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## The Problem of Urban Dogs

A dog is a protector, a playmate, and, for many, a shield against isolation. Dogs exercise a therapeutic effect not only on many emotionally disturbed people, but also on ordinary neurotics like you and me. But some facts about our urban dog population are cause for concern.

There are about 40 million owned dogs; 46 percent of all American households have at least one dog. Our most serious urban dog problems are *unwanted* pets that owners acquire and then find no longer satisfactory and *uncontrolled* pets that owners allow to roam free. Thus, since canine overpopulation per se is not the real issue, low-cost spay programs are irrelevant to solving our urban dog problems—except for the indigent or impoverished pet owner. The most terrible aspect of our pet population is the free-roaming dog. The costs of capturing and killing these dogs, plus the costs of leash law enforcement, animal shelter services, and other related public and private activities, come to about \$450 million annually. And the mere dollars-and-cents costs are only secondary.

Free-roaming dogs are a serious problem in almost every American community. Some of these dogs are owned, and some are feral (domestic animal gone wild). Their numbers depend partly on the size of the owned dog population, but primarily on dog owners' attitudes toward confinement and breeding of their pets. Free-roaming dogs constitute an ecological and public health menace by (i) spreading disease, (ii) biting, (iii) causing road accidents, (iv) creating nuisances and pollution, (v) causing property damage, and (vi) destroying livestock and wildlife.

More than 40 diseases in the United States can be transmitted from dogs to man. Among the better known are rabies, roundworms, hookworms, tapeworms, ringworm, and fleas. Besides this public health threat, free-roaming dogs also transmit disease to other dogs.

Bites are the major cause of pet-related human casualties. More than 1 million dog bites are reported annually—about one bite per 170 people—and at least as many bites go unreported. About 60 percent of dog bites are in children younger than 16 (41 percent in children younger than 11). And there are increasing reports of a new menace—the free-roaming dog pack. In addition, a growing preference for larger dogs means more severe bites.

Pet fecal littering on public and private property is unesthetic and a nuisance as well as a public health hazard. For example, the 500,000 owned dogs in New York City deposit about 150,000 pounds of feces and 90,000 gallons of urine each day on the streets. The raiding of garbage cans impedes efficient refuse collection and encourages rats. Are canine excrement and excessive barking any less polluting than chemicals or jet plane noise?

There are several dozen ways to cope with the problem of free-roaming dogs. Which measures are to be applied—and by whom and at whose expense—are questions best answered by each community according to its circumstances. But only through a multifaceted attack will relief be found. Such an endeavor must include at least three things: public education, leash law enforcement, and canine birth control. And these efforts must focus on one ultimate goal: reducing the number of "casual" owners—those unwilling or unable to provide appropriate care and restraint or confinement of their dogs.

The traditional American view of the pet dog as a benign companion is undergoing a change. Dogs are posing a threat to neighbors and to general community welfare. Dog owners had better "get it together." They must cease being irresponsible, inconsiderate, and inhumane toward their pets and fellow citizens.—BRUCE MAX FELDMANN, *Director, Pet Clinic, University of California, Berkeley 94720*