

SOCIAL PROBLEMS FINAL PAPER EXAMPLE

The Social Problem of Animal Neglect and Cruelty

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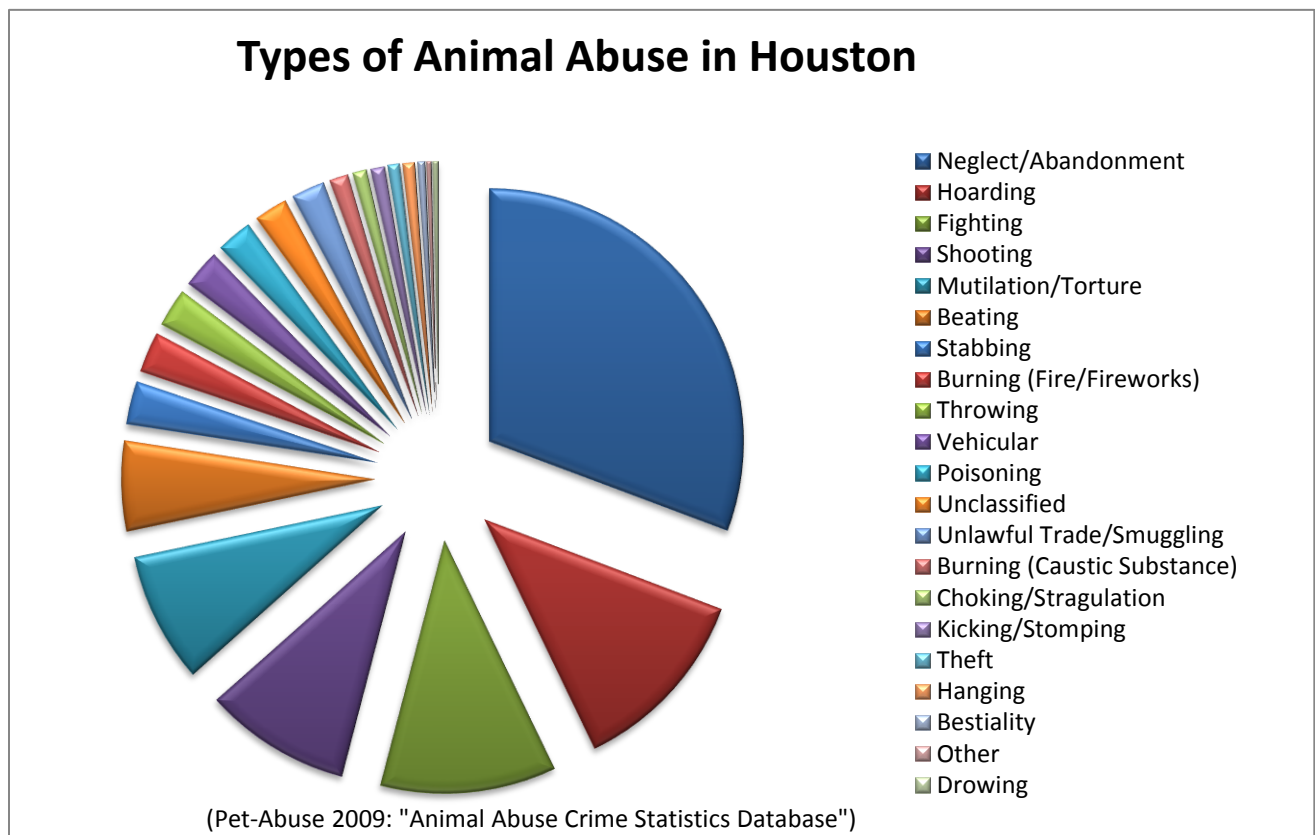
In a world whose population is over 6 billion and still rapidly growing, it seems nearly impossible for all of its inhabitants to agree on anything. This continual stance of disagreement often leads to social problems, or what Macionis defines as “a condition that undermines the well-being of some or all members of a society and is usually a matter of public controversy” (Macionis 2008: p. 2). These controversies range from abortion and taxes to poverty and unemployment as well as a range of other hot topics that seem to be continuously argued with little hope of resolution. Among these debatable issues is that of the welfare of animals and the responsibilities of pet ownership. It seems many people have forgotten the golden rule of “do unto others as you would have them do unto you.”

The Animal Protection movement dates back to 19th century England and the practice of bull baiting. Similar in nature to the Spaniards’ bull fighting, bull baiting involved tying a bull to a stake, often blowing pepper in its nose to anger it, and then releasing it into a ring of dogs (bulldogs as it happens) to essentially wrestle with the bull (Walls, 2008). This was a vastly popular sport attended by all classes of the English people. While all the animals involved sustained serious injury and often death, it was not until 1800 that Parliament enacted an anti cruelty bill designed to put a stop to bull baiting. This was quickly followed by the development of the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, backed by Queen Victoria herself, which grew alongside the movements of suffrage and anti-slavery. The Animal Rights movement in the United States patterned itself after its predecessor in England. A New Yorker by the name of Henry Bergh started the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA). While the ASPCA remained primarily a New York entity, other ASPCA chapters opened across the nation. Today there are hundreds of chapters on the county, city and

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state level. Bergh's dream has also expanded in that many of these programs not only fight against animal cruelty, but also provide shelters for animals in harm's way. The American Humane Association, whose efforts also benefit children, joined the Animal Rights Movement and has been an active supporter since 1877 (Walls 2008).

While the practice of bull baiting is unheard of in the United States, animals suffer at the hands of numerous equally cruel practices. Along the same lines as bull baiting, there is the modern day practice of dog fighting, defined as "a 'sadistic' contest in which two dogs – specifically trained to fight – are placed in a pit . . . to fight each other for the spectator's entertainment and gambling" (HSUS 2009: Dogfighting Fact Sheet). There are also often those with good intentions who simply cannot provide adequate care to their pets because of either time constraints or financial inability, thereby inadvertently imposing neglect. Others love animals so much that they cannot seem to get enough and are guilty of hoarding animals.



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Hoarding is the practice of “having more than the typical number of companion animals [without being able] to provide even minimal standards of nutrition, sanitation, shelter, and care [as well as] denial of the inability to provide this minimum care and the impact of that failure on the animals” (HARC 2009: About Hoarding).

The mass media has played a large role in helping with the fight against animal cruelty. Animal Planet runs a series called “Animal Cops” featuring different cities Houston being one of them) in which the viewer gets to see the sheriff and an HSPCA representative respond to calls about animal cruelty. These calls run the gamut from starving horses to fighting dogs, to elderly people living with too many cats. While the show can be hard to watch, the simple exposure it gives to the public raises awareness. There is also a new show that airs on National Geographic entitled “Rescue Ink.” In this show there are seven huge burly, tattooed, motorcycle guys whose mission is to stop animal cruelty. I think the premise of the show is genius in that it reminds people that anyone can help.

By their very definition, social problems come with controversy. It is literally impossible to please everyone, as there are those who favor the status quo, and those who feel that a drastic change needs to be implemented. Some of the earliest claims makers for animal rights were members of the English Parliament who spoke on behalf of their constituents and regarded the practice of bull baiting as cruel and unnecessary. Both the dogs and the bulls suffered serious harm and for what purpose? Their opponents argued that bull baiting was a long standing tradition that brought all levels of the English people together. They also contended that bull baiting was a sport and a means of entertaining the people.

These kinds of arguments are similar to the ones that the claims makers of today fight. The argument of “sport” still presents itself when protests are made against cock-fighting or dog

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fighting rings. While “sport” may be the basis for their argument, the root of it lies in finances. Dog fighting is an extremely lucrative, albeit demented and disgusting, practice, and for those that run it, the greed for money overrides the wellbeing of the animals.

Another of the most prominent issues that animal cruelty activists face today is that of overpopulation. In Texas alone, it is estimated that over 1 million dogs and cats will be dropped off to shelters each year. Nationwide over 4 million cats and dogs will be euthanized for lack of the ability to place them in a proper home (SPCA of Texas 2009). Of the animals dropped off at Houston shelters, over 90% will be euthanized each year. Overpopulation is a huge concern and while the solution seems simple, it involves several issues, most of which are highly controversial. The main goal of places like the SPCA and SNAP (Spay Neuter Assistance Program) is to sterilize animals so they cannot reproduce and add to the already disproportionate population. The opposition to this practice is those who have the uneducated notion that it somehow injures the animals and those who wish to professionally breed their animals (SNAP 2009: Truth Behind Spaying and Neutering Myths). Sterilizing dogs and cats in no way injures them, and often benefits them in reducing their risks of certain cancers and eliminating some of the more aggressive behaviors in male cats (SPCA of Texas 2009). The bottom line is that part of being a responsible pet owner is spaying or neutering your animals.

The question of dog breeding is highly contentious and not likely to reach a resolution anytime soon. For those who fight for dog breeding, they enjoy the look of the breed and feel they are getting the best of the best. However, as a BBC report recently described, many of the breeds are beginning to suffer serious health conditions from years of over breeding. Boxers are suffering more and more frequently from epilepsy, and King Charles spaniels are being born with skulls that are too small for their brains, resulting in numerous neurological problems

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(Pedigree Dogs Plagued by Disease 2008). As Professor Steve Jones of University College London said, “People are carrying out breeding which would be first of all entirely illegal in humans and secondly is absolutely insane from the point of view of the health of the animals” (Pedigree Dogs Plagued by Disease 2008). However, health issues are not the only reason why animal rights activists fight breeding. Breeding contributes to the already large population of animals needing homes, and not all people who breed are licensed and qualified. The result of unqualified breeders is often puppy mills. “Because a puppy mill is a business, the facility is designed purely for profit, not for the well-being of dogs” (HSUS 2009: Stop Puppy Mills).

It seems unreal that in an industrialized country such as the United States, cruelty of this nature can go on right under our noses. A large part of the problem is the legal system “[f]or a combination of factors . . . the court’s unwillingness to take animal cruelty cases seriously, procedural errors, and the effect of prosecutorial discretion on whether charges will be filed and maximum punishments sought” (Ravenscroft 2002: Texas Animal Cruelty Laws). The sad truth is that most animal cruelty charges are settled with simply a fine and/or probation.

In the fight against animal cruelty there still remains an uphill battle. However, advances have been made. SNAP has created a program in which people can bring in their animals for low cost (and sometimes free) sterilization. The general public is also working with animal control societies in what is called the TNR program (Trap Neuter Release). With a growing population of feral cats, veterinarians and animal activists created the TNR program in which a feral cat is trapped, brought to a vet clinic where it is neutered, vaccinated, and then returned to its home. That way the cat remains in the wild as he has chosen, but stops the cycle of reproduction.

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I would hope in the years to come that more government funding (whether on the city, county, state, or federal level) is allocated to resources battling animal abuse. I think the public needs to be educated more about the responsibilities that go along with owning a pet, as well as the benefits of sterilizing animals. I also feel that breeding should be done away with almost entirely. I do not know how that would work logistically, but something along those lines would be a drastic improvement. My final suggestion is for the Texas justice system to start taking notice of the severity of these crimes and begin doling out punishments that are appropriate. Perhaps there should even be something like a sex offender registry that is not open to the public, but can be checked when someone is attempting to adopt an animal. It is up to us to protect the animals, and after all, as Anatole France once said, “Until one has loved an animal, a part of one’s soul remains unawakened.”

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