

U.S. Public Opinion on Humane Treatment of Stray Cats

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U.S. Public Opinion on Humane Treatment of Stray Cats

Karyen Chu, Ph.D., and Wendy M. Anderson, J.D.¹

An overwhelming majority of Americans believe that leaving a stray cat outside to live out his life is more humane than having him caught and put down, according to a nationally representative survey conducted for Alley Cat Allies by Harris Interactive in April and May 2007. These results reveal a significant disparity between the public's humane ethic and the operating policy of most U.S. animal pounds and shelters.² The current animal control policy is that it is more humane to kill a stray cat now than let him live out his life outdoors; however, this policy rests on untenable bases. While those bases will be discussed in detail below, what is most salient to note is that the so-called humane ethic of the animal control and sheltering system ends more cats' lives than does any other documented cause of death.³

A Policy of Killing Stray Cats Is Not Humane

The Alley Cat Allies survey yielded responses from a nationally representative sample of 1,205 adults.⁴ Among the questions asked were two that explored the general public's views on which would be more humane: leaving a stray cat to live outside or having the stray cat caught and put down.

The first question asked was:

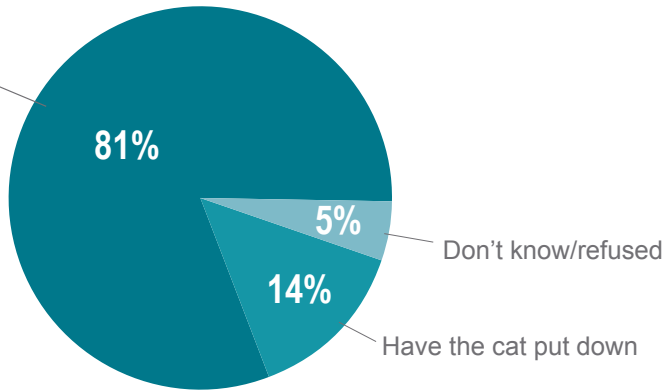
If you saw a stray cat in your community and could only choose between two courses of action—leaving the cat where it is outside or having the cat caught and then put down—which would you consider to be the more humane option for the cat?⁵

The responses, detailed below, reveal that an overwhelming majority of Americans—81%—believe that leaving a stray cat outside to live out his life is more humane than having the cat caught and killed.

Respondents were then asked a follow-up question to find out whether their views would change if they knew that the cat would die in two years from being hit by a car. Respondents were specifically asked:

If you knew that the stray cat you saw would die in two years because it would be hit by a car, which would you consider to be the most humane option today?

Leave the cat where it is

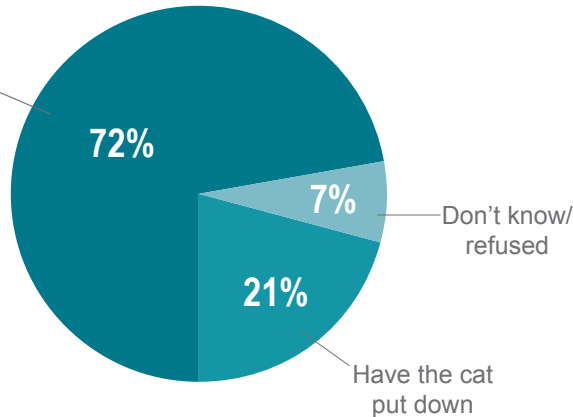


If you saw a stray cat in your community and could only choose between two courses of action—leaving the cat where it is outside or having the cat caught and then put down—which would you consider to be the more humane option for the cat?

Even when asked to assume that the stray cat would die traumatically in two years' time, most Americans continue to believe that it is most humane to leave the stray cat outside to live out those two years of his life. By a 72% to 21% margin, Americans believe that it is more humane to let the stray cat live outside than to kill the cat now, even assuming he will suffer a painful death in two years.

By contrast, it is the operating policy of the animal control and sheltering

Leave the cat where it is and let it live two years before dying



If you knew that the stray cat you saw would die in two years because it would be hit by a car, which would you consider the most humane option today?

system—which makes the actual decisions about when to kill stray animals—that it is most humane to kill stray cats in the present to preclude the possibility that the cats may suffer “bad” deaths sometime in the future. In the words of one national animal organization, “we do believe that humane euthanasia of homeless companion animals is preferable to the . . . slow, painful deaths they face when they must fend for themselves outdoors.”⁶ As a result of this policy, 70–73% of cats entering animal pounds and shelters in the United States are killed, according to the most comprehensive research to date.⁷ In fact, “euthanasia” at animal pounds and shelters is the single greatest documented cause of cat mortality in this country.⁸

The Alley Cat Allies survey reveals that most Americans do not agree: even assuming a bad death will occur in two years, Americans nevertheless think it is more humane to allow a stray cat to live out his natural life. In other words, even a certain “bad” death does not justify killing a cat and depriving him of two years of life.

Scientific Research Indicates that Stray Cats Lead Good Lives

Apart from the quality-of-death issue, the animal control and sheltering system also claims that stray cats suffer “harsh lives.” The basis of this claim is anecdotal. One national animal group asserts that in its experience with feral cats, “Highly contagious diseases are common, as are infected puncture wounds, broken bones, urinary tract infections, brain damage, internal injuries, attacks by other animals or cruel humans, automobile accidents, and terrible living conditions like freezing or stifling temperatures, scrounging for food, and being considered a ‘nuisance.’”⁹ Although such anecdotes are horrendous, they do not provide a rational basis to conclude that stray cats should be killed.

Indeed, a number of scientific studies provide a statistical reality markedly at

odds with the anecdotes that “prove” stray cats live harsh lives. For example, a 2006 study found that of 103,643 stray and feral cats examined in spay/neuter clinics in six states from 1993 to 2004, less than 1% of those cats was euthanized due to debilitating conditions, trauma, or infectious diseases.¹⁰ A smaller study conducted in 2002 examined the body weight, body condition score, and falciform fat pads of 105 mature male cats brought to a spay/neuter clinic in Alachua County, Florida. The study revealed that “[o]verall, the cats in this study were lean but not emaciated prior to neutering.”¹¹ A study examining the infectious disease rates of feral cats in Northern Florida found that “feral cats assessed in this study had similar or lower prevalence rates of infections than those published for pet cats in the United States.”¹²

While the anecdotal evidence of stray cats’ harsh lives offered by the animal control and sheltering system is true in certain individual cases, single anecdotes should not be extrapolated to a policy of killing all stray cats. This is especially true in light of the finding that most Americans believe it is more humane to leave a stray cat where he is rather than catch him and put him down, even assuming the cat will later suffer a traumatic death.

An 8,000-to-10,000-Year-Old Species Cannot Be Redefined as “Indoors Only”

The animal control and sheltering system erroneously paints cats as a species that belongs only indoors and in human households; it then cites the lack of such



homes as another reason that “euthanizing” stray cats promotes the animals’ best interests. Implicit in this assertion is another unexamined and erroneous assumption: namely, that all domestic species are totally dependent on humans for their well-being. This notion of dependency may be true for some species, but it is not true for the domestic cat, *Felis catus*. In fact, “nearly all domestic cats can . . . survive and even flourish on their own if

In other words, unlike species domesticated for agriculture (e.g., cows) or transport (e.g., horses) cats co-occurred with modern humans.¹⁹

The notion that cats belong only indoors or as “owned” pets is contrary to the natural history of the *Felis catus* species, a species that has flourished outdoors for 8,000 to 10,000 years. Setting a standard of well-being for the species based on the life of

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they shift their core area or home base to a farm, a derelict building, or even land that is uninhabited by people.”¹³

This ability to adapt and re-adapt is a central characteristic of this species. The July 2007 issue of *Scientific American* explains the most up-to-date research on the evolution of cats:¹⁴ “We now believe that the cat was domesticated on several occasions, all within the Fertile Crescent 8,000 to 10,000 years ago.”¹⁵ When “nomadic human populations began to gather in small villages around the first agricultural settlements,” the result was “the birth of human and feline civilizations.”¹⁶ The development of human agriculture led to grain stores, which in turn led to plentiful rodent populations. Attracted to those populations, wildcats began to live in proximity to humans and became increasingly socialized to humans. As the scientists summarized, these cats “linked their fortunes to those of humans.”¹⁷ They migrated with humans across the globe, and today the estimated population of domestic cats is 600 million worldwide.¹⁸

an indoor cat ignores the true habitat and natural history of the species.²⁰ The animal control and sheltering system which claims that cats are better off being killed than allowed to live outdoors ignores history and also acts in direct opposition to the beliefs of the general public about what is humane treatment of animals.

Concluding Remarks²¹

Alley Cat Allies’ national survey reveals that the animal control and sheltering system, which promotes “euthanasia” of stray cats as being in the cats’ best interests, is at odds with the humane values of most Americans. Existing scientific research does not support the system’s additional rationale for killing. These findings serve as a call to substantially reform the operating policies of the nation’s animal control and sheltering system.

About the Survey

Methodology

Harris Interactive® conducted the study by telephone within the contiguous United States between April 24 and May 14, 2007, among 1,205 adults. The sample included an oversample of 202 women ages 40 or older because this is an important constituency for Alley Cat Allies. Figures for age, sex, race, education, household income, number of adults in the household, and region were weighted for the entire sample where necessary to bring them into line with their actual proportions in the population. As such, all data included in this report reflect the weighted percentages.

All surveys are subject to several sources of error. These include: sampling error (because only a sample of a population is interviewed), measurement error due to question wording and/or question order, deliberately or unintentionally inaccurate responses, nonresponse (including refusals), interviewer effects (when live interviewers are used—as in this survey), and weighting.

With one exception (sampling error) the magnitude of the errors that result cannot be estimated. There is, therefore, no way to calculate a finite “margin of error” for any survey, and the use of this phrase should be avoided.

For this survey with pure probability samples, with 100% response rates, it is possible to calculate the probability that the sampling

error (but not other sources of error) is not greater than some number. With a pure probability sample of 1,205 adults, one could say there is a 95% probability that the overall results have a sampling error of \pm three percentage points. However, that does not take other sources of error into account.

About Harris Interactive®

Harris Interactive is the 12th largest and fastest-growing market research firm in the world. The company provides research-driven insights and strategic advice to help its clients make more confident decisions that lead to measurable and enduring improvements in performance. Harris Interactive is widely known for ‘The Harris Poll’, one of the longest-running independent opinion polls, and for pioneering online market research methods. The company has built what it believes to be the world’s largest panel of survey respondents, the Harris Poll Online. Harris Interactive serves clients worldwide through its United States, Europe, and Asia offices; its wholly-owned subsidiary Novatris in France; and a global network of independent market research firms. The service bureau, HISB, provides its market research industry clients with mixed-mode data collection and panel development services, as well as syndicated and tracking research consultation. More information about Harris Interactive may be obtained at www.harrisinteractive.com.

Endnotes

- 1 Karyen Chu, an economist, sits on the Board of Directors of Alley Cat Allies, Inc., and Wendy M. Anderson serves as the corporation's Director of Law & Policy. Alley Cat Allies, Inc., is a corporation, exempt from taxation under section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code, for the purpose of preventing cruelty to animals and educating the public to advance animal welfare. The views expressed do not necessarily represent the views of Dr. Chu's employer, the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation.
- 2 At least 5,000 animal control pounds and shelters operate in the United States. See The National Council on Pet Population Study & Policy, *The Shelter Statistics Survey, 1994–97*, <http://www.petpopulation.org/statsurvey.html> (last visited Feb. 11, 2009). The National Council on Pet Population Study & Policy identified 5,042 facilities between 1994 and 1997; the actual number of facilities may be higher. These facilities operate independently. A number of national nonprofits seek to provide guidance and resources to these facilities; both the facilities and these national nonprofits will be referred to collectively here as the "animal control and sheltering system."
- 3 See analysis and citations on page 2.
- 4 As is customary, figures for age, sex, race, education, household income, number of adults in the household, and region were weighted for the entire sample where necessary to bring them into line with their actual proportions in the population. For details on the survey methodology, see page 5.
- 5 The survey conducted by Harris Interactive referred to an individual cat as "it." Alley Cat Allies recognizes cats as gendered animals and, with the exception of the verbatim questions from the poll, will refer to an individual cat as "he."
- 6 See The Humane Society of the United States, *Common Questions About Animal Shelters and Animal Control*, http://www.hsus.org/pets/animal_shelters/common_questions_about_animal_shelters_and_animal_control.html (last visited Feb. 11, 2009); see also *People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, Euthanasia: The Compassionate Option*, <http://www.helpinganimals.com/Factsheet/files/FactsheetDisplay.asp?ID=39> (last visited Feb. 11, 2009).
- 7 See The National Council on Pet Population Study & Policy, *The Shelter Statistics Survey, 1994–97*, <http://www.petpopulation.org/statsurvey.html> (last visited Feb. 11, 2009).
- 8 *Id.* See also Gary J. Patronek et al., *Risk Factors for Relinquishment of Cats to an Animal Shelter*, 209(3) *J. Am. Vet. Med. Assoc.* 582, 582 (1996).
- 9 See *People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, Trap, Neuter, Return, and Monitor Programs for Feral Cats: Doing It Right*, <http://www.helpinganimals.com/factsheet/files/FactsheetDisplay.asp?ID=120> (last visited Feb. 11, 2009); see also *The Humane Society of the United States, Common Questions About Animal Shelters and Animal Control*, http://www.hsus.org/pets/animal_shelters/common_questions_about_animal_shelters_and_animal_control.html (last visited Feb. 11, 2009).
- 10 See Jennifer L. Wallace and Julie K. Levy, *Population Characteristics of Feral Cats Admitted to Seven Trap-Neuter-Return Programs in the United States*, 8(4) *J. Feline Med. Surg.* 279, 282 (2006).
- 11 See Karen C. Scott et al., *Body Condition of Feral Cats and the Effect of Neutering*, 5(3) *J. Appl. Anim. Welf. Sci.* 203, 210 (2002).
- 12 See Brian J. Luria et al., *Prevalence of Infectious Diseases in Feral Cats in Northern Florida*, 6(5) *J. Feline Med. Surg.* 287, 287 (2004); see also Irene T. Lee et al., *Prevalence of Feline Leukemia Virus Infection and Serum Antibodies Against Feline Immunodeficiency Virus in Unowned Free-Roaming Cats*, 220(5) *J. Am. Vet. Med. Assoc.* 620, 620 (2002). This study of 733 unowned, free-roaming cats in Raleigh, North Carolina, and 1,143 in Gainesville, Florida, concluded that the "[p]revalence of FeLV infection and seroprevalence for FIV . . . are similar to prevalence rates reported for owned cats in the United States."
- 13 Juliet Clutton-Brock, *A Natural History of Domesticated Mammals*, 131 (2d ed. 1999).
- 14 Stephen J. O'Brien and Warren E. Johnson, *The Evolution of Cats*, *Scientific American* 74, 68–75 (July 2007); see also Carlos A. Driscoll et al., *The Near Eastern Origin of Cat Domestication*, *Scienceexpress* 519-523 (July 2007).
- 15 Stephen J. O'Brien and Warren E. Johnson, *The Evolution of Cats*, *Scientific American* 74, 68–75 (July 2007).
- 16 *Id.* at 75.
- 17 *Id.*
- 18 *Id.*
- 19 See Carlos A. Driscoll et al., *The Near Eastern Origin of Cat Domestication*, *Scienceexpress* 519–523 (July 2007).
- 20 Scientists who use cats in research recognize that a human home is not a cat's "natural" habitat and should not be the standard for assessing cat welfare; rather, when considering species-standard behavior, scientists are encouraged to look for behaviors seen in outdoor cats: "Assessments [of cat behavior] should look for . . . a behavioral repertoire which more closely resembles that of free-ranging cats" (UK Cat Behavior Working Group 1995). Sandra McCune, "Enriching the Environment of the Laboratory Cat," in *Environmental Enrichment Information Resources for Laboratory Animals: 1965–1995: Birds, Cats, Dogs, Farm Animals, Ferrets, Rabbits, and Rodents* (C.P. Smith and V. Taylor eds., 1995), available at <http://www.nal.usda.gov/awic/pubs/enrich/labcat.htm> (last visited Feb. 11, 2009).
- 21 It bears noting that Alley Cat Allies' questions addressed stray cats only, not cats generally; the responses are not evidence that most Americans believe it is acceptable to abandon a pet cat or to allow an indoor-only pet to roam outdoors. Neither the survey results nor the commentary here should be read to suggest otherwise.



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