Evaluating factors influencing dog post-adoptive return in a Canadian animal shelter

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Abstract

Understanding the factors associated with post-adoptive return in dogs (Canis familiaris) is important for reducing shelter return rates. The objective of this retrospective study was to identify factors detectable in shelters associated with post-adoptive return in an objective dog-centric analysis. The records of 959 dogs were evaluated via factor analysis of seven behaviour and seven physical variables which resulted in the extraction of six principal factors. Fear aggression, ongoing health concerns, separation anxiety, sex-specific aggression, and age effect on source were not found to significantly impact outcome. In particular, dog aggression risk (a factor composed of breed, size, and dog aggression) was found to be significantly higher in returned dogs. Since dog aggression risk is associated with post-adoptive return, this could help shelters to modify policies to either screen aggressive dogs from the adoption population or improve adoption counselling in an attempt to help lower return rates.

Keywords: aggression, animal welfare, canine, factor analysis, post-adoption, animal shelter

Introduction

Post-adoptive return in shelters varies widely (Curb et al 2013) with return rates ranging from 7% (Marston et al 2005a) to 50% (Van der Borg et al 1991). However, most studies have reported return rates of ~13–20% (eg Kidd et al 1992a; Posage et al 1998; Neidhart & Boyd 2002; Mondelli et al 2004; Marston et al 2005b; Diesel et al 2008, 2010; Mohan-Gibbons et al 2014). The variation in return rates may be due, in part, to geographic differences between shelter locations (Coe et al 2014). For example, the geographic effect on post-adoptive returns is challenging to interpret in Canada as only 3 of 115 primary research studies on companion animal relinquishment have been conducted in Canada (Coe et al 2014). To reduce return rates, a better understanding of the factors associated with post-adoptive return are needed.

The post-adoptive return of dogs to animal shelters can compromise animal welfare, consume resources, and impact community perception of animal sheltering organisations. The initial entry into a shelter can be particularly stressful for dogs as cortisol levels are highest during the first three days in an animal shelter (Hennessy et al 1997). Due to the high stress associated with entry into a shelter, avoiding multiple re-entries is important in maintaining the welfare of shelter dogs. Furthermore, time in animal shelters can be stressful for dogs due to social isolation from conspecifics (Wells & Hepper 1998), an inability to display normal behaviour due to confinement (Verga & Michelazzi 2009), loss of environmental control and disruption of old routine (Beerda et al 1999; Tuber et al 1999), and exposure to loud noises (Beerda et al 1999). Dogs can also experience social stress caused by the loss of a primary caregiver. The social stress associated with adoption and subsequent re-entry into a shelter can occur because shelter dogs can form attachment bonds with new owners even after minimal exposure (Gácsi et al 2001). The stress caused by the severing of social bonds has been implicated in the development of separation anxiety behaviour in shelter dogs (Tuber et al 1999).

Also, when considering public relations, animal shelters may erode social licence if animal shelters alienate people who have previously experienced unsuccessful adoptions. The American Humane Association (2012) reported that 22% of dog owners obtain a dog from an animal shelter. With a quarter of all dog acquisitions coming from shelters, it is important to ensure people have a positive adoption experience and continue to adopt. For example, Shore (2005) found that 41.4% of people with failed adoption experiences would not consider adoption from a shelter again. Further, even people with a less negative view of a failed adoption felt that future adoption was uncertain to be successful. In addition, social licence may be compromised by the increased risk of unnecessary euthanasia following return, and there is evidence that there is an increased risk of euthanasia caused simply by being returned, making this