

Community-based approach best bet to control free-roaming cats, survey suggests

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A survey gauging Ohioans' attitudes about free-roaming cats suggests that no single statewide measure would be sufficient in managing cat overpopulation because public opinion about outdoor cats varies widely across the state.

In particular, perceptions about the need to regulate cat overpopulation in Ohio tend to differ among rural and urban dwellers and among cat owners and people who do not own pets.

Compounding the problem is that a quarter of Ohio households are feeding free-roaming cats, but most of those residents aren't ensuring that the outdoor cats they feed are spayed or neutered.

The Ohio State University survey indicates that about 40 percent of cat owners allow their cats to go outdoors. At the same time, almost half of the survey respondents believe laws should prohibit owners from letting their cats roam outside and nearly as many believe local governments should be responsible for controlling free-roaming cats.

Sixty percent of all respondents support spay-neuter laws for cats and 48 percent support using tax dollars to subsidize those programs. However, fewer rural residents support mandatory spaying and neutering or the use of tax money for that purpose.

And while 49 percent of all respondents believe in prohibiting cats from roaming freely, only one-third of cat owners agree with such prohibition. Cat owners are also less likely to support mandatory identification for cats.

"Because of the variety of attitudes we see between demographic areas, I don't know that a one-solution-fits-all statewide policy is going to work. Communities are going to have to look at their own approach," said study author Linda Lord, assistant professor of veterinary preventive medicine at Ohio State.

But coordinated action of some kind – on the part of policymakers, shelter organizations and cat owners alike – is needed to try to control cat overpopulation, Lord said.

In the United States, more than 38 million households own an estimated 88 million cats – or about one cat for every 3 ½ Americans.

"If we don't change something, we're going to continue to lose this battle. We're going to have more and more cats reproducing and we need to think about collective community approaches to prevent that," Lord said.

The research is published in the April 15 issue of the *Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association*.

With fertile female cats able to produce an average of two litters of four to six kittens per year, the numbers add up quickly. Nationally, up to 5 million cats are euthanized in shelters each year, according to estimates by the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals.

In the survey, free-roaming cats were defined as any cats that respondents have seen outside that do not belong to them – so these cats could belong to a neighbor, be lost, or be a stray or feral cat.

Three-quarters of Ohioans also supported mandatory identification for all owned cats and 88 percent supported laws requiring rabies vaccines for cats.

Survey responses suggest that many Ohioans either think government agencies already have a hand in cat control or are unsure about government support for animal control.

"The perception is that government provides funding for the control of cats, but by and large, that is not the case in Ohio," Lord said.

“Government has tended to not want to be involved in cats. And I don’t know if they can avoid it anymore. It doesn’t mean government representatives have to implement very strict animal control laws, but they might want to look at partnering with their sheltering community and veterinarians, and providing funding and/or services to try to help address this. I hope it’s helpful for them to have a better representation of what the average person thinks and what the average person is doing when it comes to cats.”

Across the state, 703 households participated in the 51-question telephone survey of a representative sample of adults. Among participants, 60 percent owned pets and 31 percent owned cats. Almost two out of three respondents indicated they like or love cats, while the rest either don’t care about cats or don’t like them.

Forty-three percent of respondents reported seeing free-roaming cats at least weekly, with 29 percent reporting daily sightings. Of the 26 percent of households feeding free-roaming cats, a quarter of those were giving cats food every day. Cat owners and rural residents were more likely to feed free-roaming cats than were non-cat owners and urban and suburban residents.

Of the households feeding cats, fewer than one in four had ever taken the free-roaming cats to a veterinarian for any kind of care, including spaying or neutering. The same percentage reported knowing the cats they were feeding had delivered at least one litter of kittens in the past year.

“I was surprised by how many households were feeding cats,” Lord said. “In an ideal world if you’re going to take the responsibility to feed a cat, which is going to make it more viable longer, then it would be best to at least try to get the cat altered so it’s not adding to the numbers.

“But not everyone’s going to spend a lot of money on a free-roaming cat. This is where cooperative efforts using private and public dollars could come in to try to find affordable solutions for folks who are trying to do the right thing and don’t want the cat suffer, but they also want to make sure that cat’s not contributing to the population problem.”

Seventy-seven percent of respondents agreed that trap-neuter-return programs are a good way to manage free-roaming cats. Such programs rely on volunteers to take responsibility for trapping known colonies of feral cats, overseeing the cats’ alteration at a veterinary clinic, usually at low cost, and returning the cats to the outdoor colony in which they live with an identifying mark that indicates they have been spayed or neutered.

Though Ohioans favored this approach, few were aware of whether trap-neuter-return programs already existed in their communities, Lord said.

Finally, the survey exposed the belief among many cat owners that indoor cats don’t need identification or vaccinations. In a previous study, Lord found that 40 percent of lost cats were indoor cats. And yet only 20 percent of the owned cats in Ohio have identification, according to the survey.

“Indoor-only cats do get out and get lost. We need to get past thinking that these cats are completely safe from being lost,” Lord said. “And with such a high percentage of households feeding cats, if your cat gets lost and someone decides to start feeding it, there’s a large chance your cat is never going to be found if it doesn’t have visible identification.”

Source: Ohio State University

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