



# Shelter

## research

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## Why do cats enter shelters?

by Anne Fawcett



Every shelter aims to reduce the number of cat admissions and euthanasias while also reducing overpopulation in the community. To do this effectively it is crucial to find out why cats are entering the shelter in the first place - and where they are coming from.

That sounds simple, but surprisingly few shelters have access to this information.

Most shelters admit cats from a variety of sources. These include pet cats, stray cats, feral cats and 'semi-owned' cats - that is, cats that receive some degree of care from people, but for whom those people do not claim ownership.

The proportion of cats from each source may vary significantly between different shelters, but this isn't obvious unless admission data are compiled in a consistent fashion that allows for comparison between facilities.

The most effective strategy for controlling feline overpopulation depends on which of the above groups is responsible for the bulk of admissions. If, for example, the majority of feline admissions to a particular shelter consist of feral cats, then the impact of a campaign promoting desexing to cat owners would be limited.

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# Why do cats enter shelters?

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To find out where cats come from, shelters need to implement a system of categorising cats on admission. Although there are no hard-and-fast rules to determine which category a cat not presented to the shelter by its owner fits into, indirect measures such as body condition score, sociability and the presence of injury and/or disease can be useful.

To complicate the issue further, few shelters have access to reliable figures on the number of cats from each group that are rehomed or euthanased. This makes it difficult to be sure how successful population control strategies really are, and whether they need to be tweaked or overhauled to increase success.

## Worldwide Problem

A lack of good data is a problem worldwide. In the United States, many shelters developed their own targeted programs to address feline overpopulation, with little evidence of their effectiveness. Until the mid 1980s, when the American Humane Association (AHA) began collecting national shelter statistics, there was no single agency or department gathering this vital information.

But even the AHA's figures aren't perfect. Many of the figures were extrapolated from data collected in larger shelters. Because larger facilities process a larger number of animals, the total number of animals admitted and euthanased may have been overestimated, giving a false impression that pet overpopulation was getting worse. In fact, a US study found that – for one American city at least – the number of animals euthanased had consistently and dramatically decreased over the past 50 years (Zawistowski et al 1998).

## Reasons for surrendering a pet included

Owner moving house

A landlord not allowing pets

Too many animals in the household already

Cost of pet care

While continued emphasis on desexing companion animals will always be an important component of any effort to control urban pet overpopulation, it is essential for shelters to collect detailed and accurate admission data over a period of time to

develop, implement and manage effective intervention programs.

Fortunately Australian shelters are taking steps to do just that. A team from Monash University captured detailed data on sources of cats admitted to three Victorian shelters over a period of 13 months. The team, part of the Animal Welfare Science Centre, collected data on almost 26,000 feline admissions.

Although it was not possible to ascertain how many of the cats admitted as strays by members of the public were actually owned by the person surrendering the animal, only 21% of total admissions were clearly identified as being owner-surrendered.

## Why people surrender their pets

The reasons for pet cat surrender are many and varied, suggesting that a simple approach may not be effective in reducing this figure. For example, a US study conducted in 1998 (Salman et al 1998) identified a staggering 71 different reasons that owners surrendered pet cats.

The top ten reasons common to both cats and dogs included, the owner moving house, a landlord not allowing pets, too many animals in the household already, cost of pet care, the owner having personal problems and not being able to find homes for littermates. For cats, having someone with a cat allergy in the household, urinating or defaecating indoors and incompatibility with other pets were other commonly cited reasons for surrender.

It is believed that owner expectations and education about cats played a significant role in whether a cat was surrendered.

Of the owners surrendering cats, 58% believed that animals misbehave out of spite, and 14% believed that an animal does not need to be caught in the act of misbehaving to punish it. Just over one fifth of cat owners believed that a female dog or cat should have one litter before being desexed, a belief which probably contributed significantly to the number of puppy and kitten admissions.

The study did find that cats were less likely to be surrendered if the owner had read a book or other educational material about cat behaviour or if the owner had sought veterinary care for their cat.

In contrast, the Monash University team identified that the two most common reasons for surrender of cats to Victorian shelters were “too many cats” (over 36% of surrenders) and a “new child in the family” (almost 22% of surrenders).

Thus while increased general education for owners may reduce feline surrenders to the shelters included in the US study, a more targeted program may be necessary to make an impact in Victoria.

Furthermore, the Victorian research found that up to 80% of cats entering shelters were non-owned or semi-owned.

Because semi-owned cats are typically well fed, reasonably healthy and rarely desexed, their reproductive capacity is extremely high.

Well-meaning casual or semi-owners may believe that they are doing these cats a favour by feeding them, without understanding the true welfare implications of their actions. By maintaining the presence

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of these cats in the community, these casual owners may be contributing to the feline overpopulation problem, and the welfare problems that ensue including reduced lifespan of these animals and increased prevalence of cat fights and disease.

Educating these people about the harsh reality of the life of the cats they support may encourage them to present these cats for desexing, and possibly take the step of adopting them.

### Local Knowledge

The findings of the Victorian study show how important local knowledge is in helping Australian shelters target programs. There are significant differences in the cat populations which affect the relevance of the overseas data.

For example, when compared with US figures, Victorian shelters had a much higher proportion of kitten admissions (over 23% of total cat admissions) and a higher frequency of multiple animal admissions (either colonies of cats, mothers with kittens or multiple kittens). In fact, almost three

quarters of admissions to participating shelters involved multiple animals.

In this study relatively few cats (less than 10% of queens) were feral. In fact, the majority (almost 70% of strays presented by the public and just over 72% of strays presented by animal management officers) were tolerant of or actively sociable with people. This indicates that they had been socialised to humans to some degree at an early age. The huge number of stray admissions suggests that strategies aimed at reducing the number of stray cats would have the greatest impact on shelter admissions.

More than three-quarters of owner-surrendered animals were also highly tolerant of being handled and actively sought attention from people. When it comes to surrenders, behavioural reasons were much less commonly cited in the Victorian study.

The research suggests that reducing the number of cat admissions requires targeted programs. Before such programs can be developed, shelters need to identify the major sources of feline admissions and common reasons for surrender. One suggested approach involves identifying the top three common reasons for admission, and developing strategies to address these. Strategies may involve providing seminars on cat behaviour for new owners or offering incentives for people presenting stray queens to shelters for desexing.

Shelters can expand the reach of these targeted programs by working with other stakeholders such as local councils, community groups and other animal welfare organisations.

Based on the Victorian study, important issues to address include the population of semi-owned cats and the relinquishment of pets because of the arrival of a new child in the family.

In summary, shelters may increase their success in reducing feline admissions by determining the major sources of cat admissions and tailoring education and processing strategies around this. This requires the systematic collection of data specific to the shelter or region.

## Resources

There are already excellent resources for shelters to draw upon, including the Department of Primary Industries hosted “Who’s for Cats?” campaign website [www.whosforcats.com.au](http://www.whosforcats.com.au). The campaign, based on data identifying semi-owned cats as a major contributor to the feline overpopulation problem, educates the community about the consequences of feeding unowned cats. The campaign encourages cat feeders to take ownership of the cat, not only via feeding but also by desexing and identifying the cat. It also recommends that cat feeders unable to do this call the local council to have the cat taken to a pound or shelter.

The website provides extensive information on the feline overpopulation problem, useful tips including how to tell whether a cat is owned, and links to information on cat training.

Another excellent resource is the Victorian DPI’s “We Are Family” website; [www.pets.info.vic.gov.au/wearefamily](http://www.pets.info.vic.gov.au/wearefamily) an online guide on helping children and pets co-exist. The campaign is aimed at addressing the large number of pets, particularly cats, which are relinquished to shelters when a new baby arrives. As many relinquishments are based on inaccurate information, the website aims to provide reliable information to expectant parents and those with young children. It provides information on preparing a pet for the arrival of a child, understanding how dogs and cats may react to children, and reliable information about preventing diseases that children may contract from animals, such as ringworm or toxoplasmosis.

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# Why Cats Get Lost

## and how to find them again.



*Given the strong emotional bonds people experience with their pets, a lost cat can often create great stress and anxiety for their owners.*

In 2005, American researchers Lord et al. investigated how cat owners tried to find their lost cats. She reported the consequent success rates.

### Results Snapshot

**Of the 138 cats lost, 73 cats were recovered**

**The average time to find a cat was five days**

**66% of the cats recovered returned home of their own accord**

**The vast majority (93%) were domestic short or long haired cats.  
Only 7% of stray cats were purebred**

This research uncovered a number of obstacles that potentially hindered the recovery of lost cats and added to wide spread animal management issues. For example:

**People seeing a healthy stray cat in the street generally believe that it belongs to somebody**

**Owners believe that their independently natured felines will turn up in their own good time**

## Ways to Prevent and Assist Lost Cats

While we all can play a key role in the education process, research has revealed a number of ways to prevent cats becoming lost and improve their recovery rate.

**Owners with lost cats that have identification tags are more likely to be contacted by people who find the cat in the street.**

Only 14% of the lost cats wore ID tags.

**Owners should contact animal assistance organisations earlier to report their cat missing.**

Owners waited on average three days before contacting an animal agency.

**Owners concerned with cat collars should consider microchipping.**

Many of the owners in the study reported that their cat did not wear a collar and tag because they believed that the cat could be injured by it or would feel uncomfortable when wearing one (within some states microchipping is a legal requirement).

**Owners of lost cats should use community signage with a photo attached.**

The most successful search method used to locate a cat was posting signs in the neighbourhood.

**Owners should desex their cat.**

Neutered cats were much more likely to be recovered than sexually intact cats.

Cats kept indoors have less opportunity to roam.

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Kate with her dogs Archie and Charlie

## Editorial

Shelter Research is compiled by an editorial committee: Dr Pauleen Bennett (Monash University), Dr Linda Marston (Monash University), Kate Mornement (Monash University), Timothy Adams (Petcare Information and Advisory Service).

This publication is distributed to every major shelter and pound in Australia. Articles in Shelter Research are written to assist the work of shelters, and information contained therein is obtained from international scientific literature and research.

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