

Cat stats: Tracking cat admissions to shelters in Melbourne

Linda Marston, P. Bennett, S.Toukhatsi, Animal Welfare Science Centre, Dept. of Psychology, Monash University

Abstract

During the past decade there has been a relatively large amount of research concerning the behaviour of canines in shelters. Unfortunately the same cannot be said for felines. While there is some research concerning the effects of housing (Kessler and Turner 1999) and environmental enrichment (Loveridge 1998) on feline wellbeing, there is a dearth of scientific data relating to cats in shelters. The limited data available suggests that the majority of cats admitted to shelters are strays.

Introduction

In those cases where a cat is relinquished (or owner-surrendered) the reasons given can be broadly divided into two categories; owner-centric and those cat-centric. Owner-centric reasons for relinquishment include inappropriate expectations about the cat's role, inappropriate care expectations, lack of knowledge about cat behaviour (indicated by never having read a book about cat behaviour), allowing the cat outdoors and owning a sexually intact cat. Cat-centric reasons revolve around behavioural issues and particularly inappropriate toileting or spraying (Patronek et al. 1996).

The Patronek study identified that the primary reason owners gave for not desexing their cat, was the cost of sterilization. Notably owners did not plan for their cats to become pregnant and the majority of pregnancies were accidental, although some owners liked the queen to have kittens so that their children could experience birth. This study also indicated that cats acquired as strays or with minimal planning were at decreased risk of relinquishment to a shelter, but this might simply mean that owners did not bother take them to a shelter but just allowed them to 'wander off'.

Very few (approximately 5%) stray cats are reclaimed from shelters unless they are microchipped when the reclaim rate is approximately 70% (David Carbaugh, personal communication 4th April 2005). This is much lower than the reclaim rate for stray dogs (70-80%) (Marston, Bennett and Coleman 2004). It would be interesting to identify which factors determine whether people microchip their cats. Perhaps some of the variables to be probed might include the cost of the cat or the owner's emotional attachment to the animal. If people do not worry if their cat is missing for a day or two, this may mean that cat owners will take longer to reclaim their cat from the shelter than dog-owners who tend to reclaim their pets within 4 days (Marston, Bennett and Coleman 2004). These statistics will clarify this situation.

The lack of good feline data is particularly important at present in Melbourne because we are experiencing an upswing in cat admissions to Melbourne shelters and, of course this is accompanied by an increased euthanasia rate. After a number of years of encouraging people to neuter and register their animals, which has resulted in reduced cat admissions to shelters, this turn-around is particularly worrying. The number of registered cats has remained constant, so it does not seem as though responsible cat owners have changed their behaviour patterns, so the increase is likely to be the result of some other factors. One possible hypothesis is linked to a social phenomenon, whereby an increasing number of people are communally feeding cats without owning them. This results in cats who are in good reproductive condition but do not receive any veterinary care, including desexing. Alternatively, it may be an increase in the feral cat population. Identifying which of these hypotheses is correct is extremely challenging, therefore we are tracking feline admissions to three Melbourne shelters for a one year period.

We are also following what happens to rehomed cats via the microchip database. As every shelter cat is microchipped upon rehoming and every enquiry to the microchip database generates an entry in the database activity log,

We will be able to examine patterns of straying of these rehomed cats and the reclaim rate of these animals. Normal admission data will be collected, plus data relating to the cat's physical state including a 5-point body score (Waltham Feline Body Condition Guide), evidence of injuries (particularly whether they are traumatic or chronic) and coat condition. Cats will also be rated on a 5-point sociability rating as follows:

- 1) Active attempt to avoid eye contact and negative reaction to voice – hissing and arched back OR obvious signs of distress, dilated eyes, rapid breathing, not avoidant but hisses when approached (this means that both aggressive and extremely fearful cats will be classed as category 1).
- 2) Cat is avoidant in the cage, but tolerant of human presence when outside, but not actively engaging in interaction.
- 3) Responds positively to gentle human voice, will tolerate being tentatively stroked when on floor but will not be held
- 4) Responds positively to gentle human voice and will accept being gently held
- 5) Responds positively to gentle human voice, actively seeks physical interaction and contact accompanied by purrs.

This scale was devised after discussion with a number of shelter managers and veterinarians. It is believed that feral cats would probably be scored as category 1, those scored 2 or 3 would likely be communally-fed cats and those scored as a 4 or 5 would probably be Owned pets. We believe that communally-fed cats need to more sociable than feral cats, because they must interact, to some extent, with the people who feed them.

The inclusion of this body score and sociability rating scale should enable us to identify which of the current hypotheses is most likely and enable appropriate strategies to be directed at addressing the problem. Preliminary data will be presented at the conference.

References

- Kessler MR and Turner DC (1999) Socialization and stress in cats (*Felis silvestris catus*) housed singly and in groups in animal shelters. *Animal Welfare* 8 (1):15-26.
- Loveridge GG (1998) Environmentally enriched dog housing. *Applied Animal Behaviour Science* 59:101-113.
- Marston LC, Bennett PC, and Coleman GJ (2004) What happens to shelter dogs? An analysis of data for one year from three Australian Shelters. *Journal of Applied Animal Welfare Science* 7 (1):27-47.
- Patronek GJ et al (1996) Risk factors for relinquishment of cats to an animal shelter. *Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association*. 209 (3):582-588.