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Characteristics of Relinquished Dogs and Their Owners at 14 Rehoming Centers in the United Kingdom

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In the United Kingdom, each year many companion animal (pet) caregivers (owners) hand over dogs to shelters for rehoming. Studies conducted in the United States and Australia have shown that accommodation issues and problematic behaviors are the most common reasons for dogs to be relinquished. The purpose of this study was to provide a clearer understanding of common characteristics of relinquished dogs in the United Kingdom. A descriptive study conducted during 2005 collected data on 2,806 dogs relinquished to Dogs Trust's rehoming centers in the United Kingdom. The most common reasons for dogs to be relinquished were their problematic behaviors and their need for more attention than the owner could provide. The results of this study identify several common characteristics of relinquished dogs as well as differences between its results and those found in studies conducted in the United States and Australia. An improved knowledge of characteristics of relinquished dogs should inform the development of strategies for improved management of the rehoming process.

Every year, caregivers (owners) who are unable or unwilling to keep their dogs relinquish large numbers of dogs to nonhuman animal shelters and welfare organizations. In a study carried out in Indiana, Patronek, Beck, and Glickman (1997) found that 3.8% of the dog population was relinquished per year. Relinquishment of a companion animal (pet) has been described as a difficult and emotional process (Kass, New, Scarlett, & Salman, 2001; Patronek et al., 1997). Statistics

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from animal shelters in the United States found that, due to lack of suitable new homes, nearly 60% of dogs who are relinquished to animal shelters are euthanized (Houpt, Honig, & Reisner, 1996); these shelter euthanasias account for between 1/10 and 1/4 of all canine deaths, thereby being the leading cause of canine death in the United States (Olson, Moulton, Nett, & Salman, 1991).

Previous international studies have shown that the most common reasons given for relinquishment of a pet are issues related to accommodation, dog behavior, and owner lifestyle (Marston & Bennett, 2003). It is important to be aware that on many occasions, what the owner classifies as a “behavioral problem” is actually a normal behavior. This is often due to owners’ lack of knowledge or understanding or their unrealistic expectations (Houpt et al., 1996).

Relinquished dogs are more likely to be less than 2 to 3 years old and/or sexually intact. Owner income tends to be low and the owners do not participate in dog-training classes (Gregory, 2000; Marston & Bennett, 2003; Miller, Staats, Partlo, & Rada, 1996; National Council on Pet Population Study and Policy, 1997; New et al., 2000; Patronek, Glickman, Beck, McCabe, & Ecker, 1996; Shore, Petersen, & Douglas, 2003). Patronek et al. (1996) found (a) that nearly 65% of relinquished dogs were sexually intact compared with 34% of the general dog population and (b) that owners receiving helpful behavioral advice for dogs with problematic behaviors were much less likely to relinquish their dogs. “Owner’s moving” was given as the reason for relinquishment in 40.4% of all relinquished cases in a study in Australia, whereas problematic behaviors of the dog were given as the reason for 11% (Marston, Bennett, & Coleman, 2004).

There have been very few studies documenting the characteristics of relinquished dogs in the United Kingdom, and these may differ from those reported in studies conducted elsewhere in the world. An understanding of common features of relinquished dogs in terms of reasons for relinquishment, home environments, and previous owner characteristics could aid policymakers and charities in targeting resources to reduce the occurrence of relinquishment. Hence, the objectives of this study were to describe the characteristics of relinquished dogs, their previous owners, and home environments in the United Kingdom.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

A descriptive study was carried out using dogs relinquished to Dogs Trust during a 12-month study period between January 1 and December 31, 2005, inclusive. Dogs Trust is the largest dog welfare charity in the United Kingdom, rehoming more than 10,000 dogs every year. They take in many stray dogs and dogs handed over by members of the public. Dogs Trust has a noneuthanasia policy and tries to find a suitable home for all dogs who come into its rehoming centers. Occasionally, a dog with aggressive tendencies will be kept back for

further training, will be placed in a sanctuary for nonrehomable dogs, or—in extreme circumstances—will be euthanized. Information that may have been collected from the previous owners combined with a behavioral assessment for each dog helps Dogs Trust place the dog in a suitable home. A previous study has shown that Dogs Trust has a 14.7% return rate; that is, 14.7% of the dogs whom the Trust rehomes are returned to its rehoming centers (Diesel, Pfeiffer, & Brodbelt, 2008).

The researchers attempted to obtain data from all 15 Dogs Trust centers in operation at the start of the study, but one center had to be excluded because it did not have computerized records. The owners of all dogs who were relinquished at 14 of the Dogs Trust's rehoming centers (Figure 1) were required to complete a questionnaire that included information about the reason for relinquishment,



FIGURE 1 The map shows the location of 14 Dogs Trust rehoming centers used in the study.

the owner, and the home environment. The questionnaire was designed using closed questions and one open question to allow for the owner to provide additional information if considered necessary. The questionnaire was pretested at 3 rehoming centers with owners who relinquished dogs in December 2004 (the questionnaire is available from Gillian Diesel on request). The information from these questionnaires and additional information about the dogs' signalment (age, sex, breed, size, spay/neuter status) from the Dogs Trust database was entered into a relational database (Microsoft Access 2002, Microsoft Corporation).

Descriptive statistics were calculated using Excel (2002, Microsoft Corporation) and Stata v9.0 (StataCorp, College Station, TX). Data from the 14 rehoming centers were combined as the most common reasons for relinquishment were the same for all centers. The study used prevalence ratios and the z test to determine if there was a statistically significant difference (significance level of $p < .05$) between proportions. The data were divided into subpopulations of dogs: dogs originally obtained from Dogs Trust and dogs obtained elsewhere. Dogs obtained elsewhere were divided into those obtained from another rescue kennel or shelter and those obtained privately (friends, family, breeders, or pet stores). Owners provided this information in the questionnaire. Owners were asked where they had obtained their dogs. In addition to this information, all dogs whom Dogs Trust rehomes or cares for are microchipped; therefore, a dog returned to a Dogs Trust kennel can be traced based on the microchip number. For ease of reading, we refer to three groups of dogs as follows:

1. DT group (Dogs Trust group), dogs originally obtained from Dogs Trust;
2. PO group (privately obtained group), dogs obtained privately; and
3. ORK group (other rescue kennel group), dogs obtained from a rescue kennel other than Dogs Trust.

RESULTS

Dog Characteristics

Data were collected for 2,806 dogs. Results of the descriptive analysis show that male dogs comprise the larger proportion of the 2,806 and crossbreeds comprise the majority of all dogs (Table 1). More than half of all the dogs had been spayed or neutered before arrival at the Dogs Trust. Of all the dogs, more than 50% were medium (10–30 kg); less than 1 in 4 were small size (<10 kg). The majority of dogs were between 6 months and 6 years old. The PO group had a significantly higher proportion of purebreds than the DT and ORK groups ($p < .001$) and a significantly higher proportion of intact dogs on arrival at kennels ($p < .001$) than those dogs obtained from the Dogs Trust. A significantly higher

TABLE 1
Descriptive Results of Dog Characteristics for Those Dogs Relinquished
to Dogs Trust During 2005

Variable Name	Variable Categories	<i>Dogs Not Obtained From Dogs Trust</i>			<i>All Dogs (%)</i>
		<i>Dogs Obtained Privately (%)</i>	<i>Dogs Obtained From Kennels Other Than Dogs Trust (%)</i>	<i>Dogs Originally Obtained From Dogs Trust</i>	
Total number of dogs		1,217	396	1,193	2,806
Sex	Male	660 (54.2)	231 (58.3)	704 (59.0)	1,595 (56.8)
	Female	557 (45.8)	165 (41.7)	489 (41.0)	1,211 (43.2)
Crossbreed	Crossbred	827 (68.0)	346 (87.4)	1,047 (87.8)	2,220 (79.1)
	Purebred	390 (32.0)	50 (12.6)	146 (12.2)	586 (20.9)
Size	Small (<10 kg)	360 (29.6)	59 (14.9)	210 (17.6)	629 (22.4)
	Medium (10–30 kg)	638 (52.4)	274 (69.2)	769 (64.5)	1,681 (59.9)
	Large (>30 kg)	218 (17.9)	63 (15.9)	214 (17.9)	495 (17.6)
	Unknown	1 (0.1)	0	0	1 (0.1)
Age	<0.5 years	227 (18.7)	20 (5.1)	151 (12.6)	398 (14.2)
	0.5–<1 year	257 (21.1)	29 (7.3)	330 (27.7)	616 (21.9)
	1–<3 years	311 (25.5)	77 (19.5)	424 (35.5)	812 (28.9)
	3–<6 years	209 (17.2)	123 (31.1)	198 (16.6)	530 (18.9)
	6–<10	169 (13.9)	113 (28.6)	76 (6.4)	358 (12.8)
	≥10	44 (3.6)	33 (8.3)	14 (1.2)	91 (3.2)
	Unknown	0	1 (0.1)	0	1 (0.1)
Spayed/Neutered before arrival	Yes	355 (29.2)	314 (79.3)	1,012 (84.8)	1,681 (59.9)
	No	862 (70.8)	82 (20.7)	181 (15.2)	1,125 (40.1)
How long have they owned the dog	<6months	414 (34.0)	52 (13.1)	896 (75.1)	1,362 (48.5)
	6 months–1 year	211 (17.3)	36 (9.1)	175 (14.6)	422 (15.0)
	1–5 years	384 (31.6)	208 (52.6)	116 (9.7)	708 (25.2)
	>8 years	188 (15.5)	99 (25.1)	3 (0.3)	290 (10.4)
	Unknown	20 (1.6)	1 (0.1)	3 (0.3)	24 (0.9)

proportion (75.1%) of dogs in the DT group had been owned for less than 6 months compared with 34.0% PO and 13.1% ORK ($p < .001$).

Dog Obtainment

Of the dogs who had been relinquished, the majority had been obtained to provide companionship for a member of the family or other dog (Table 2). Almost 10% of the dogs were obtained without any planning, and only a small

TABLE 2
**Descriptive Results of Characteristics of Dog Obtainment for
 Those Dogs Relinquished to Dogs Trust During 2005**

Variable Name	Variable Categories	<i>Dogs Not Obtained From Dogs Trust</i>			
		<i>Dogs Obtained Privately (%)</i>	<i>Dogs Obtained From Kennels Other Than Dogs Trust (%)</i>	<i>Dogs Originally Obtained From Dogs Trust</i>	<i>All Dogs (%)</i>
Total number of dogs		1,217	396	1,193	2,806
Why did you obtain your dog	Companionship	783 (64.3)	344 (86.9)	1,035 (86.7)	2,162 (77.1)
	Gift	172 (14.1)	0	56 (4.7)	228 (8.1)
	Stray	64 (5.3)	24 (6.1)	2 (0.2)	90 (3.2)
	Other	64 (5.3)	6 (1.5)	1 (0.1)	71 (2.5)
	Working dog	37 (3.1)	2 (0.5)	6 (0.5)	45 (1.6)
	Guard dog	21 (1.7)	6 (1.5)	9 (0.8)	36 (1.3)
How much planning went into decision to get dog	Missing	76 (6.2)	14 (3.5)	84 (7.0)	174 (6.2)
	Not planned	257 (21.1)	10 (2.5)	9 (0.8)	276 (9.8)
	Discussed briefly	234 (19.2)	46 (11.6)	104 (8.7)	384 (13.7)
	Lots of thought	502 (41.3)	290 (73.3)	889 (74.5)	1,681 (59.9)
	Missing	224 (18.4)	50 (12.6)	191 (16.0)	465 (16.6)
Did you obtain advice before getting dog	No	1,018 (83.7)	363 (91.7)	1,082 (90.7)	2,463 (87.8)
	Yes	116 (9.5)	16 (4.0)	78 (6.5)	210 (7.5)
	Missing	83 (6.8)	17 (4.3)	33 (2.8)	133 (4.7)

proportion of people received advice (other than advice given by rehoming kennels) before obtaining a dog.

A significantly higher proportion of dogs from the PO group was obtained without planning compared with dogs from the DT group and the ORK group ($p < .001$). A significantly higher proportion of dogs in the PO group was obtained as a gift compared with both the ORK and DT groups ($p < .001$).

Home Environment Characteristics

As shown in Table 3, almost all the new dog owners lived in houses, and an even greater proportion had a garden or yard. There were slightly higher percentages of dog owners without any children in the DT group and the ORK group compared with dog owners in the PO group. However, there were no significant differences with regard to this variable.

Almost 20% of all the dogs were left on their own for more than 6 hr without a break. Approximately 11% of dogs from the DT group were left for more than

TABLE 3
Descriptive Results of Home Characteristics and Owner Effort and
Commitment of Those Owners Relinquishing a Dog to Dogs Trust During 2005

Variable Name	Variable Categories	<i>Dogs Not Obtained From Dogs Trust</i>			
		<i>Dogs Obtained Privately (%)</i>	<i>Dogs Obtained From Kennels Other Than Dogs Trust (%)</i>	<i>Dogs Originally Obtained From Dogs Trust</i>	<i>All Dogs (%)</i>
Total number of dogs		1,217	396	1,193	2,806
Home type ^a	House	955 (78.5)	329 (83.1)	1,001 (83.9)	2,285 (81.4)
	Bungalow	82 (6.7)	20 (5.1)	91 (7.6)	193 (6.9)
	Flat	101 (8.3)	34 (8.6)	50 (4.2)	185 (6.6)
	Farm	22 (1.8)	2 (0.5)	11 (0.9)	35 (1.2)
	Caravan	7 (0.6)	2 (0.5)	4 (0.3)	13 (0.5)
	Other	13 (1.1)	4 (1.0)	3 (0.3)	20 (0.7)
	Missing	37 (3.0)	5 (1.2)	33 (2.8)	75 (2.7)
Garden or yard	Yes	1,082 (88.9)	360 (90.9)	1,118 (93.7)	2,560 (91.2)
	No	94 (7.7)	30 (7.6)	42 (3.5)	166 (5.9)
	Missing	41 (3.4)	6 (1.5)	33 (2.8)	80 (2.9)
Age of children in home	None	458 (37.6)	166 (41.9)	495 (41.5)	1,119 (39.9)
	<1	39 (3.2)	26 (6.6)	31 (2.6)	96 (3.4)
	1–5	144 (11.8)	42 (10.6)	119 (10.0)	305 (10.9)
	6–12	125 (10.3)	43 (10.9)	170 (14.2)	338 (12.0)
	13–16	90 (7.4)	29 (7.3)	105 (8.9)	224 (8.0)
	Mixed ^b	185 (15.2)	43 (10.9)	128 (10.7)	356 (12.7)
	Mixed <13 ^c	142 (11.7)	42 (10.6)	127 (10.6)	311 (11.1)
	Missing	34 (2.8)	5 (1.2)	18 (1.5)	57 (2.0)
How much time and effort was involved in the care of your dog	Less than expected	62 (5.1)	34 (8.6)	28 (2.3)	124 (4.4)
	Same as expected	638 (52.4)	237 (59.9)	550 (46.1)	1,425 (50.8)
	More than expected	405 (33.3)	96 (24.2)	508 (42.6)	1,009 (35.9)
	Missing	112 (9.2)	29 (7.3)	107 (9.0)	248 (8.9)
How much time is your dog left alone	<1 hr	135 (11.1)	41 (10.3)	174 (14.6)	350 (12.5)
	1–2 hr	91 (7.5)	23 (5.8)	126 (10.6)	240 (8.5)
	2–4 hr	218 (17.9)	82 (20.7)	357 (29.9)	657 (23.4)
	4–6 hr	268 (22.0)	102 (25.8)	252 (21.1)	622 (22.2)
	>6 hr	288 (23.7)	103 (26.0)	135 (11.3)	526 (18.8)
	Missing	217 (17.8)	45 (11.4)	149 (12.5)	411 (14.6)

^a"House" refers to a building consisting of two stories; "Bungalow" refers to a single-story building; "Flat" refers to an apartment that occupies part of a building. ^b"Mixed" refers to households with children of varying ages, including some children less than 13 years and some older than 13 years. ^c"Mixed < 13" refers to households with children of varying ages, but all children are less than 13 years of age.

6 hr on their own compared with significantly higher percentages (23.7% and 26.0%) of the PO and ORK groups of dogs ($p < .001$). Of the owners, 36% reported that the care and effort associated with looking after their dogs was more than expected. There was a significantly higher proportion of owners in the DT group who found the care and effort involved in looking after their dogs to be more than expected compared with those in the PO and ORK groups ($p < .001$).

Dog Behavioral Characteristics

A large proportion of the owners reported that their dogs showed one or more types of problematic behaviors, the most common being (a) more than one problem including destructive tendencies, (b) aggression toward people, and (c) aggression toward other pets (Table 4). Among dogs in the DT group, there was a significantly lower percentage of dogs without any reported problematic behaviors (18.1%) compared with those dogs (47.2% and 41.2%) in the PO and ORK groups ($p < .001$). It was found that of those dogs with problematic behaviors in the DT group, a higher percentage of owners received advice (37.1%) compared with those owners of dogs in the PO and ORK groups (15.1% and 27.5%) whose dogs had problematic behaviors ($p = .05$).

Reasons for Relinquishment

Problematic behaviors (34.2%) were the most common reason given for relinquishing a dog (Table 5). For 15.4% of dogs in the PO group, problematic behaviors were given as the reason for relinquishment compared with a significantly higher proportion (28.9%, $p < .001$) among the ORK group and 55.1% among the DT group ($p < .001$).

DISCUSSION

Dog Characteristics

The findings of the descriptive analysis are similar to previous studies in that relinquished dogs were more likely to be male (Marston & Bennett, 2003; Marston et al., 2004; Mondelli et al., 2004). A relatively high proportion of dogs (14.2%) were less than 6 months old, which may be due to unwanted litters or people obtaining a puppy with insufficient planning. This result broadly agrees with findings reported from a study in Australia where 10% of all dogs relinquished were puppies (Marston et al., 2004). However, a previous study carried out by the Blue Cross (an animal welfare charity in the United Kingdom) in Oxfordshire

TABLE 4
Descriptive Results of Dog Behavioral Characteristics for
Those Dogs Relinquished to Dogs Trust During 2005

Variable Name	Variable Categories	<i>Dogs Not Obtained From Dogs Trust</i>			
		Dogs Obtained Privately (%)	Dogs Obtained From Kennels Other Than Dogs Trust (%)	Dogs Originally Obtained From Dogs Trust	All Dogs (%)
Total number of dogs		1,217	396	1,193	2,806
Number of reported problematic behaviors	No problems	574 (47.2)	163 (41.2)	216 (18.1)	953 (34.0)
	More than one problem with destruction (excluding aggression)	106 (8.7)	20 (5.0)	195 (16.3)	321 (11.4)
	More than one with aggression toward people	47 (3.9)	32 (8.1)	211 (17.7)	290 (10.3)
	Aggression toward pets	59 (4.8)	28 (7.1)	126 (10.6)	213 (7.6)
	Destructive	78 (6.4)	23 (5.8)	95 (8.0)	196 (7.0)
	Hyperactive	104 (8.5)	22 (5.6)	68 (5.7)	194 (6.9)
	Aggression toward people	39 (3.2)	29 (7.3)	112 (9.4)	180 (6.4)
	Unwanted barking	81 (6.7)	27 (6.8)	38 (3.2)	146 (5.2)
	More than one problem (excluding destruction and aggression)	42 (3.4)	20 (5.0)	48 (4.0)	110 (3.9)
	Urinates or defecates in house	50 (4.1)	17 (4.3)	42 (3.5)	109 (3.9)
	Other problems	18 (1.5)	11 (2.8)	31 (2.6)	60 (2.1)
	Missing	19 (1.6)	4 (1.0)	11 (0.9)	34 (1.3)
Did your dog attend training classes	No	1,097 (90.1)	329 (83.1)	1,044 (87.5)	2,470 (88.0)
	Yes	103 (8.5)	62 (15.6)	136 (11.4)	301 (10.7)
	Missing	17 (1.4)	5 (1.3)	13 (1.1)	35 (1.3)
Of those with problematic behaviors did you get any behavioral advice	No	523 (81.3)	164 (70.4)	596 (61.0)	1,283 (69.2)
	Yes	97 (15.1)	64 (27.5)	362 (37.1)	523 (28.2)
	Missing	23 (3.6)	5 (2.1)	19 (1.9)	47 (2.6)

TABLE 5
**Descriptive Results of Reasons for Relinquishment for
 Those Dogs Relinquished to Dogs Trust During 2005**

<i>Variable Name</i>	<i>Variable Categories</i>	<i>Dogs Not Obtained From Dogs Trust</i>			
		<i>Dogs Obtained Privately (%)</i>	<i>Dogs Obtained From Kennels Other Than Dogs Trust (%)</i>	<i>Dogs Originally Obtained From Dogs Trust</i>	<i>All Dogs (%)</i>
Total number of dogs		1,217	396	1,193	2,806
Why have you given up your dog	Problematic behaviors	188 (15.4)	114 (28.9)	657 (55.1)	959 (34.2)
	Needs more attention than can be given	439 (36.1)	104 (26.3)	251 (21.0)	794 (28.2)
	Moving/Landlord	186 (15.3)	68 (17.3)	84 (7.0)	338 (12.0)
	Owner ill	75 (6.2)	32 (8.1)	30 (2.5)	137 (4.8)
	Relationship breakup	62 (5.1)	32 (8.1)	39 (3.3)	133 (4.7)
	A family member is allergic	55 (4.5)	15 (3.8)	51 (4.3)	121 (4.3)
	Unwanted gift	46 (3.8)	2 (0.5)	2 (0.2)	50 (1.8)
	Owner died	33 (2.7)	5 (1.3)	6 (0.5)	44 (1.6)
	Dog has grown too big	16 (1.3)	3 (0.7)	14 (1.2)	33 (1.2)
	Unwanted litter/ Unwanted dog	26 (2.1)	1 (0.2)	1 (0.1)	28 (1)
	Other pet not happy	8 (0.7)	2 (0.5)	12 (1.0)	22 (0.8)
	Cost	5 (0.4)	2 (0.5)	9 (0.7)	16 (0.6)
	Fostering/Stray/ Temporary home	14 (1.2)	3 (0.7)	0	17 (0.6)
	Owner having baby	5 (0.4)	1 (0.2)	6 (0.5)	12 (0.5)
	Retired racer/ Retired working dog	10 (0.8)	0	0	10 (0.4)
	Forcibly removed/ Rescued	8 (0.7)	1 (0.2)	0	9 (0.4)
	Change of personal circumstances	3 (0.2)	0	4 (0.3)	7 (0.3)
	Owner's child scared of dog	2 (0.2)	2 (0.5)	2 (0.2)	6 (0.2)
	Neighbor's complaint	3 (0.2)	1 (0.2)	2 (0.2)	6 (0.2)
	Failed training	2 (0.2)	1 (0.2)	1 (0.1)	4 (0.1)
	Missing	31 (2.5)	7 (1.8)	22 (1.8)	60 (2.1)

found that 23% of relinquished dogs were puppies (Bailey, 1992). This difference may be due to differences in the public's preference to relinquish puppies to these organizations or possibly due to differences in the socioeconomic status of dog owners in the catchment areas of these organizations.

A relatively high number of medium-size dogs were relinquished in this study, whereas in Australia there were high numbers of small-size dogs (Marston et al.,

2004). This may be due to differences in breed popularity or the catchment areas of the shelters used in the study. If the study were based on data from a shelter with a catchment area located predominantly in a city, it is likely that the general dog population would contain higher proportions of small-size dogs. This study included rehoming centers located around the United Kingdom. The catchment areas of each of these centers would be dependent on the local population density and the proximity to other rehoming centers.

The percentage of intact dogs, among those relinquished to shelters, was 59% in an Australian study (Marston et al., 2004) and 55% in the United States (Salman et al., 1998); both percentages are higher than those in this study (40%). This could be due to the large percentage of dogs in the overall study population who were originally obtained from rescue kennels, including Dogs Trust, and thus reflects their policy of spaying or neutering all dogs before they are rehomed. This interpretation is supported by the finding that in this study the percentage of intact dogs in the PO group was much higher (71%). The lower percentage of intact dogs found in this study, when compared with those studies conducted in the United States and Australia, could also indicate differences between these countries in people's preferences and opinions of spaying and neutering dogs.

Dog Obtainment

The number of people who received advice (apart from the advice received from the rehoming centers) before obtaining a dog was low, suggesting some people may obtain a dog without sufficient thought or preparation; this may lead them to choose an inappropriate dog, particularly those owners who did not obtain their dog from a rescue kennel. It should be noted that most rescue kennels would provide all owners with advice before obtaining a dog and would carry out a "home check" (check the home environment to ensure it is suitable for a dog).

Previous studies have shown that choosing a dog incompatible with the owner's lifestyle has resulted in people leaving a dog for long periods of time or giving their dog very little exercise. This can lead to the development of problematic behaviors; therefore, the dog may be more likely to be relinquished (Hubrecht & Serpell, 1993; Schwartz, 2003; Wells & Hepper, 1992; Wells & Hepper, 2000). A study in the United States found that 36% of owners obtained their dogs to provide companionship. The same study found that 24% of the dogs owned were strays, 18% were obtained by the owners for another person, and 12% were obtained as a gift (Miller et al., 1996). However, it should be noted that the study conducted by Miller et al. was based on a small sample size; therefore, inferences from these data should be made with care.

In this study, 14.1% of the PO dogs were obtained as gifts, which is higher than in the other groups of dogs. This could be due to the checks and advice

given by the rehoming centers in preventing people from giving dogs as gifts. The higher percentage of owners of dogs in the DT and ORK group who put a lot of planning and forethought into the decision to obtain their dog, compared with owners of dogs in the PO group, could be an indication of the work that the animal welfare organizations do to make sure owners fully consider all the factors involved in owning a dog. However, as we have no comparison group, this cannot be confirmed; therefore, this may also indicate (a) that the advice is not working and (b) that people, despite putting more forethought and planning into their decision to obtain their dogs, still return or relinquish them.

Home Environment Characteristics

The percentage of owners in the different categories of the variables representing the home environment and owner effort highlights the policies of Dogs Trust and other rescue kennels and the type of person who takes on a “rescue” dog. Each person who adopts a dog from a Dogs Trust center is assessed for suitability as a dog owner and therefore is (a) less likely to be living in a flat; (b) more likely to have a garden or yard, and (c) less likely to have children in the household. Some members of staff at rescue shelters think that households with children would often tend to have less time to dedicate to the dog, and many experts advise against certain breeds being placed in households with children.

Of those dogs in the PO group, there were higher percentages of dogs who were left for long periods on their own compared with dogs in the DT group. This may be because, during an adoption of a dog from a Dogs Trust center, the owners would have been made aware that certain breeds (high-energy breeds) of dogs are not suitable to be left alone for long periods of time and may require more exercise. In addition, because these dogs were originally either strays or relinquished dogs, they might have preexisting behaviors, which meant that it was not possible to leave them for long periods of time on their own. The higher proportion of DT dogs for whom the owner found the “care and effort to be more than expected” could be due to higher numbers of problematic behaviors (because of the Dogs Trust noneuthanasia policy) or could be due to insufficient advice or information given to the owners before adoption.

Behavioral Characteristics and Reasons for Relinquishment

The results of this study agree with other studies in showing that problematic behaviors are a major cause for relinquishment of a pet (Patronek et al., 1996). However, a study in the United States found significantly higher numbers of “owner aggression” and “fear of strangers” reported by owners who thought the questionnaire was completely confidential compared with those owners who

knew the information was going to be used for rehoming their dog. This shows that behavioral questions may provide information about the dog with regard to some aspects of behavior; however, certain problems may not be fully reported, especially when the owners suspect their answers will affect the likelihood that their dog will be rehomed (Segurson, Serpell, & Hart, 2005).

This study found that problematic behaviors were given as the reason for relinquishment in 34.2% of cases, commonly including destructive tendencies and aggression. This is similar to the result found in a study at the Blue Cross in the United Kingdom, which reported that 33% of relinquishments were due to problematic behaviors, including dogs being destructive, not getting on with children, and being aggressive (Bailey, 1992).

In the DT group, 55.1% were returned due to problematic behaviors. This percentage is significantly higher than that of the other groups of dogs. Dogs Trust has a noneuthanasia policy resulting in its often dealing with, and trying to, rehome more difficult dogs; this could result in a higher number of dogs with problematic behaviors being rehomed, resulting in owners—unwilling to try to retrain the dogs—returning them. In this case, a review of the dog behavioral assessments and rehabilitation procedures may be needed. In addition, Dogs Trust requests owners who have any problems and no longer want their dogs to return the dogs to Dogs Trust. This means that for these dogs a more complete history would be available. It would be much more difficult to get this kind of history for dogs obtained from other sources such as private breeders or pet stores. If owners who did not obtain their dogs from Dogs Trust experienced any problems with their dogs, they would have a number of places to take their dogs for rehoming (other charities, friends, or family).

During the adoption process, Dogs Trust would have asked owners questions regarding moving, potential change in job, and other owner-related factors. If it was likely that any of these would take place soon after adoption, the owners would be advised to wait to adopt a dog until settled in the new home or job. Therefore, it is less likely that these owners would relinquish their dogs due to these factors, increasing the proportion of dogs returned due to problematic behaviors.

In some cases, for those dogs obtained from Dogs Trust, saying the dog has a problematic behavior may be an “easy excuse” for returning the dogs rather than admitting that they do not have the time or do not want to put any more effort into caring for the dog. Or perhaps the owners had unrealistic expectations and the advice from the staff at the rescue kennels was insufficient to prepare them fully to own a dog. It is also thought that some owners may give what they consider more “socially acceptable” reasons for relinquishing their dogs rather than admitting the true reason. DiGiacomo, Arluke, and Patronek (1998) have shown that some owners may underplay or underreport behavioral problems. It is also important to consider that these problematic behaviors are those reported

by the owners; therefore, there is some potential for incorrect categorization and bias. Houpt et al. (1996) pointed out that it is rare to find true cases of problematic behaviors and that it is often lack of knowledge or understanding on the part of the owner that has either led to the problem or resulted in the owner misinterpreting normal behavior.

Owners of dogs from the PO group may be concerned that, if they admit their dog has any problematic behaviors, Dogs Trust may refuse to take on their dog. Dogs Trust has a selective intake and may therefore give owner-related problems as the reason for relinquishment. Marston et al. (2004) in Australia found that 31.9% of relinquishments were due to owner-related factors, with the most common reason (40.4%) being moving, 10.8% problematic behaviors, and the remainder not giving a reason. Studies of shelters in the United States found that moving was given as the reason for relinquishing a dog more often than any other reason (New et al., 1999; Salman et al., 1998; Shore et al., 2003). A study in the United States found that relinquishers had often tried many other options before finally turning to a shelter. They also showed that the reason given by owners was often not the primary reason for relinquishment (DiGiacomo et al., 1998).

The comparison between this study and those conducted in the United States highlights differences in predominant reasons given for relinquishment. In the United States, owner-related problems are most common; in the United Kingdom, it appears that problematic behaviors are reported to be the predominant reason.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study has provided a description of relinquished dogs and their previous owners in the United Kingdom. Many similarities were found between studies conducted in the United States and Australia, but this study also highlights some important differences between countries.

The two most common reasons for relinquishment could indicate that some relinquishments may be due to inappropriate dog selection or lack of advice or thought before deciding to obtain the dog. As an indication of this, many owners admitted that they found they could not give their dogs the attention the dogs needed; this in turn may have led to the development of problematic behaviors. However, it may also indicate that a dog's problematic behaviors result in the dog's being more demanding of the owner's time, leading the owner to report being unable to give the dog the attention needed.

The study shows that overall the most common reason for dogs to be relinquished to Dogs Trust are problematic behaviors with the majority of dogs reported to have multiple problems, including aggression and destructive tendencies.

cies. However, this result was strongly affected by those dogs originally obtained from Dogs Trust.

Those dogs in the PO group were relinquished more often due to owner-related factors. This suggests that Dogs Trust and other rehoming kennels may be able to reduce the likelihood of relinquishment due to owner-related problems through advice and the careful monitoring of the adoption of dogs from rehoming centers. Problematic behaviors remain a major issue that needs to be addressed through the participation in training classes, the provision of behavioral advice, and further education of owners in order to reduce the number of dogs relinquished to animal welfare centers.

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