Perceptions of dog breeding practices, breeding dog welfare and companion dog acquisition in a self-selected sample of Australian adults

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Abstract

Welfare considerations surrounding dog (Canis familiaris) breeding practices are contentious in some sectors of the community. However, public perceptions surrounding dog breeding practices are poorly understood. The aims of this study were to describe perceptions of dog breeding and associated welfare concerns held by members of the general public and identify whether factors exist that potentially predict these perceptions. Australian residents (n = 986) completed an online questionnaire investigating their perceptions, and attitudes towards, companion dog breeding and other acquisition methods. Participants predominantly indicated that breeding dog welfare was important, that dog breeding should be regulated, and that tougher laws are necessary to improve breeding dog welfare. Furthermore, three groups of respondents were identified: those who supported breeder-sourced companion dogs but felt that current regulations were inadequate to ensure satisfactory welfare, those who disapproved of dog breeding and felt adoption was the only appropriate acquisition method, and those who felt breeding was acceptable and that current industry practices provide adequate welfare. Several participant factors predicted cluster membership, including age, characteristics considered important when acquiring a companion dog, the source of their most recent dog, and their dog breeding knowledge and/or experience. This study provides a direct preliminary examination of public perceptions of dog breeding, breeding practices, and associated welfare concerns, and the factors associated with these perceptions. This information can be used to guide those who provide companion dogs to the public and inform evidence-based policy development concerning companion dog breeding and acquisition.

Keywords: animal breeding, animal welfare, anthrozoology, breeding perceptions, Canis familiaris, dog adoption

Introduction

Dogs (Canis familiaris) and humans have lived alongside one another for at least 20,000 years (Druzhkova et al 2013). Although this close association traditionally served a practical purpose, such as improved hunting or livestock protection, dogs nowadays function primarily as human companions (Bennett & Rohlf 2007). They made this transition with exceptional efficacy and are the most widespread companion animal in the world (Miklósi 2014), with nearly 40% of households in Australia (Headey 2006) and 30% of households in the UK (Murray et al 2010) containing a dog. Humans regularly form close emotional bonds with their dogs (Crawford et al 2006), consider them psychological kin (Topolski et al 2013), and regularly describe them as part of their family unit (Tannen 2004; Franklin 2006). Dog owners are prepared to pay for the privilege of living closely with a dog, with Australian and British households annually spending almost A$4.7 billion (Animal Health Alliance 2013) and £10.6 billion (Roberts 2016) on their dogs’ care, respectively.

Consistent with their substantial economic and emotional investment in individual dogs, humans in developed countries have a high regard for the welfare of companion dogs in general (Cobb et al 2014). Animal welfare is a multi-faceted construct (Mason & Mendl 1993), but can be broadly conceptualised as a state subjectively experienced by an animal relating to the sensations and perceptions felt as a consequence of their experiences (Mellor 2016). It can be assessed according to an animal’s ability to engage in positive experiences as well as to minimise or avoid those that are negative (Mellor & Beausoleil 2015). Dog welfare has been discussed publicly since at least the early 1800s, with public sentiment for enhancing it increasing as dogs moved from being hunting and herding partners, to occupying backyards and the end of their owners’ beds (Ritvo 1994). In line with this, legal regulations have been implemented in various parts of the world to uphold companion dog welfare specifically. Numerous shelters have also been founded exclusively for dogs, such as the Barking Mad Dog Rescue in the UK, and The Lost Dogs Home in Melbourne, Australia.