

The dog shortage: How spay-neuter has led to empty shelters

Animal welfare campaigns have been so successful that many communities have no adoptable dogs. We can solve this dilemma with humane breeding.



by Mark Cushing, JD
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Seven or eight years ago, when I was a few years into my work as a strategist for the animal health profession, I was talking with a senior animal welfare executive at an industry event. I had been studying the dynamics of the industry, and I mentioned that it wasn't clear to me — or, it seemed, to anyone — where dogs were coming from or even how many were needed for everyone who wanted one. "I don't know if we have too many, too few, or just the right number of dogs," I said.

"Oh, we're heading toward a shortage," he replied. "In fact we're probably there now."

To say I was surprised at this admission is an understatement. After all, the commercials running on evening television at the time clearly suggested otherwise. When I mentioned this to the

executive, along with an oblique reference to the amount of money those commercials must raise, he just laughed, and we left it at that.

Diving into data

Since that exchange I have delved much more deeply into this issue. On behalf of the Pet Leadership Council, an advocacy group made up of pet industry, animal welfare, veterinary and academic leaders, I helped organize a rigorous study by a professional survey research organization to determine how many dogs were in the United States. We found that in 2015 there were around 90 million dogs — more than anyone had thought. And if dogs live 11.2 years on average, that means we need about 8.3 million dogs every year to replace those we've lost.

Our next question was, OK, where do those 8.3 million dogs come from? A 2017 study by veterinary researchers at Mississippi State University, home of the premier shelter medicine program in the United States, told us that animal shelters adopt out 2.6 million dogs every year.¹ Other sources indicate that breeders and the internet provide another 3.4 million dogs. But that still left a 2.3-million-dog gap we couldn't account for.

I had a theory that at least part of this gap was being addressed through dogs coming into the U.S. from other countries. And in 2019 the Centers for Disease Control reported that roughly 1.1 million dogs enter the U.S. every year, less than 3% with medical records of any sort.² That would account for about half of the gap we had identified. Some of the rest likely come from backyard breeders and other unknown sources.

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But we are still short of dogs. And there is growing awareness of this scarcity. After the Mississippi State study was presented, the Washington Post ran a story on the front page headlined, "Does America have enough dogs for all the people who want one?" All of the sudden this was big news, with other media outlets conducting their own investigations (see [here](#) and [here](#)). My chapter on the subject in *Pet Nation*, titled "Dog Shortages and Canine Freedom Trains," has generated more discussion than anything else in the book.

People are finally talking about a dog shortage. Really, we shouldn't be surprised that we've reached this point — after all, we spay and neuter pretty much every dog, and most shelters adopt dogs out soon after receiving them. But the idea of a dog shortage makes many people extremely uncomfortable. Why? Because it invokes two very ugly words: puppy mills.

Bracing for impact

When I first took my findings public, I waited for animal rights groups to come flying out of their offices attacking me, saying I was promoting puppy mills. I didn't represent any breeders, so I wasn't making that case. But it stands to reason that if you have a shortage of dogs, you need to create more dogs, and the way you do that is through breeding.

In the animal welfare world, the idea of breeding is anathema — at least it has been for a very long time. The Humane Society of the United States (HSUS) didn't invent the phrase "puppy mill," but in the early 2000s they grabbed it and ran. It's a brilliant epithet. "Puppy mill" — you just say the words, and the images that come to mind are horrific: a hundred dogs in squalor, living in

crates upon crates on some remote farm with no veterinarian within a hundred miles, where disease is rampant and it's basically a Gulag.

Those facilities do exist, and to its credit, HSUS helped get many of them shut down and cleaned up. But the phrase "puppy mill" raises a lot of funds, and animal welfare groups know what sells. Other humane issues, such as confinement of farm animals, don't hold a candle to the specter of the puppy mill when it comes to opening pockets. So puppy mill campaigns remain relentless and spare no breeders.

Yes, there are bad breeders in America. There are also bad lawyers, bad dentists and bad writers. But the notion that all breeders are bad? I don't accept that.



An alternative: Humane breeding

It takes two dogs who can produce a puppy to make a puppy, but today's dog population doesn't have that capacity because of the way we routinely spay and neuter. This philosophy derives from a decades-old scenario in which drastic measures were necessary to address overpopulation and senseless euthanasia. While welfare networks have made tremendous progress in these areas, there has been little discussion of putting on the brakes with spay-neuter.

Which brings us to where we are today. The solution to our current shortage, as I see it, is hobby and large-scale breeding carried out under meticulously applied humane guidelines. Some animal rights groups may insist that this is not possible, but it is — and it's what makes sense. Candace Croney, PhD, has developed rigorous standards for the breeding of pets and pioneered the Canine Care Certified program at Purdue University College of Veterinary Medicine. If everyone played by her book, there wouldn't be an unhealthy pet bred in America.

In fact, breeders of pet dogs can apply the same approach used by the coffee industry 20 years ago, when it began promoting fair trade coffee in response to concerns about environmental and labor conditions in parts of the world that produce coffee beans. Breeding operations that adopt Purdue's Canine Care Certified standards will instill confidence in consumers and activists that the parent dogs and puppies in their care are healthy and well-cared-for.

Eventually breeders of all stripes will have to get on board with humane breeding because consumers will demand it. Small hobby breeders will have to abide by the same rules as large operations. Ideally 4-H groups and land grant universities, with their expertise in animal breeding,

will help support the effort, and community networks will develop around humane breeding. And eventually pet dogs will be accessible again.

The veterinarian's role

The veterinary profession has mostly been on the sidelines in this conversation, not wanting to touch such a politically explosive issue. However, Dr. Croney's work at Purdue has been conducted under the umbrella of academic veterinary science, and veterinarians should support that work. Veterinarians should be leading the cause for humane breeding, not to create jobs for themselves or breeders, but because it's the right thing to do. It's similar to how human medicine promotes child health — not to keep pediatricians busy and successful, but because it's built into the ethic of the profession.

On the other hand, if the shortage continues to drive prices skyward (a goldendoodle in the western U.S. today can sell for around \$4,500), veterinary medicine will become a luxury profession, not an "every man and woman's best friend" profession.

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If nothing else, I think a veterinarian who's associated with this effort might enjoy having an answer for the client who says, "Our dog's 14 and we don't know where we're going to get another. Is there somebody breeding retrievers in the area we could trust?" Right now, it is extremely difficult to answer the question of where to go to get a healthy and humanely bred dog.

Attitudes are changing

These days I'm part of conversations joining animal welfare groups, breeders and industry representative at the same table — people who ordinarily don't get near each other! But they are finally coming to the table. Recently we had one conversation with no goal other than to see if we wouldn't have a fistfight. And we all got along. We are slowly starting to make progress, and we might just figure this out.

There's room for everybody at the table who agrees there's a shortage of dogs and we have an obligation to prevent pets from becoming luxury items available only to the elite. Right now we've got a serious shortage of dogs at a time when millennials can't get enough pets. If we can alleviate the shortage with humane breeding, the benefits and successes of Pet Nation will only grow.

1. "Research offers new estimates for shelter dog population," *JAVMA News*, American Veterinary Medical Association, March 29, 2017.
2. Centers for Disease Control, "Guidance Regarding Agency Interpretation of 'Rabies-Free' as It Relates to the Importation of Dogs into the United States," *Federal Register*, National Archives, January 31, 2019.

