

A retrospective study of dogs and cats housed at an animal control facility following cases of cruelty or neglect

Abstract

The objectives of this project were to examine the needs of animals housed in animal shelters and animal control facilities following cases of animal cruelty or neglect. Due to previous aversive or inadequate experiences with humans, many of these animals likely face obstacles, including health and behavior, affecting their welfare and adoptability. In order to address these objectives, data was collected from an animal shelter with a large annual intake (>10,000 dogs and >7,000 cats) and filtered to include dogs or cats housed following cases of cruelty or neglect. The data included a description of type of legal case, length of stay and final outcome. We found that many of the animals were returned to an owner, providing opportunity for education and interventions to prevent recurrence. In addition, health reasons were cited for 91% of cat euthanasia, whereas behavior reasons accounted for 69% of dog euthanasia associated with cases of cruelty or neglect. In future research, it would be helpful to identify guidelines for shelters collecting data about cruelty or neglect cases in order to provide a broader scope of information regarding this vulnerable subset of shelter animals. These guidelines will ultimately help improve animal welfare and overall outcome.

Materials and Methods

A retrospective study was conducted using PetPoint, a web-based animal management system utilized frequently by animal shelters. Data was gathered from June 2011-June 2012 from a Midwestern shelter. This shelter served both animal control and animal sheltering functions, and received more than 20,000 animals per year. The animal control facility identified animals with a legal case number for any violation of city ordinances. This included violation of licensing laws, breed restrictions, number of animals per home (pursuant to local code), as well as cases of cruelty or neglect (pursuant to state code). Local code stated that not more than 6 cats or dogs could be housed per home, with no more than 3 of those being dogs. Each animal with a legal case number was located individually within the PetPoint database in order to identify the reason for which the animal was seized, and the final outcome for that animal.

Results and Discussion

There were 49 cats and 84 dogs housed at the shelter following cases of cruelty or neglect, as shown in Figure 1. The cats were housed a median of 13 days, with a range of 1 to 105 days. The dogs were housed a median of 12 days, with a range of 1 to 57 days. The final outcomes for these animals are shown as proportions in Figure 2. The reasons for euthanasia can be grouped into two main categories: behavior and health. For dogs, 69% were euthanized due to behavioral reasons and 31% for health reasons; for cats, 10% were euthanized for behavioral reasons and 90% for health reasons.

In addition, 50 cats and 33 dogs were housed after being seized from homes in violation of local code regarding excessive number of animals. Of these animals, 82% of the cats and 18% of the dogs were euthanized. It was not possible to gather details about the number of animals seized in each case, or the conditions in which they were housed. For cats, 49% of euthanasia was for space, 44% for health reasons, and 3% for behavioral reasons. These proportions highlight the obstacles shelters face when intake of animals overflows available space, as well as the frequency of illness that may be seen in these situations.

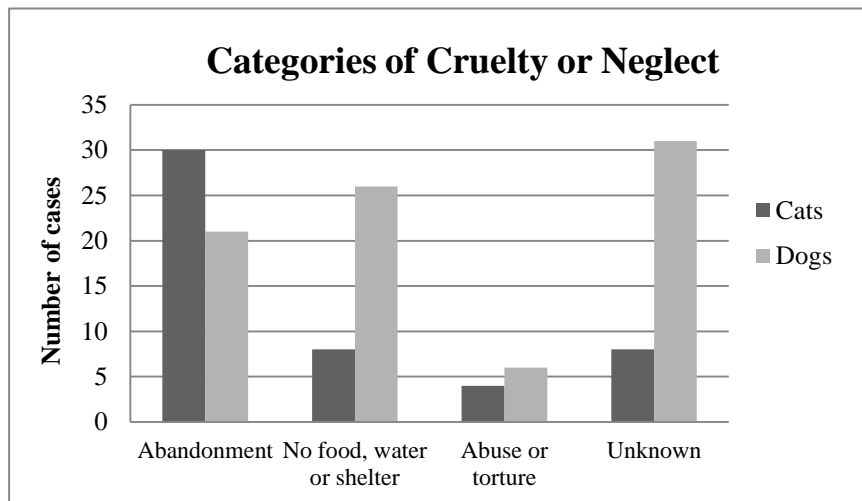


Figure 1. There were 49 cats and 84 dogs housed at the shelter during June 2011-June 2012 following cases of cruelty or neglect.

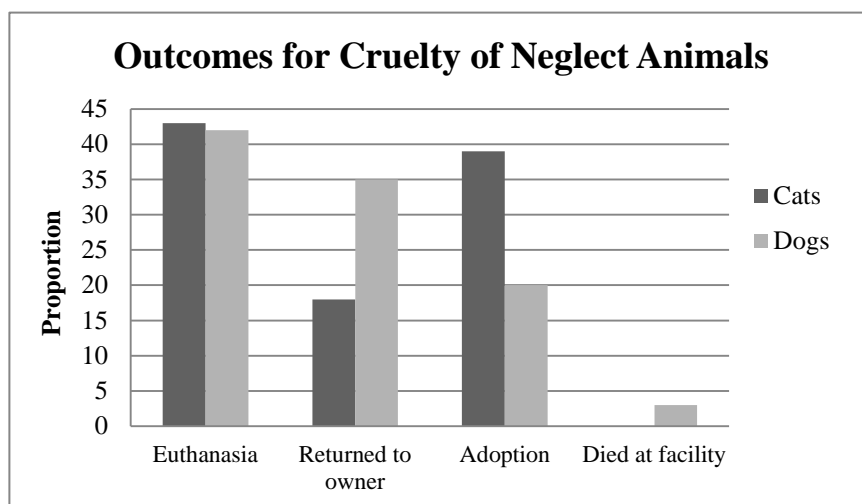


Figure 2. The final outcomes for animals housed at the shelter following cases of cruelty or neglect as proportions of cats or dogs in each category.

Summary

Animals relinquished or seized following cases of cruelty or neglect are a unique subset of the shelter population. This project aimed to follow these animals through the system and analyze their outcomes as well as identify areas in which the welfare of these animals may be improved. It is important to note the number of animals that were returned to owner, underlining the need for proper education prior to the animal being returned. In future research, it would be helpful to guide shelters about what information to collect in these cases, as well as how best to document this information. This would allow for more detailed information about each case of cruelty or neglect, allowing us to develop better guidelines for shelters housing these vulnerable animals. These guidelines will ultimately help improve animal welfare, adoptability and overall outcome.