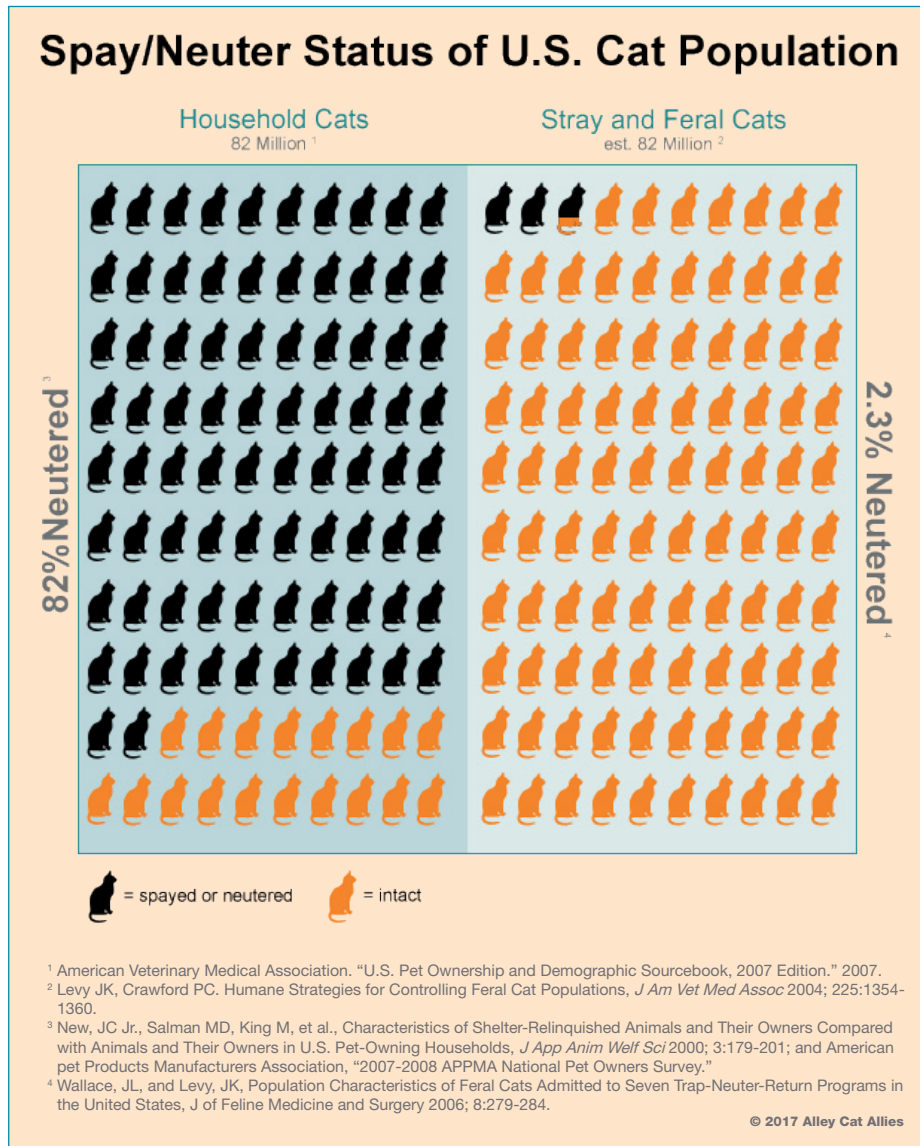


Missing the Target:

Mandatory Spay/Neuter Legislation Fails to Reach Most Intact Cats

Spay/Neuter Facts



Most people agree that increasing the spay/neuter rate of cats in the United States is a worthy goal, and a growing number of communities are considering legislation to accomplish this result. Mandatory spay/neuter legislation (MSN) is frequently discussed, but a look at the demographics of the cat population shows that this approach would not be effective at raising the overall cat neuter rate.

The fundamental problem with MSN is that it targets only the pet cat population—82% of which is already spayed or

neutered—while ignoring that a potentially equally large stray and feral cat population exists, less than 3% of which is neutered. Furthermore, MSN is counterproductive; it spends limited public resources on administrative expenses instead of on spay/neuter programs.

The U.S. Cat Population: Not Just Pet Cats, Stray and Feral Cats Too

The U.S. cat population is made up of both pet cats living in households as well as stray and feral cats living outdoors.

According to the American Veterinary Medical Association, 82 million cats live in U.S. households.¹ In addition, scientists estimate that the size of the U.S. stray and feral cat population rivals that of the pet cat population.² Scientists are of the opinion that the majority of kittens being born in this country are born to the outdoor cat population.³

Neuter Rates of U.S. Cats

The neuter rates of the two subpopulations of U.S. cats differ significantly. Research indicates that 82% of cats in U.S. households are neutered.⁴ In contrast, less than 3% of stray and feral cats are neutered, according to the most comprehensive study to date.⁵

Any attempt to meaningfully increase the overall cat neuter rate in the United States must address this stark disparity. MSN utterly fails to do so.

MSN Does Not Reach Most Intact Cats

MSN not only ignores the disparity between the neuter rates of the two subpopulations of U.S. cats, but it also overlooks the very existence of the stray and feral cat population. This failure is not surprising given that MSN was developed without regard to demographic data.

In particular, one of the first proponents of MSN erroneously believed that the primary source of kittens in the United States was cat owners who bred their animals.⁶ She argued that it was necessary to pass laws requiring cat owners to sterilize their pets because those owners would not voluntarily stop breeding their animals.⁷ As a result, MSN targets owners of pet cats in an effort to increase the spay/neuter rate—a pointless target given that 82% of pet cats are already neutered.

By ignoring the entire stray and feral cat population, MSN fails to reach what scientists believe is approximately half of the total U.S. cat population – the same half that is more than 97% intact.

MSN Diverts Limited Resources Away from Spay/Neuter Programs

In addition to being ineffective, MSN imposes a financial burden on taxpayers and existing government budgets. MSN attempts to increase the spay/neuter rate by imposing penalties on pet owners. Generally, punishment is the most costly way to accomplish any legislative goal. In the case of MSN, government agencies – and the taxpayers who fund them – may incur the expenses of monitoring owner compliance, issuing citations, collecting fines, or participating in court proceedings for disputed

citations. Tax dollars, in other words, would be used largely for administrative activities and not on actual spay/neuter programs.

Spay/Neuter Programs: a Better Way to Target Intact Cats

A quick look at the demographic data makes this much clear: MSN does not target the vast majority of intact cats, and therefore cannot achieve the goal of increasing the neuter rate of the U.S. cat population.

To have a real impact on the overall neuter rate of U.S. cats, resources should be directed to spay/neuter programs. These programs have become common enough across the country that Veterinary Medical Care Guidelines for Spay-Neuter Programs have been published.⁸ Properly designed spay/neuter legislation should support these spay/neuter programs, not MSN.

Endnotes

¹ American Veterinary Medical Association, “U.S. Pet Ownership and Demographics Sourcebook, 2007 Edition,” 1, 29 at Table 1-13 (2007).

² E.g., Levy JK, Crawford PC. Humane Strategies for Controlling Feral Cat Populations, *J Am Vet Med Assoc* 2004; 225:1354-1360, 1355 at Table 1; see also Levy JK, et al. Number of Unowned Free-roaming Cats in a College Community in the Southern United States and Characteristics of Community Residents Who Feed Them, *J Am Vet Med Assoc* 2003; 223:202-205, 204.

³ E.g., Levy JK and Crawford CB. Humane Strategies for Controlling Feral Cat Populations, *J Am Vet Med Assoc* 2004; 225:1354-1360, 1355.

⁴ New JC Jr., Salman MD, King M, et al., Characteristics of Shelter-Relinquished Animals and Their Owners Compared With Animals and Their Owners in U.S. Pet-owning Households, *J App Anim Welf Sci* 2000; 3:179-201, 185 at Table 2; see also American Pet Products Manufacturers Association, “2007-2008 APPMA National Pet Owners Survey,” 155 at Table 10.

⁵ Wallace, JL, and Levy, JK, Population Characteristics of Feral Cats Admitted to Seven Trap-Neuter-Return Programs in the United States, *J of Feline Medicine and Surgery* 2006; 8:279-284, 282 at Table 3.

⁶ Sturla K, “Killing the Crisis, Not the Animal,” published by The Fund for Animals (Circa 1991).

⁷ *Id.*

⁸ Looney AL, et al., The Association of Shelter Veterinarians veterinary medical care guidelines for spay-neuter programs, *J Am Vet Med Assoc* 2008; 233:74-86, 74-75.