

International Comparison of Animal Shelter Oversight, Policies, and Results

By Makenna Ramsay

The objectives of this project are to compare animal shelters in different countries with respect to oversight, policies, and commonly used metrics of shelter performance (e.g., measures of animal intake and outflow). Previous studies of animal shelters have focused on one or a few shelters in a single country. Thus, this project is important because, to my knowledge, there have been no published studies that compare and evaluate shelter oversight, policies, and metrics across different countries.

I will use national databases to collect the data for animal shelters both here in the United States and in other countries. For the United States, I will use the National Database maintained by Shelter Animals Count, an independent nonprofit organization; this database contains annual information from over 3000 animal shelters on measures that all shelters should gather to help guide their policies. I will use similar databases for other countries (e.g., Humane Canada and RSPCA Australia). These databases generally include save rate (percentage of animals leaving the shelter alive), intake data (sources of incoming animals, such as owner surrendered, stray, seized, or transferred from another shelter), and outflow data (destination of outgoing animals, such as adoption, transfer to a rescue group, returned to owner, or euthanasia). If possible, I will also include average length of stay (average number of days from intake to departure of animals from the shelter) and post-adoption return-to-shelter rates. I will focus on the year 2019 to avoid issues related to COVID-19, which caused many shelters to close their doors to the general public and change to adoptions by appointment. To determine the type of oversight and policies of shelters, I will conduct online searches and review relevant publications. I hope to compare national animal shelter data from a minimum of three countries and I will focus on dogs, given my previous research experience and interests. To this end, I will collaborate with Dr. Betty McGuire, Department of Ecology and Evolutionary Biology, who has conducted canine research at local animal shelters since 2012 (Tompkins County SPCA, Cortland County SPCA, and Chemung County SPCA). I anticipate consulting with personnel at these local shelters and at Maddie's Shelter Medicine Program, Cornell University.

Animal shelters are a public concern because people are interested in animals and their welfare. At the community level, many members of the public have companion animals, such as dogs and cats, as pets. Individuals within a community come into contact with animal shelters to adopt a pet, surrender a pet, bring in a stray animal they found, use low cost spay/neuter services and pet food pantries, or to donate or volunteer. In all of these situations, the quality of the animal shelter is key, and my study may help improve shelter practices and performance. My study may also help to educate the public by bringing together data on how shelters work and how different policies affect shelter animals.

Regarding other potential impacts, my international comparison will help broaden exposure of shelter oversight agencies, administrators, veterinarians, staff, and volunteers to different policies, procedures, and results regarding the welfare of shelter animals. These data will help guide decision-making and may improve shelter policies, thereby enhancing the welfare of shelter animals.