

San Antonio Animal Care Services Project, 2007
Summary Findings & Related Policy Implications
Michael R. Baumann, PhD

The following consists of findings and related policy implications of a project conducted by the Culture & Policy Institute at The University of Texas at San Antonio on behalf of the city of San Antonio's Animal Care Services department. The project consisted of two phases. The first phase was a county-wide telephone survey. The second phase was a series of paid focus groups, with participants selected from people having completed the survey. The summary is organized by animal care-related behavior or problem.

Spaying and Neutering

Findings

A large minority of “owned” cats and dogs in San Antonio have not been spayed or neutered.

Based on participants reports of spaying and neutering, we estimate that as many as 30% of owned cats and dogs in San Antonio and the surrounding areas have not been spayed or neutered. This corresponds to a breeding population of approximately 215,000 to 250,000 fertile cats and dogs, not accounting for “un-owned” animals.

The rate of spaying and neutering differs by demographic group. Spaying and neutering was lower among Hispanics than Non-Hispanic Whites, and increased with education and income. To determine whether this was due to differences in beliefs regarding spaying and neutering or some other factor, we (1) examined attitudes towards spaying and neutering separately from behavior and (2) examined spaying and neutering rates controlling for attitude. Hispanics were slightly less in favor of spaying and neutering than were Non-Hispanic Whites. No differences in attitude were found by education or income. All three demographic effects on spaying and neutering remained when controlling for attitudes. This suggests there is some factor that comes between a person's attitude towards spaying and neutering and that person spaying or neutering his or her pets.

The question of what factor is coming between a person's attitude towards spaying and neutering and that person spaying or neutering his or her pets was addressed (1) through additional analyses of the survey data, and (2) through examination of comments made during focus groups. Both approaches suggest that cost and awareness of low-cost options for spaying and neutering play a major role. Focus group comments also suggest that cost is not strictly monetary, but involves time and travel considerations as well. Both approaches also suggest that, on average, participants did not oppose spaying and neutering but did not see spaying or neutering as being particularly important.

Residents' reactions to mandatory spay/neuter are mixed

Focus group participants were asked about the possibility of making spaying or neutering mandatory for cats and dogs in the San Antonio area. The reaction was mixed at best. Of those opposing mandatory spay/neuter, some opposed it for reasons such as giving too much power to breeders and pet stores or concern over what it would do to the availability of specific breeds. However, the feelings of many participants were along the lines of “don't tell me what to do.” Others expressed the belief that, for whatever reason, ACS was unable to enforce existing codes and therefore would be unable to enforce additional codes.

Policy implications

Awareness of low-cost spaying and neutering needs to be increased

The city of San Antonio already has low-cost spaying and neutering programs in place through arrangements with other organizations. However, many participants were unaware of these programs.

Convenience of low-cost spaying and neutering needs to be improved

In spite of being booked well in advance, at the time of this project the current low-cost spaying and neutering programs were not operating at capacity. This was due in part to a high no-show rate. This no-show rate may be due in part to non-monetary costs such as taking the time off work to take the animal to be spayed or neutered, arranging transportation, arranging child-care, etc.

The population needs to be convinced of the importance of spaying and neutering

Currently, spaying and neutering is seen as a good thing to do, but is not seen as important. In the language used by attitude researchers, people have a positive attitude towards spaying and neutering but it is a “weak” attitude. The weaker the attitude, the less likely people are to act on that attitude.

Different interventions should be directed at different segments of the population

Income and level of education were related to behavior, but not to attitudes towards spaying and neutering. Ethnicity was related to both the behavior and the attitude. This suggests the failure to spay or neuter is caused by different factors in different segments of the population. Interventions aimed at Hispanics should attempt to make the attitude more positive and increase the strength of the attitude. Those aimed at other segments should focus on increasing the strength of the attitude.

Incentives for spaying and neutering are preferable to mandatory spaying and neutering

Participants voiced a number of concerns with mandatory spaying and neutering. However, participants generally favored incentives for spaying and neutering. The current licensing discount could be effective if compliance with licensing requirements was increased (see below). Discounts on pet-release fees for pets found by ACS and other similar incentives were suggested by focus group participants.

Vaccination

Findings

A large minority of cat and dog owners in San Antonio do not vaccinate their pets against rabies on a regular basis.

During the planning stages of this survey, a member of the ACS advisory board pointed out that many more people report vaccinating their pets than actually do so. As a partial solution to this problem, we asked participants to estimate how many of the pet owners they knew vaccinated their pets on a regular basis. Based on a phenomenon known as the “false consensus” effect, respondents who vaccinate their pets regularly should estimate most or all others do so as well, while those who do not vaccinate their pets regularly should estimate few if any others do so. Using this technique, we estimate that approximately 30% of cat and dog owners do not vaccinate their pets against rabies on a regular basis.

A large majority of respondents strongly agreed that keeping pets' vaccinations up to date was important (78.1%). At least on average, the lack of vaccination does not appear to be an attitude problem. However, there were significant differences in agreement by level of income and education, and a trend towards a difference for ethnicity. Thus, although the city as a whole appears to agree with vaccination, some portions agree with it more than others. Because income, education, and ethnicity were all related to each other, the relationship between attitudes towards vaccination and each of these variables was re-computed controlling for the other 2 variables. This analysis suggests that only education was directly related to attitude, and ethnicity and income were only associated with attitude due to their relationships with education.

In the focus groups, the main reasons people gave against vaccination centered on the belief that there was a low chance of their pets getting sick. This attitude was exemplified by owners of "in-door only" pets saying that because their animal didn't interact with others, it could not become infected. However, even owners who allow their pets outdoors did not expect local strays or wild animals to transmit rabies or other major diseases to their pets.

Some focus groups suggested that part of why people fail to keep their vaccinations up to date is that, much as many people forget it is time for their own annual checkups, people forget that it is time for their pets' annual checkups and shots. Although not strictly an attitude issue, this does suggest that people are not particularly concerned about the risks involved in letting vaccinations lapse.

Policy Implications

Low-cost vaccination programs and awareness of such programs need to be increased

As with low-cost spaying and neutering, few participants were aware of low-cost options for vaccination. Many focus group participants called for additional low-cost options and were surprised by low-cost options that currently exist.

The population needs to be convinced of the importance of vaccination

Agreement with vaccination was high in all segments of the population. However, people seem to consider vaccination relatively low-priority. As such, although the population's attitudes towards vaccination are positive, their attitudes are also weak.

Reminders may increase vaccination rates

Focus group participants stated having difficulty remembering when their pets were due for yearly vaccinations. Those with a regular veterinarian receive a reminder. However, those who do not have a regular veterinarian or who frequently move are unlikely to receive such reminders. Focus group participants suggested an annual reminder campaign similar to "no shots no school" as a way to increase rabies vaccination rates. This may also have the added benefit of increasing the number of pet owners who keep other pet vaccinations up to date, thereby decreasing the number of sick pets found by ACS and the risk of infection among pets found and held by ACS.

Improving convenience should increase vaccination rates

The weaker the attitude, the more easily obstacles in the environment can prevent people from acting on that attitude. Conversely, people will act on weak attitudes when it is convenient to do so. Focus group participants responded very favorably to the idea of mobile

vaccination stations, especially if parked in the same place for several days, if the location was a place many people would have to go to anyway (HEB was suggested by name), and if sufficiently publicized.

“Bundling” vaccinations may increase the rate of voluntary vaccinations

Focus group participants suggested that “bundling” vaccinations at a discounted rate (e.g., a discount on rabies vaccination if a parvo vaccination is also purchased) may serve as an incentive for keeping voluntary vaccinations up to date.

Licensing

Findings

Residents of San Antonio and the surrounding area see little reason to license their cats and dogs

Very few participants opposed licensing, and there were no differences in licensing by any demographic variables. However, licensing was not seen as part of being a responsible pet owner, and focus group participants did not see any direct benefits of licensing their pets.

Residents are confused about licensing

Due to time constraints, the survey did not ask pet owners whether they had licensed their pet. However, in focus groups, it became clear that many people *thought* they had licensed their pets *but had not*. Many focus group participants were under the impression that the state rabies vaccination tag was the same as the city license.

Policy Implications

The licensing process needs to be simplified and clarified

The percentage of owners who license their pets with the city could be greatly increased by simplifying the process. Many focus group participants knew they had to license their pet and *thought they had*, but had not. As such, many owners who intended to license their pets failed to do so. Focus group participants suggested having the license be annual and being something that could be bought at a veterinarian’s office at the same time as the annual rabies vaccination.

The population should be educated regarding licensing and / or its benefits

Simplifying the licensing process will increase compliance among owners who comply with city codes by virtue of them being city codes. However, to increase compliance among the rest of the population, people must see some benefit to licensing.

Dumping of Animals and Perceptions of ACS

Findings

Perceptions of ACS are mixed

Participants were more likely to see ACS as a support agency than as an enforcement agency. This perception was stronger among Hispanic respondents. There is reason to believe that this perception is due in part to participants’ lack of satisfaction with ACS’s enforcement activities. Many focus group participants expressed dissatisfaction with response times and overall effectiveness, and Hispanic respondents reported more frequent encounters with loose

animals than did members of other ethnic groups. In spite of the negative perception of ACS as an organization, participants who had encountered ACS personnel had relatively positive impressions of those personnel.

Dumping may be related to perceptions of ACS

Turning to the relationship between the practice of dumping and perceptions of ACS, focus group participants appear to believe that dumped pets are more likely to survive than are pets surrendered to ACS. Upon further exploration of these beliefs, it became clear that participants do not expect the dumped pets to survive as animals in the wild. Rather, they think the dumped pets have a better chance of being taken in by a family near the dumping site than of being adopted out of ACS. Disagreement with the practice of dumping was high in all segments of the population. However, there was a relationship between income and attitudes toward dumping such that respondents with lower income disagreed less strongly than did those with higher incomes.

Policy Implications

The perceived ability of ACS to enforce codes needs to be increased

Focus group participants did not see ACS as capable of enforcing existing codes. The most frequent complaints involved response times. This was true both for reports of loose strays and reports of biting incidents. Slow response times on these issues appear to have led the population to doubt ACS's ability to enforce other animal care and control codes.

The perceived likelihood of survival / quality of survival of dumped pets needs to be altered

As long as residents believe that animals are more likely to survive if dumped than if turned in to ACS, animal dumping will continue. Either ACS's reputation in this respect needs to be improved, or the population needs to be convinced that although dumped animals may be more likely to survive, they are also more likely to suffer.

Adoption and Fostering

Findings

The level of support for adoption is unclear

Many survey respondents stated that they would be willing to adopt a pet from ACS (66.9%). The only demographic variable related to willingness was income, with wealthier respondents reporting greater willingness. However, far fewer participants had previously adopted a cat or dog from ACS or any other shelter (28.1%). As such, the percent of the population that would actually act on their reported willingness to adopt a pet is unclear.

Two primary reasons for the low adoption rate are suggested by the data. The first is that the number of stray animals and the frequency of unwanted litters provide would-be pet owners with a large population of "free" pets. Rather than adopt, owners simply take in one of these animals. In the survey sample, 29.3 % of owners obtained at least one pet as a found stray and 35.9 % obtained at least one pet through some other "free" mechanism. The second possibility is that there is a negative perception of shelter animals. Focus group participants suggested this may play a role, and expressed concern over possible health or behavioral problems of shelter animals. However, focus group participants were mixed with respect to their perception of shelter animals.

The level of support for fostering is low, but non-trivial

Only 39.6% of the population reported being willing to foster a pet. No demographic variables measured were related to willingness. As with adoption, focus group participants voiced concerns about the animal they would be fostering. In addition, focus group participants voiced concerns about becoming attached to the animal, the impact the animal would have on their pets, and the financial load of caring for an additional animal.

Policy Implications

Decreasing the population of strays and “free” animals may increase adoption rates

The availability of strays and puppies / kittens being given away (e.g., due to unwanted litters) appears to be one factor affecting adoption rates. Decreasing this population is therefore likely to increase adoption rates. It is therefore likely that increasing spaying and neutering rates would have the added benefit of increasing adoption rates and thereby reduce both the current inflow of animals at the ACS facility and increase the outflow of adoptable pets.

The perception of shelter animals may need to be improved

Focus group participants mentioned possible health and behavioral problems as reasons they would think twice about adopting or fostering animals. In terms of health, there was some concern that shelter animals were kept in close quarters and could become exposed to various infections from other animals. In terms of behavior, the concern was that close quarters, abuse by a previous owner, or time as a stray may have made the animal less friendly.

Providing potential adopters / fosterers with additional information about the animals may increase adoption rates

Focus group participants generally wanted to know more information about the animals before they adopted them or agreed to foster them. For example, focus group members mentioned wanting to know more about the likely mix of breeds, likely temperament, etc., of the animal in question. ACS's current plans with respect to kennel cards are likely to help in this regard. However, for potential adopters, it may be worth providing more detailed information once the potential adopter is past the “window shopping” stage and seriously considering adoption. For fosterers, this additional information would also be desirable.

Perceptions of the Problem

Findings

The problem varies widely from region to region

Survey respondents rated the problems of stray dogs and of animal care and control relative to other problems in their community. Participants' responses were remarkably evenly spread across response options, suggesting wide disagreement about the importance of these problems. In the focus groups, the nature of the problems people experienced was explored, and these varied widely as well.

Demographically, respondents identifying themselves as Hispanic, having lower levels of income, or lower levels of education see the problem as more serious than other ethnicities or those having higher levels of income and education. Geographically, the problem was seen as least serious in the region falling into county commissioner precinct 3 and most serious in

precincts 2 and 4. This corresponds closely to differences in reported frequency of encounters with loose but owned as well as stray dogs. It is also worth noting that in addition to seeing the problem as less important and having fewer encounters with loose animals, precinct 3 has the highest reported rate of vaccination, highest reported proportion of pets spayed and neutered, and the most positive attitudes towards vaccination, spaying, and neutering. As such, it appears that animal care and control are seen as less of a problem in precinct 3 because the owners (1) believe in practices that should prevent animal control from becoming a problem and (2) actually engage in those practices and (3) are encountering fewer loose animals as a result. Demographically, participants from precinct 3 also reported higher education and income than the other precincts and respondents were more likely to be Non-Hispanic Whites than in any other precinct. In other words, the demographic make-up of precinct 3 is least like the demographic make-up of the neighborhoods having the worst problems.

Participants from the region falling into county commissioner precinct 3, on average, reported fewer encounters with loose animals and rated the problem of animal care and control as less serious than in other areas of the city. However, even within this precinct, there were some areas with greater problems than others. Therefore, it would be a mistake to think of the city's animal care and control problems as district-specific. Although the seriousness of the problem varies by region, the "hot spots" (i.e., problem areas) appear to be distributed across the entire city.

Policy implications

The data are consistent with the idea that spaying, neutering, and vaccination will reduce the magnitude of the local animal control problem

Logically, increasing spaying and neutering rates and increasing vaccination rates should reduce the problems associated with stray animals. The finding that the areas in which animal care problems are seen as least important are those in which spaying, neutering, and vaccination are highest provides some support for this idea.

Recurring Themes

Findings

In the focus groups, several themes emerged that are relevant to all of the areas discussed above.

- *Many owners lack sufficient knowledge of how to care for their pets*
Focus group participants frequently stated the belief that many pet owners in San Antonio simply do not know how to take care of their pets.
- *The population does not believe ACS sufficiently publicizes its programs and events*
Many focus group participants argued that ACS needs to publicize its events and programs far better than it currently does. This is consistent with the generally low awareness of ACS programs as measured by the survey.
- *Many owners "know better," but are apathetic, forgetful, or busy*
Focus group participants suggested that one of the many things that may affect spaying, neutering, vaccination, and other pet-owner behaviors is pet owner apathy and

forgetfulness. Focus group participants responded positively to almost any suggestion that would increase the convenience of pet care or help overcome their forgetfulness.

- *Participants are generally against making pet-owner behaviors mandatory*
Focus group participants understood rabies vaccination being mandatory due to the threat rabies poses. However, when asked about the idea of making spaying and neutering mandatory, many were against it. Although some were against it for practical reasons, others were against the idea of making any behavior mandatory.

Policy Implications

- *Increase educational activities for pet owners and the population at large*
A number of different educational interventions were discussed in the focus groups. This included outreach to local schools, a “pet school” (modeled on “defensive driving school”) for people who commit pet related offenses, and pet-awareness activities including pet fairs and public service announcements. ACS is already attempting some of these activities.
- *Increase publicity of ACS programs and events*
Focus group participants **expressed particularly** strong opinions about both 311 and the web as methods of distributing information. **Many** participants reported being non web-users due to either lack of familiarity with computers or due to income issues. As such, while the web can be a valuable tool, ACS must be careful not to rely upon the web too heavily. This is especially important given the impact of education and income on several of the issues discussed above. Lower income, lower education individuals are most in need of information about low cost spaying, neutering, and vaccination, and are also least likely to have ready web access / be web users.

In addition to the traditional, expensive ways of publicizing events, focus group participants suggested less costly alternatives. These included ad space in church bulletins or neighborhood newsletters.

- *Make it easier to do the right thing*
There are people in the population who want to be good pet owners but who are forgetful or are confused by current procedures. All pet owners have obstacles in their lives (e.g., work commitments, scheduling difficulties with family, etc.) that can interfere with their plans to spay, neuter, or vaccinate their pet. Reminding pet owners that it is vaccination time, simplifying pet licensing procedures, and making it easier to get the pet to the place it needs to be to get vaccinated, spayed, or neutered, will all help with the current animal care and control problems in San Antonio.
- *When possible, incentivize instead of mandating*
Given the current perceptions of ACS and the reactions of focus group members to the idea of making anything mandatory, creating incentives for behavior are more likely to be effective and supported by the community than are making behaviors mandatory.