



## PET OVERPOPULATION STUDY

In this Report, ISAR presents a brief overview of the findings of a Spring, 1997 survey conducted by Pecos People for Animal Welfare Society, Inc. (PAWS)<sup>1</sup>. This telephone Survey addressed various companion animal issues in the sparsely populated and economically depressed small villages and rural areas of San Miguel County, New Mexico. By surveying 200 participants representing diverse cultural and demographic backgrounds, nearly 90% of whom had at least one companion animal, PAWS was able to systematically examine the area's pet population and learn what might be done to improve animal welfare in the area.

Among other companion animal concerns, the survey's primary objectives included the following: to obtain an estimate of the current population of dogs and cats in the survey area; to ascertain how many of these animals were spayed or neutered; to identify obstacles to spaying and neutering; and to determine the awareness and use of low-cost spay/neuter programs in the area.

This highly informative survey yields some surprising results, while providing valuable insight to those fighting the war on dog and cat overpopulation.

By quantifying pertinent statistics and identifying the reasons why people neglect to have their pets sterilized, the survey results can aid in planning and implementing an effective spay/neuter campaign directed specifically to combat the obstacles that inhibit spaying and neutering.

Surprisingly, the most common reason cited for not having a pet spayed or neutered was that the animal was either too young or too old. While there may be some validity in the reasoning that a pet may be too old to undergo surgery, it's unlikely that an animal would be too young for the operation, considering the practice of early age spay/neuter. Because many people are unaware that pets may be altered as young as eight weeks of age, ISAR has a Special Report entitled *Dog and Cat Overpopulation and Juvenile Spay/Neuter* which is available free of charge for individual use or for wider distribution purposes.

The survey clearly reveals the ongoing need for public education on the importance of spaying and neutering, including the benefits to both the animal and its caretaker. Furthermore, the results indicate a need for special efforts to reach special segments of the population with the spay/neuter message.

ISAR is striving to meet these unfulfilled needs with our intense educational efforts and public awareness campaigns. We hope that by disseminating a wide variety of educational materials in both Spanish and English, we may assist others in addressing the specific educational needs of their own communities.

The reverse side of this page includes a brief overview of the survey findings. The complete survey results have been published by ISAR as a 12-page Special Study entitled "*Dog and Cat Survey*." This study provides the statistics obtained from the survey, including information on what becomes of the litters of puppies and kittens, the prevalence of stray animals in the survey area, respondents' reaction to strays, respondents' awareness and impression of animal services in the area, and more. This Special Study also includes a copy of the survey, along with information on survey techniques, which will be particularly helpful for those who wish to undertake a similar study in their own area. Individual copies of this Special Study are available from ISAR free upon request.

Although the PAWS survey was conducted in a very specific area, we believe the information can prove insightful elsewhere as well. The results can be especially helpful when used as a basis to assess the needs of a particular location. We caution, however, that the results must be evaluated very carefully, as the individual needs will vary with each situation.

**Dog and Cat Survey: Pet Population, Spay/Neuter Practices, Stray Animals, and Awareness of Animal-Related Services**  
*Overview of survey findings*

**The Sample**

The PAWS survey was conducted in an economically poor and culturally diverse region of northern New Mexico. The sparsely populated survey area encompassed approximately 900 square miles which included an estimated 5,675 residents. Three women who were trained to conduct the telephone survey contacted 262 persons, with 200 (76%) of those contacted participating. All respondents were informed that participation was voluntary and that any information they provided would remain confidential.

Ages were obtained for 148 of the 200 participants. The youngest respondent was 13 years old and the oldest was 84, with a median age of 48 years. The majority of participants (n= 132, or 66%) were women. Ninety-three respondents (46.5%) identified themselves as Hispanic and 96 (48.0%) as Anglo; 6 (3.0%) had other ethnic background, including 3 Native Americans, and 5 (2.5%) declined to specify their ethnic background.<sup>1</sup>

**Pet Population**

Most respondents (88.5%) had at least one companion animal, and 23% had five or more. Dogs and cats were equally represented (mean of 1.9 dogs and 1.5 cats per household).

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<sup>1</sup> The Report contains ethnic information solely because one of the funding foundations required its resources be expended in a certain manner.

The number of animals reported was significantly higher in the rural regions of the survey area (average of 3.8 vs. 2.7 animals per household,  $p = 0.48$ ) than in the village of Pecos (the one incorporated town included in the survey area); this was due to a greater number of dogs owned by rural residents (mean of 2.2 vs. 1.3 per household,  $p = .0003$ ).

### **Spaying and Neutering**

Of 146 households with at least one female dog or cat 94 (64%) reported that all were spayed. Of 130 households with at least one male dog or cat, 63 (48.5%) reported that all were neutered. Hispanic respondents were less likely than Anglo respondents to report that all of their female animals were spayed (29/61 or 47.5% vs. 76.6%;  $p < .001$ ) or that all of their male animals were neutered (19/61, or 31 % vs. 38/59, or 64%,  $p < .001$ ). Differences were also noted by residential area. Pecos residents were more likely than those in outlying areas to have all female pets spayed (39/47, or 83% vs. 55/99, or 56%;  $p < .01$ ) or all male pets neutered (21/31, or 68% vs. 42/96, or 44%;  $p = .02$ ). There were no differences related to gender or age in the likelihood of having all pets spayed or neutered, although among Hispanics younger adults were somewhat more likely ( $p = .06$ ) than older individuals to have all male animals neutered.

A diverse set of reasons were offered for not spaying or neutering companion animals, with the most common explanation being that the owner felt the animal was either too young or too old (endorsed by 20% of respondents for female animals, 21 % for male animals). Another fairly common reason for not spaying was that the owner wanted to breed the animal to sell the offspring (15% of respondents). For male animals, a significant proportion of respondents (nearly 19%) said they saw no need to neuter their pet, either because he didn't roam or because he didn't cause problems. The belief that sterilization might harm an animal's health or personality was expressed, but was not a common response (about 8% of the respondents for both spaying and neutering), and very few respondents (about 1 %) stated they didn't believe in spaying and neutering. The cost of the sterilization procedures was also infrequently mentioned (5% of respondents for spaying, and 8% for neutering). Some persons noted that their animals were too wild to catch, some said they didn't bother because the offspring always got eaten, and some reported that they simply hadn't given it any thought or hadn't gotten around to doing it.

### **Offspring of Unspayed Females**

Data were available on the offspring of unspayed females in 32 cases. For 19%, no prior litters were reported; the remaining 81 % had produced 1 to 4 litters. Data on litter size were available in 21 cases, and ranged from 2 to 10, with a median of 4 offspring. If each of the 32 unspayed females produced a litter of four offspring (two female and two male), and the female offspring then produced their own litters, and so on, these animals alone could produce an estimated 10,368 offspring in five years. These calculations are based on some of the more conservative published estimates of cumulative birth rates.

Twenty-seven persons provided information on how they dispensed with these offspring. The most frequent course of action was to give the pups or kittens away to relatives or friends (39% of respondents). Sixteen percent reported that the offspring died or disappeared. Other fairly common responses (each endorsed by 13% of respondents)

were to keep the offspring, sell them, or place them through ads or with the assistance of an animal welfare program. Very few respondents (6%) reported taking the offspring to a shelter.

### **Awareness of Spay/Neuter Programs**

Just over one-half (n=101, or 50.5%) of respondents stated that they knew about a local low-cost spay/neuter program. Awareness of spay/neuter programs did not differ significantly for respondents in rural areas and those in the village of Pecos, but Hispanic respondents were less likely than Anglo respondents to report awareness of such programs (34/93, 37% vs. 60/92, or 63%;  $p < .001$ ). Men and women did not differ in program awareness, but respondents aged 60 years or older were much less likely than younger persons to know about spay/neuter programs (6/33, or 18% vs. 69/115, or 60%,  $p < .001$ ).

There was only a slight trend for persons who knew about a low-cost spay/neuter program to be more likely than those unaware of such programs to have their female animals spayed (69% vs. 58%). A larger difference was observed with regard to having male animals neutered: 57% of those who were aware of a low-cost program had all of their male pets neutered as compared to 40% of other respondents ( $p = .06$ ).

### **Ways to Improve Animal Welfare**

When asked what they would like to see done to reduce animal-related problems, or to improve the welfare of animals in the area the most frequently endorsed need was to reduce pet overpopulation (54% of respondents), followed closely by the need to enforce local ordinances against cruelty and neglect (51 % of respondents).

### **Statistical Analysis**

Descriptive statistical analysis were conducted using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences. Most analysis consist of simple frequency tallies. When group differences were examined, means were compared with the F statistic and categorical differences were assessed by Pearson chi-square. The level of probability for inferring statistically significant differences was set at  $p < .05$  (5 chances in 100 of incorrectly identifying an outcome as significant).