 2022, but has fostered a culture of responsibility for the cats amongst the students and university staff.



The Western Cape area of South Africa has many dairy, equestrian, and fruit farms that use domestic cats instead of poison for rodent control. The people who work and live in small, impoverished communities on the farms do have attachment to the cats and provide some care for them, but they have no reasonable means of getting the cats sterilized. The farmlands are surrounded by wildlands with African wildcats, and ACR saw the opportunity to help the residents, farm cats, and African wildcats through TNR. Our local team began working, farm-to-farm, in 2022 and since that time has succeeded in sterilizing over 2,700 cats.

Many more examples of TNR at work and *working* can be found on our website at saveacat.org/tnr-statistics.html. A list of successful TNR campaigns is a resource that community cat advocates should employ when educating others, including policymakers, about compassionate cat population management.

Summary

Though there have been improvements for cats over the last 20 years, there is still much work to be done. Shelters and rescue groups cannot do it all on their own without the public stepping up to help.

How you can help—

- The best way to control feral cat numbers is to get involved in TNR programs in your area. This will also improve the lives of your local community cats.
- Don't contribute to the problem! Spay and neuter your own cats.
- You can donate money to TNR groups or shelters if you cannot do the hands-on work.
- You can also donate cat food, so that outdoor cats can eat well and stay healthy.
- Volunteer at your local shelter.
- Offer to foster a litter of kittens. Shelters are flooded with kittens, especially this time of the year.
- Hold a bake sale to collect money for your shelter.
- Have a yard sale & donate the proceeds to your local shelter.

References list can be found at www.saveacat.org/2024CatReport.html



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