# Characteristics of cat hoarders and ways forward for better management

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# Reference

- R Elliott, J Snowdon, G Halliday, GE Hunt and S Coleman, Characteristics of animal hoarding cases referred to the RSPCA in NSW, Australia. AVJ 97 (5), May 2019.

# What is animal hoarding?

"the accumulation of a large number of animals and failure to provide minimal standards of nutrition, sanitation and veterinary care. Further, the owner fails to act on the deteriorating condition of the animals and environment."

Patronek (1999)

Image: Animal Rescue League of Iowa

# What is animal hoarding?

- Hoarding of Animals Research Consortium (HARC) (2011):

1. Having more than the typical number of companion animals
2. Failing to provide even minimal standards of nutrition, sanitation, shelter and veterinary care, with this neglect often resulting in illness and death from starvation, spread of infectious disease and untreated injury or medical conditions
3. Denial of the inability to provide this minimum care and the impact of that failure on the animals, the household and human occupants of the dwelling
4. Persistence, despite the failure, in accumulating and controlling animals.

# What is animal hoarding?

'Animal hoarding' describes the behaviour of persons who accumulate and persistently retain more animals than they have the capacity or will to look after appropriately, and who do not fulfil an acceptable duty of care towards those animals

# Why animal hoarding is a problem

- Exacerbation of companion animal overpopulation

- Human suffering

- Burden on animal and human services

- High level of recidivism

- Public health implications

- Impact on community

- Detrimental impact on animal welfare

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KWdhlC6Tvck

# Why do people hoard animals?

- Exploiters:
  - Actively acquire/breed for their own gratification (financial/control)
  - Fail to look after them properly, act cruelly, sociopathic collecting
  - Happy to dispose of animals if given sufficient incentive
- Overwhelmed:
  - By excessive animal reproduction or some change in their lives
  - Accumulate animals passively
  - Some recognition of their inability to cope; the most likely to relinquish animals or accept help
- Rescuers:
  - Highly resistant to surrendering their animals
  - Actively collect from any source possible on a mission to 'save' them all; may be involved in rescue organisations

# Is this a mental health problem?

- Hoarding disorder
- Depression
- Personality disorders
- Brain changes (frontal lobe) due to:
  - Dementia
  - Schizophrenia
  - Alcoholism

- Attachment disorders due to chaotic, neglectful or abusive childhoods

# Aims of our study

- Describe the range and characteristics of 'animal hoarding' cases referred to RSPCA NSW

- Examine factors relevant to the development of animal hoarding, particularly mental health problems

- Pilot study for a more detailed and ambitious study investigating the prevalence of mental disorder, psychological disorder or cognitive impairment in animal hoarders

# Methodology

- Descriptive retrospective study, using de-identified data sheets completed by inspectors on all cases of animal hoarding referred to RSPCA NSW from 2013 to 2015

- Standardised ratings:

    - Environmental Cleanliness and Clutter Scale (ECCS, Halliday and Snowdon, 2009) to rate living conditions of human dwelling
    - Tufts Animal Care and Condition (TACC) Environmental Health Scale (Patronek, 1997) to rate animals' living conditions

- Cases identified by Chief Inspector
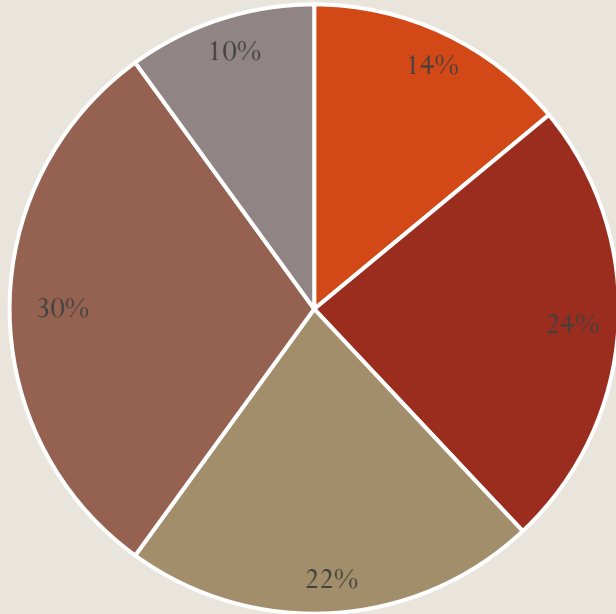
# Variables examined

- Owner:

  - Demographic (sex, employment, age, income benefits, marital status, living arrangements)
  - Category of animal hoarder
  - Contributing factors (mental health, physical disability, drugs/alcohol)
  - Animals bred or traded as source of income
  - Association with animal rescue networks or human agencies

- Dwelling/animal housing details
- Animal details (source, species, number)
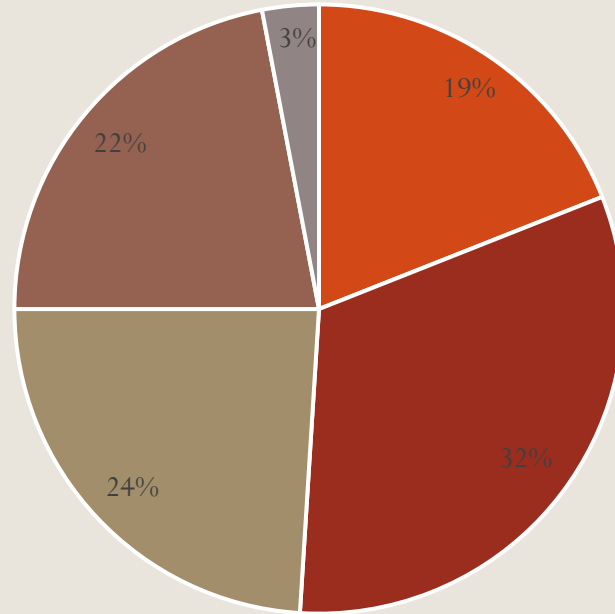
# Owner demographics

- Sample of 48 referred cases (50 owners)

- 78% female (84% for cat hoarders)

- 63% 50 years of age or above (54%)

- 44% single (57%) and 40% (46%) lived alone

- 44% unemployed or retired (51%)

- 34% on income benefits (41%):

  - 18% of sample on Disability Pension (22%)

  - 12% of sample on unemployment benefits (14%)

# Category of animal hoarding

## Entire sample

- Incipient 14%
- Overwhelmed 24%
- Rescuers 22%
- Breeders 30%
- Exploiters 10%

## Cat hoarders

- Incipient 19%
- Overwhelmed 32%
- Rescuers 24%
- Breeders 22%
- Exploiters 3%

# Trading of animals or involvement with rescue/carer networks

## Entire sample

- Animals bred/traded as source of income: 39%

- Owner associated with rescue/carer networks: 24%

## Owners who hoarded cats

- Animals bred/traded as source of income: 24%

- Owner associated with rescue/carer networks: 24%

# Contributing factors and services involved

- Contributing factors to animal hoarding:
  - Mental health 52% (60% cat hoarders)
  - Drugs/alcohol 13% (14%)
  - Physical disability 11% (14%)

- Human agencies involved with POI in 56% (54%) of cases:

  - Council                                        30% (19%)
  - Mental health &/or social services 30%
  - Police                                         16% (11%)
  - Housing Dept                                   10% (14%)

# Human dwellings

- Type of dwelling: 56% (62%) house, 27% (16%) rural, 13% (16%) unit
- Inspector saw inside 69% (78%) of dwellings
- ECCS median13 (17) (mean of 17.6, range 2 to 30) indicates severe domestic squalor
- Severe domestic squalor in 51% of dwellings and moderate squalor in 21%
- Moderate to severe accumulation of refuse or garbage in 66% (54%)
- Moderate to severe hoarding (excessive accumulation of items of little value) in 66% (58%)
- 38% (41%)acknowledged animal hoarding/squalor as a problem

# Animal details

- Mean number of animals per property:

  - 53 (range 6 to 300, median 35)
  - Mean number of cats: 36.9 (range 1-150)
  - Mean number of dogs: 40.8 (range 1-300)

- Species hoarded by property: cats (75%), dogs (52%)
- Single species hoarding most common (50% of properties), 2 species (29%) and multiple (3-5) species on 21%

# Acquisition of animals

- Animals acquired by:

  - ➤ Unplanned breeding:        60% (65%)
  - ➤ Collecting strays:        38% (43%)
  - ➤ General public:        32% (35%)
  - ➤ Planned breeding:        28% (16%)
  - ➤ 'Other' sources:        23% (24%)
  - ➤ Rescue networks:        19% (19%)
  - ➤ Pounds:        9% (11%)
  - ➤ Purchasing:        6% (5%)
  - ➤ Internet/ads:        2% (3%)

  Animals acquired by single method on 38% of properties and 2 or more ways on 62%

# Animal Housing

| Animal housing | Percentage of dwellings | Living conditions very unsanitary or filthy for animals |
|---|---|---|
| House | 67% (76%) | 66% (54%) |
| Yard | 52% (51%) | 42% (22%) |
| Cage | 35% | 77% (30%) |
| Other | 35% | 63% |
| Garage | 17% (23%) | 50% (11%) |
| Kennels | 15% (8%) | 14% (3%) |
| Pens | 15% (8%) | 29% (3%) |
| Shed | 13% (3%) | 17% (0%) |
| Aviaries | 10% (8%) | 80% (5%) |

# Characteristics of cat hoarders

- Female, ≥50 years of age, single, almost half living alone
- Unemployed or retired and 41% on income benefits
- 56% were overwhelmed caregivers or rescuers, 19% incipient hoarders and 25% exploiting animals (22% breeders, 3% 'exploiters')
- 24% traded cats for income
- 24% were involved with rescue networks
- Mental health problems contributing
- Majority lived in severe domestic squalor
- Acquired cats through unplanned breeding, collecting strays, the general public, 'other' sources and rescue networks
- Cats were more likely to be kept freely in the house, but were also kept in the yard, in cages or 'other' locations

# Vulnerability factors for cats

- Reproductive capacity

- Outdoor living

- Adaptation to semi- owned or unowned state

- Relatively quiet compared to dogs

- Easy to obtain due to high number of cats needing adoption

- Plethora of rescue groups without regulatory oversight

# Implications for best practice cat care

- Need for a nationally consistent approach to best practice cat management, including:
  - ❖ Breeder licensing system and breeding limits
  - ❖ Restrictions on the number of domestic cats who can be kept
  - ❖ Mandatory identification of cats
  - ❖ Community education and legislation to support secure 24-hour containment of cats
  - ❖ Mandatory desexing, low-cost desexing programs and promotion by vets of pre-pubertal desexing
  - ❖ Regulation of animal rescue/carer networks

# Adopting a One Welfare approach

- Ongoing support, mental health assessment and treatment of hoarders

- Collaboration between animal welfare organisations, mental health services, charities and councils to identify cases early and offer interventions

- Training and support for veterinarians to identify animal hoarding, offer education and support to owners and report to the relevant inspectorate if this fails

# Novel interventions

- Hill K et al (2019), A novel approach to welfare interventions in problem multi-cat households. BMC Veterinary Research, 15.434.
  - ❖ Pre-pubertal desexing
  - ❖ Home-based education and support
  - ❖ Improved welfare scores
  - ❖ Voluntary relinquishment
- Applicable to multi-cat households, semi-owned cats and veterinary clients struggling to provide adequate care
- Who will take responsibility?
- Establishing animal hoarding taskforces, including veterinarians
- Partnerships between local councils and reputable animal welfare/rescue groups

# Questions for discussion

Image: Needpix.com