Adoption and relinquishment interventions at the animal shelter: a review

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Abstract

Each year, nearly 4 million dogs will enter one of over 13,000 animal shelters operating in the United States. We review programmes implemented at shelters aimed at increasing the likelihood of adoption. The morphology of shelter dogs plays a large role in in-kennel adopter selection, but their behaviour is also influential in out-of-kennel adopter interactions. Previous studies suggest that dogs have the ability to readily learn new behaviours at the shelter, and programmes designed to improve behaviour of the dogs can increase adoption rates. Whilst human interaction has been well-established to improve behavioural and physiological outcomes of dogs living in shelters, analysis of the effects of sensory, environmental, and social-conspecific enrichment has not resulted in clear conclusions. We also review the literature on the relinquishment of owned dogs and return rates of previously adopted dogs. Whilst owner- and dog-related risks to relinquishment are discussed, we show that there is a notable lack of research into programmes that address issues that may prevent the initial surrender of dogs to shelters, or that could prevent re-relinquishment. It is likely that factors, unrelated to the dog, play a larger role than previously believed. Suggestions for further research include multi-site studies, investigations into the efficacy of in-shelter enrichment programmes, predictive validity of behavioural assessments, understanding of adopter behaviour at the shelter, and programmes within the community focused on keeping dogs in their homes.

Keywords: adoption, animal shelter, animal welfare, dog, relinquishment, review

Introduction

The American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA) estimates that over 13,000 animal shelters operate in the United States. Each year, nearly 4 million dogs will enter one of these shelters (ASPCA 2016). Recent survey data from the American Pet Products Association (APPA) indicate that 54 million homes in the US have a dog, with 78 million dogs living in human households (APPA 2016), approximately 20% of which were adopted from shelters (Campbell 2012). The number of dogs living in the US is comparable to that of Europe, where more than 80 million dogs live in over 20% of the region’s households (The European Pet food Industry Federation [FEDIAF] 2014). The percentage of the US population that is dog-owning has remained relatively stable for the last twenty-five years (Scarlett 2013).

Dogs may arrive at the animal shelter in one of four ways: i) surrendered by their owners; ii) as strays; iii) returned to the shelter after adoption; or iv) confiscated as part of cruelty and criminal cases. Results from the National Council on Pet Population Study and Policy’s survey of 4,700 United States shelters from 1994–1995 indicate that close to 30% of dogs that entered shelters did so as owner-surrenders (Zawistowski et al 1998). This complements more recent statistics from the ASPCA that finds twice as many dogs enter shelters as strays rather than as relinquishments by their owner (ASPCA 2016)

However, findings from a 2010 census from the United Kingdom suggest that the number of owner-surrendered dogs may be nearer to 50% of that country’s shelter dogs (Stavisky et al 2012) while in Australia that number is only 15% (Marston et al 2004). A majority of owner-surrendered dogs are young, intact and not purebred (New et al 2000). In Patronek et al (1997), dogs relinquished to the shelter accounted for nearly 4% of the canine population in the community with authors noting that owners likely under-reported surrendering their pets when questioned. Dogs entering as strays compose 53–83% of shelter canine populations (Wenstrup & Dowidchuk 1999; Lepper et al 2002; Marston et al 2004; Protopopova et al 2012). In a 2009 study investigating microchip prevalence in US animal shelters, 58% of microchipped dogs arrived as strays. Of those dogs, 52% were returned to their owners compared to 22% of the shelters’ total stray dog population (Lord et al 2009). Overall, dogs that come into shelters but then are reunited with their owners make up 13–23% of the shelter dog population, with older dogs having higher rates of being reclaimed than those under six months of age (Zawistowski et al 1998; Wenstrup & Dowidchuk 1999; Bartlett et al 2005). Calculations about the number of dogs returned to owners, however, are often based on total dogs received at the shelter and not solely on stray intakes.