

## CHAPTER 1

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# TOO MANY DOGS AND NOT ENOUGH HOMES

In 2001, more than 55 percent of all American homes had at least one dog or cat, with a total of more than 60 million pet dogs in the United States, according to the Pet Food Institute. This group's report has been called the census of pet populations in the United States, and has tracked an increase in pet ownership over the past 20 years; in 1981, there were 54 million dogs in this country. This increase of six million dogs over two decades is somewhat deceiving, however, because it measures neither the number of dogs who have lost their homes, nor those who have been put to death because they had no homes.

## RELINQUISHED DOGS

Although actual numbers vary from survey to survey, most experts agree that each year at least 25 percent of all dog-owning households will give up a dog. Dogs are given up for a variety of reasons; here are some of the more common ones:

- Moving, didn't want to take dog
- Moving to a place where dogs were not allowed
- Military owner transferred overseas
- Divorce
- No time for the dog
- Owner was ill or passed away
- Dog was found as a stray
- Family member brought home an unwanted dog

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- Family member had allergies
- Couldn't afford the dog (including vet care)
- Didn't have a fenced yard
- Dog was an unwanted gift
- New baby in house; dog not trusted

As you can see, the dogs involved didn't cause any of these problems, yet they were the ones who lost their homes.

Unfortunately, not everyone is as committed to their dog as we would like them to be. But sadly, these are not the only reasons that dogs are given up. Many dogs are also given up due to what we call behavior problems. Here are the most common:

- Dog has bitten people
- Dog is aggressive to other dogs or other animals
- Neighbors complain of barking
- Dog is a destructive chewer
- Dog digs
- Dog jumps on people
- Owner is afraid of the dog

Again, the dogs are not to blame. All of these actions are natural behaviors for dogs. Granted, we may not like it when dogs bite, but it is their means of asserting themselves and the dogs do not understand why biting is a problem. It is our responsibility as dog owners to teach our dogs whether specific behaviors are acceptable, and if so, when. Obviously many people do not understand this, do not know how to control these behaviors or do not want to be bothered to teach their dog acceptable conduct.

Other reasons that dogs are given up are simply very, very sad:

- Owner bred their bitch, kept a puppy and got rid of the mother
- Dog didn't make it as a working dog and is no longer wanted
- Dog didn't make it as a show dog and is no longer wanted
- Stud dog is not breeding quality
- Owner is no longer showing or competing with the dog

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Sometimes the owner just didn't understand dog ownership:

- Dog needed exercise
- Dog needed grooming
- Dog shed too much
- Dog needed training
- Dog had fleas

Regardless of the reason, millions of dogs are given up by their owners each year. Sometimes the circumstances are tragic; for example, when owners must give up their dogs because they need to move into a care facility where dogs are not allowed. Other times, dogs are given up because the owners were unprepared for the demands of dog ownership or because they chose a breed that wasn't right for them. Other times the reason seems frivolous. After all, most dog owners would agree that dogs need training, exercise and grooming.

### WHEN DOGS ARE GIVEN UP

When giving up a dog, some owners act responsibly and work to find the dog a new home. Some spread the word among friends and co-workers, put an advertisement in the newspaper and screen new owners.

A great number of dogs given up by their owners are relinquished to shelters, pounds or humane societies. A decade ago, a dog given to a shelter would have probably been put to death within just a few days if

#### PUREBREDS AND MIXED BREEDS

Unfortunately, the supply of dogs exceeds the demand. There are not enough homes for all the puppies born. Although much of the blame for this excess has been laid at the feet of purebred dog breeders, they cannot assume all of the responsibility. Fully 50 percent of the puppies born are from accidental breedings, and most of them are mixed breed puppies. The other half are purebred puppies, of which only about 30 percent are or will be registered with the American Kennel Club or one of the other purebred dog registries.

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he was not adopted. At that time, only 25 percent of dogs relinquished by their owners were adopted into new homes, but today the figure has increased dramatically. In many shelters, as many as 60 to 75 percent of all owner-relinquished dogs are adopted. That means, however, that 25 to 40 percent of the dogs are still being killed.

Some shelters (many self-described as “no kill”) claim to have a 100 percent adoption rate. Although a 100 percent adoption rate is an awesome accomplishment, this figure can be deceptive. Some “no kill” shelters will not accept just any dog, and screen all dogs for temperament and health. Only those dogs who are adoptable (mentally and physically healthy with a reasonable chance of adjusting well in a new home) are accepted into their adoption program. While this is wonderful for those dogs accepted into the program, it leaves many dogs out who still need homes. Other shelters will accept all dogs, but their “no kill” rates do not include unadoptable dogs; only those considered adoptable. In other words, the fine print may (or should) read, “100 percent adoption rate for adoptable dogs.”

Not all dogs given up by their owners are lucky enough to go to a new home or a shelter. Some dogs are turned loose to run as strays. A few lucky strays will be caught by animal control and brought to a shelter; the others will die of exposure, starvation, predators or will be casualties of collisions with vehicles.

### CHANGING THESE STATISTICS

There is, obviously, no easy way to keep all dogs in their original home for their lifetime. As the adage says, “Stuff happens!” However, dogs do deserve a stable, caring home, and providing them with homes is undoubtedly the goal of all who love them.

Veterinary epidemiologist Philip Kass wanted to learn why so many dogs were given up by their owners and was a leader of the National Shelter Study. From April 1995 through April 1996, Kass and his co-investigators’ goal was to uncover as much as possible about animals who are relinquished to shelters and the owners who bring them in. Kass found that the vast majority of people who gave up their pets were younger, less wealthy and less educated than the people who kept their pets. Many seemed to have little understanding of the requirements for successful pet ownership. They were uninformed of the importance of vaccinations, spaying, neutering and training.

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*Unfortunately, there are too many dogs and not enough homes for them.*

Humane education of children in schools and communities has the potential to help change these statistics significantly. Children follow the lead of their parents, and if their parents are uneducated dog owners, then they will grow up with the same poor attitudes and expectations. However, if children learn what dogs are, how to care for them and why dogs act as they do, they are more likely to mature into responsible adult dog owners.

Adult education programs are a way of providing the same information to adults. Classes for potential and new dog owners may inform people about various dog breeds, dog behavior, obedience training, problem behavior and prevention, spaying and neutering and other aspects of dog care. Low-cost spay and neuter clinics and low-cost vaccination clinics have been proven to attract many people in communities across the country. Because clients often wait in line for services, educational programs being presented in the clinics could both entertain and educate pet owners while they wait.

Pet professionals need to work together, too, to promote responsible pet ownership. The pet community could sponsor seminars or have “dog days at the park” where professionals could share information. Veterinarians, animal control officials, dog club members, groomers and trainers could all participate.

Many shelters and humane societies today spay and neuter dogs prior to adoption, thereby removing those dogs from the future breeding pool. Breeders can do the same thing by having any non-show-quality puppies spayed or neutered before their sale. Admittedly, doing so would add to the breeders’ costs, but the benefits to purebred dogs would be of great significance. Many purebred dog owners breed their dog because “there are champions in his pedigree” or because “I paid

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big money for this dog, I want to get my money back!” Poorly planned breedings obviously lead to more purebred dogs needing help in the future.

### THE NEED FOR RESCUE

Until the number of dogs needing new homes declines dramatically, there will be a need for people to help find homes for dogs. There are, thankfully, many kindhearted, caring people who volunteer their time every week to help all dogs; mixed breeds and purebreds. And purebreds do need help, too. Although many people think only mixed breed dogs end up in shelters, that’s not true. Take a walk through any shelter and you will see all types of purebred dogs side-by-side with mixed breeds.

About 20 years ago, the purebred dog rescue movement began when dog lovers realized that purebred dogs were facing the same problems as mixed breeds and dying at horrific rates in shelters. Concerned individuals, often breed club members, joined forces and formed groups to take in homeless dogs of their breed and find those dogs new homes. Thus, purebred dog rescue was born.

Purebred dog rescue is generally defined as the movement to find and care for purebred dogs in need, saving as many as possible from death, and placing those dogs in responsible, permanent homes. Rescue groups are working all over the world, and range in size from one-person operations that save one dog at a time to vast organizations run by, supported by or assisted by national breed clubs.

Because there is no governing agency for these groups, there are no concrete figures on how many dogs are saved each year. However, each group keeps its own records and the numbers can be staggering. For example, one Southern California Labrador Retriever rescue group saved and placed more than 350 Labs in one year alone. Multiply that number by all of the groups working across the country, and by all of the breeds needing help, and the totals could be astounding!