

# Buy and return: improving outcomes for animal shelter dogs

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## Introduction

Traditionally investigations into the welfare and outcomes of dogs surrendered to animal shelters have focused on specific areas where problems have been identified. Recently however there has been a move towards examining the overall processes that lead to a dog being surrendered to a shelter as well as events in shelters and their effects on the dogs and re-homing rates.

## Discussion

The most recent of these studies (Marston and Bennett, 2003) attempts, with limited success, to accomplish this "big picture" approach to the problem. Initially it considers events prior to relinquishment; reasons for people acquiring dogs and relinquish them. Interesting observations here were that relinquishment for aggression problems were not as prevalent as previously recorded (this may be because people were not reporting problems that would be sure to lead to euthanasia of their dog), unrealistic expectations about care were often associated with relinquishment and re-relinquishment, as was lack of participation in formal obedience training. Among its many recommendations this report proposes that obedience classes be provided to people adopting shelter dogs. Unfortunately it overlooks ideas such as offering obedience classes to people who wish to relinquish dogs for such reasons, or strategies designed to help people cope with dogs that are harder work than expected (ie. actions that may prevent dogs being relinquished in the first place).

Events occurring post-relinquishment and pre-adoption (that is admission, processing and time in a shelter) have been the focus of several recent studies on the effects of shelter life on the welfare of dogs and their prospects. One such study (Wells, 2004) examined this issue and, in agreement with other studies, found that at the very least dogs require ongoing social contact with humans and other dogs to maintain adequate psychological well-being. It also found that toys in shelter kennels had little effect on the wellbeing of the dogs, other than to make them more likely to be adopted compared to other dogs without toys in their kennels. In particular it identified training as an excellent form of social contact, one that presumably would also have benefits when dogs are adopted by new owners. Unsurprisingly it also found that group housing of dogs increased their welfare considerably, though this is rare in shelters for reasons related to health, practicality and because many shelters are often simply old structures that are not designed for group housing.

The article by Marston & Bennett (2003) largely reflects this, though with the addition of a discussion about how dogs are selected for re-homing rather than euthanasia. It reports that most shelters have few mechanisms for accurately recording the reasons for relinquishment. Generally, decisions on selection are made by shelter staff based on animals' superficial appearance and behaviour. In some shelters basic temperament tests are carried out. A powerful tool however would be a test that can be administered to relinquishers to discover temperament characteristics and behaviour problems in dog. The test would need to be reliable despite people attempting to skew answers to produce a favourable outcome for the dog they are giving up. This is based on the assumption, supported in the literature (Wells and Hepper, 2000), that people do not always give honest reasons for relinquishment (such as aggression) if the real reason may result in an adverse outcome for their pet (eg. euthanasia).

To help determine what behaviour problems an animal entering a shelter might display Hsu & Serpell (2003) by way of factor analyses produced a 68 item questionnaire to screen dogs for behaviour problems. Their method is based on attempting to measure dogs' responses to common situations in their environments rather than specifically attempting to detect certain "behaviour problems". Then measuring if scores on groupings of questions correlated with

diagnoses of "behaviour problems" as defined by behaviouralists. As with many such studies though there is only a little exploration of what effects owner biases or age of animals has on test scores. A relatively comprehensive discussion though explains how groups of questions (for example relating to "owner-directed aggression" were appropriately linked up with "behaviour problem" diagnosis. It appears this is a promising avenue, for if animals with behaviour problems can be detected upon entry to a shelter, much can be done in terms of directing treatment, making potential new owners aware of potential problems they may face (and also linking appropriate owners up with appropriate animals). Having said that, there continues to be much debate and contradictory information on the predictive value of temperament tests.

Post-adoption there is also room for improvement of retention of adopted dogs. While only 30% of animals relinquished to shelters are reported as having behaviour problems, the majority (69%) of people who acquire dogs from shelters report their dog as exhibiting behaviour problems (Wells and Hepper, 2000). Of these problems, fearfulness, excessive activity, destructiveness and inappropriate elimination were the most commonly reported problems. Of animals re-relinquished to the shelters studied, over 90% had exhibited problem behaviours as compared to 67% of those which were kept by their owners. The type of behaviour problem exhibited also affected the risk of re-relinquishment with dogs that exhibited aggression towards other dogs, straying tendencies and excessive activity being at increased risk. The study made some errors in attribution, assuming all these behaviours were present before relinquishment. While there is evidence that some problem behaviours were underreported by owners relinquishing their dogs to shelters, little allowance was made for the effect of sheltering on these problems or the development of new problem behaviours. This problem is also canvassed by Marston & Bennett (2003) who echo calls for some sort of behavioural intervention either in the shelter or post-adoption (such as support phone-lines or obedience training).

## Conclusion

The comprehensive approach to looking at the problem of canine relinquishment and adoption has much to offer since it avoids some of the pitfalls of focal studies.

## References

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