Study Confirms Puppy Mills Leave Long Term Scars on Dogs

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They have as much as eight times the amount of fear as an average dog. They spin in tight circles. They are highly sensitive to being touched.

All common traits exhibited by adult breeding dogs who have been removed from puppy mills.

Researchers have now confirmed what anyone who works with dogs rescued from puppy mills knows: that they suffer psychological damage from their years of confinement and that after they leave they exhibit the effects years later.

The landmark new study conducted by University of Pennsylvania researchers for Best Friends Animal Society looked at 1,169 former puppy mill dogs and compared a wide array of psychological and behavioral characteristics with those of standard pet dogs.

"We always suspected the dogs in these facilities suffer emotionally because of the abnormal behaviors they show when they get out, but we can now scientifically confirm how truly destructive these places are for the dogs kept in them,” said Frank McMillan, a veterinarian and the study's lead author.

Commercial breeding operations, or puppy mills, are large scale facilities where dogs are confined in small enclosures for their entire lives with little to no exercise or positive human contact—for the sole purpose of mass-producing puppies to sell in retail pet stores and via the Internet.

[As clear a definition of a "puppy mill" as I have seen.]

“The results of the study indicate it really doesn’t matter if the breeding operation claims to be shiny and clean, abiding by the laws, or even whether or not they are licensed by the USDA,” McMillan said. “This study gives us strong evidence that the dogs kept in these large scale breeding facilities don’t just suffer while they’re confined there, but carry the emotional scars out with them for years even when they’re placed in loving homes. Many of the dogs show difficulty in simply coping successfully with normal day-to-day life.”

The results showed a broad range of abnormal findings in the former breeding dogs, including: significantly elevated levels of fears and phobias, pronounced compulsive and repetitive behaviors such as spinning in tight circles and pacing, house soiling, and a heightened sensitivity to being touched and picked up.

All of these traits are well known to those volunteers working to bring out the inner dog of the troubled puppy mill survivors at Delaware Valley Golden Retriever Rescue and Main Line Animal Rescue - among others - which holds weekly for sessions with dog trainer Mary Remer. Read about their amazing work in Dog Blessed by MLAR volunteer, Lisa Fischer.

Many exposés of puppy mills have focused on the filthy and unhealthy physical conditions, in some cases leading to stronger laws like in Pennsylvania, this research focused on the trauma to the inside of the dogs.

McMillan said that laws designed to protect the dogs from inhumane physical conditions do not provide adequate protection from the negative emotional effects.

[Although we wonder how one could legislate socialization.)

McMillan said while the majority of dogs improve, many continue to struggle emotionally for the rest of their lives, "to them the world and all the people in it just can’t be trusted—it is something to always fear. The damage done to these dogs is heartbreaking.”

“The saddest stories are those from the kindhearted people who adopt these dogs and work hard for years to give them love and acceptance. They’ll sometimes report that even after several years the dog will simply sit and stare blankly into space,” McMillan says. “They tell me that it’s like ‘he’s not really there,’ or that the little dog is reminiscent of a severely autistic child.”

The study was conducted in collaboration with Drs. James Serpell and Deborah Duffy at the University of Pennsylvania School of Veterinary Medicine and will be published in the journal Applied Animal Behavior Science.

An addendum: The Best Friends study comes a day after the city of Irvine, CA banned the sale of dogs and cats in pet stores, an ordinance fought by Washington-D.C. -based The Pet Industry Joint Advisory Council (PIJAC) - the trade group for pet stores, pet breeders and pet products manufacturers.

PJAC said its research - and we haven't seen it - has demonstrated that pet store puppies are "as healthy, or healthier, than puppies from any other source" and that "most pet stores obtain their puppies from responsible breeders, and customers choosing pet store puppies overwhelmingly end up with healthy and well-socialized pets."

By contrast national animal welfare groups contend that 99 percent of pet shop puppies come from puppy mills.

Now we await the response from PJAC and the American Kennel Club, which has stepped up its efforts of late to register commercial kennel-produced dogs to this groundbreaking study.

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