Why Euthanasia Rates at Animal Shelters Have Plummeted

By Alicia Parlapiano  Sept. 3, 2019

DALLAS — When a lost, stray or abandoned pet entered an American city’s animal shelter 10 years ago, there was a good chance it would not leave.

But in a quiet transformation, pet euthanasia rates have plummeted in big cities in recent years, falling more than 75 percent since 2009. A rescue, an adoption or a return to an owner or community is now a far likelier outcome, a shift that experts say has happened nationwide.

The New York Times collected data from municipal shelters in the country’s largest 20 cities, including two in the Los Angeles metro area. Many of the shelters do not track outcomes uniformly or make historical data readily available online. Until recently, there has not been a concerted national effort to standardize and compile shelter records.
One reason the data is scarce: What it represents is sensitive. Even in the best-run shelters, workers face criticism, even death threats, for euthanizing animals.

“We all agree that even one euthanasia is too much,” said Inga Fricke, the most recent director of sheltering initiatives at the Humane Society of the United States. She supports more data transparency, but in her view, many shelters face impossible expectations. They also operate with varying levels of political and community support.

“Shelters shouldn’t be condemned for the numbers they have if they are genuinely doing what they can,” she said.

Part of the difficulty is that most city-run shelters are “open admission,” meaning they are required to take in any animal, regardless of its health or behavior (many private shelters and rescue groups accept only...
animals most likely to be adopted).

In 2015, for example, the New York City shelter system found itself with 176 ill and injured domestic rabbits that a woman had been keeping in a vacant lot in Gowanus in Brooklyn. “We bring in all these rabbits,” said Risa Weinstock, the shelter’s chief executive, “and then we have to start figuring out — where are these rabbits going?” (Most were rescued and adopted.)

**How we used to deal with stray animals**

For much of their history, cities’ animal services swept stray dogs off the streets, brought them to the pound, and put them to death. (It wasn’t necessarily heartlessness; there was a well-founded fear of rabies).

In the mid-19th century, New York City adopted a policy to drown stray dogs that were not claimed. A report from Philadelphia described a notorious dogcatcher operating in “the brutal slaughter of the captured animals by clubs” before a shelter was established that put down the animals using gas chambers.

Today, the vast majority of shelters in the United States perform euthanasia by injection.

By the 1970s, the Humane Society estimated that 25 percent of the nation’s dogs were out on the streets and that 13.5 million animals were euthanized in shelters each year (some argue that number was much higher). In 1971, Los Angeles's shelter alone euthanized more than 110,000 animals, or 300 per day on average.

Since then, large-scale activism, industry professionalization and shifting cultural attitudes have helped limit euthanasia to fewer than two million shelter animals per year. In 2018, the Los Angeles city shelter euthanized an average of 10 animals per day, less than 10 percent of its intake.
“They’re family members on four legs,” said Richard Avanzino, a longtime activist known as the father of the “no-kill” movement. “Society is no longer willing to say, ‘Well, there’s just too many animals and not enough homes.’”

What’s behind the changes

Animal welfare experts tend to agree that since the 1970s, the number of stray animals entering American shelters has decreased sharply — the result of a successful push to promote spaying and neutering of pets (remember Bob Barker’s sign-off?).

A recent paper in the journal Animals found that up until about 2010, the drop in shelter euthanasia tracked very closely with the drop in intake. After that, the authors wrote, it appeared that adoptions helped to further drive down euthanasia rates.

Nearly all of the shelters in the Times analysis increased adoptions over the 10-year period surveyed.

“Rescuing an animal has become a badge of honor,” said Matt Bershadker, the president and chief executive of the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. “People proudly go to dog parks and walk around their neighborhoods talking about the animal that they rescued from a shelter.”

Many of the animals rescued are transported north from Southern states with higher rates of euthanasia. The A.S.P.C.A. alone relocated 40,000 animals in 2018.

Most of the shelters in this analysis also continue to reduce the number of animals they take in. Programs to spay/neuter and release community
cats are one factor. There has also been a rise in programs helping people resolve problems — like landlord disputes and unaffordable vet care — that might otherwise compel them to give up their pets.

These trends reflect the professionalization of the shelter industry. Its members attend conferences and have their own magazine and veterinary specialization. Shelters increasingly use data to direct their resources, and they collaborate with a growing network of rescue groups and volunteers to fill in the gaps.


Many shelters have been pushed along by no-kill advocates, who oppose euthanizing any healthy or treatable animal, often using a 90 percent “live release” benchmark. (A live release rate is essentially the inverse of the euthanasia rate, though not every shelter calculates it the same way.)

In part because of the success of the no-kill movement, many shelters in the nation’s largest cities euthanize only the most ill or aggressive animals.

The movement’s critics agree that it has helped decrease euthanasia, but they point to examples of no-kill shelters in which animals have suffered in poor conditions or were released to families despite having exhibited dangerous behavior.

The challenge is to find a middle ground between euthanizing as few animals as possible, ensuring that those in the shelters don’t endure overcrowding or the spread of disease, and providing animal control for public safety.

The municipal shelter in Austin, Tex., which boasted a 98 percent live release rate in 2018, reported sheltering more than 800 animals at the end of June, more than double the number of kennels available. A shelter representative told a local ABC affiliate that while the shelter is “doing
work that no one else has done” in terms of live release rate, it is “reaching a breaking point.”

The animal shelter in Dallas places more emphasis on not going above capacity, which can occasionally mean euthanasia for some animals that could be adopted. But there is still much less euthanasia than there once was (a rate of 65 percent in 2012).

A turnaround at a Dallas shelter

Of all the city shelters surveyed, Dallas Animal Services has achieved one of the most drastic declines in kill rates in the last 10 years. A decade ago, Dallas Animal Services euthanized nearly 28,000 dogs and cats in a year, 75 per day on average.

Mismanagement also plagued the municipal shelter. A 2010 evaluation by the Humane Society identified inadequate record keeping, “a morale crisis” and “alarming” care of sick or injured animals. To reduce euthanasia rates, management discouraged field officers from impounding strays.

Animal Services officers in Dallas removed a dog from a home. They found that it was taken in by a resident as a stray, but the microchip revealed the dog was registered elsewhere. Ilana Panich-Linsman for The New York Times

Then, in May 2016, a homeless veteran, Antoinette Brown, was mauled to death by a pack of dogs in South Dallas.

Public outcry led the city to bring in consultants, who determined that there were about 8,700 loose dogs roaming city streets, contributing to more than 1,600 dog bites in the city that year. The dogs were almost exclusively found in low-income South Dallas neighborhoods, where only 15 percent of them were spayed or neutered.

But in just three years — after a shelter overhaul by the Dallas Police
Department; the adoption of a mandatory microchipping law; a renewed push for spay and neuter; and the hiring of a new director — Dallas has managed to decrease euthanasia while also increasing the number of dogs it removes from the streets.

“You can do both, and you can do it responsibly,” said Ann Barnes, who runs the shelter’s field office. “I don’t think that a municipal shelter should risk public safety” to increase the live release rate. “That’s not what we’re for,” she added.

Bites from loose dogs in Dallas are down 12 percent compared with last year. More strays are being returned to their owners, and more adoptions are happening inside the shelter. Rescue groups continue to transfer animals to areas with higher demand, but the city now reserves some smaller and more sought-after dogs (think Yorkies) for people coming in the front door.

As a result, Dallas has hovered around a live release rate of 85 percent to 90 percent this year.

On a recent weekday in August, a 10-day-old tabby named Chevy napped in an incubator in the shelter’s kitten nursery. Neonatal kittens without a mother are difficult to care for, but if all goes well, the shelter will be a brief stop between the place he was found — inside the engine of a Chevy — and a permanent home.