



FIREPAW

**THE FOUNDATION FOR INTERDISCIPLINARY RESEARCH AND
EDUCATION PROMOTING ANIMAL WELFARE**

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WHY PEOPLE DO NOT SPAY/NEUTER

**Joshua Frank, Ph.D.
Executive Director, FIREPAW, Inc.**

**Pamela Carlisle-Frank, Ph.D.
President, FIREPAW, Inc.**

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Spay/neuter is one of the most important tools, perhaps the most important tool, available to reduce companion animal overpopulation. Much progress has been made to increase spay/neuter rates across the nation, with some regional programs making particularly impressive strides. But there is still a large segment of society resistant to spaying or neutering their animals. What barriers keep these people from spaying or neutering and what can be done to overcome these barriers?

Money as a barrier

One of the premises of many spay/neuter programs is that money is a major barrier keeping people from getting their companion animals altered. Subsidized spay/neuter programs providing free or reduced rate services have had great success at attracting customers.

Some critics of low-cost or no-cost spay/neuter have argued that these programs cause consumers to merely switch the source of the procedure to a lower cost supplier rather than creating new users of the procedures. This criticism was particularly strong in the early days of subsidized spay/neuter programs and often came from some members of the veterinary community who viewed the programs as a threat to an important revenue stream. However, over time the success of these programs has proved difficult to dispute. The success of a wide range of programs across the country (for example New Hampshire and various projects nationwide funded by Maddie's Fund) have demonstrated that low-cost spay/neuter works at attracting *new* animal guardians who would not otherwise have spay/neutered their animal.

A FIREPAW study of dog guardians in upstate New York found that about a quarter (27%) of respondents who did not spay/neuter their dogs reported that cost was a factor in their decision. Although this study did not cover cats, other studies have found that cost is more often cited as a factor for cats than for dogs. Of those for whom cost was a factor in the FIREPAW study, about half said they would spay/neuter their animal if they only had to pay \$50 (see Figure 1). However, even at a cost of \$20, about a fifth of these people stated they would still not spay/neuter their animal due to the cost.

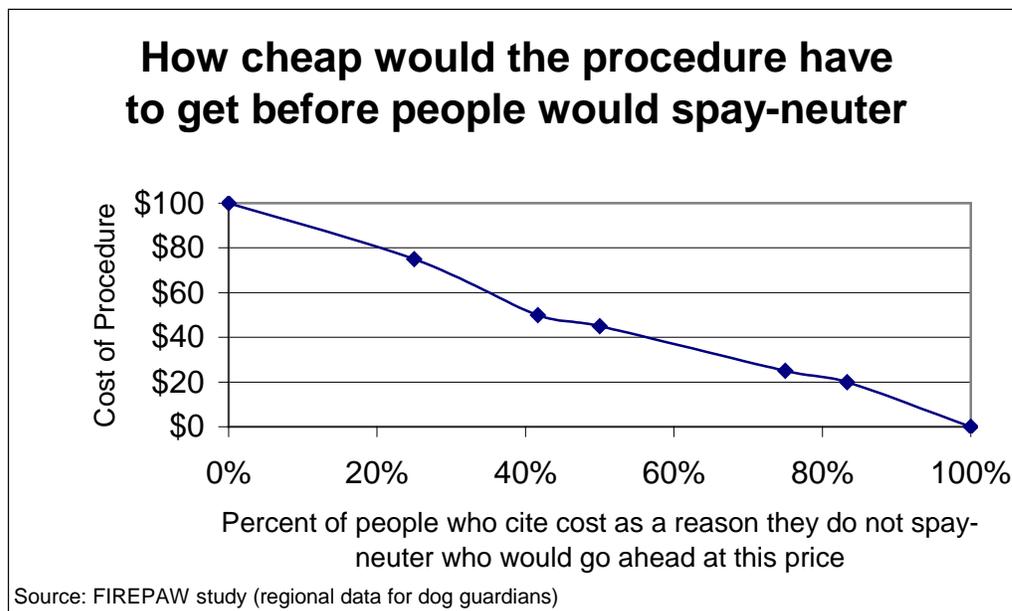


Figure 1

Low-cost spay/neuter programs then have two difficult questions. (1) How cheap to go, and (2) How to avoid “bargain hunters”. As Figure 1 suggests, the cheaper the procedure, the better the response. But cheaper procedures require larger subsidies and therefore additional resources that could be used for other projects. Cheaper procedures also increase the chance that “bargain hunters” will utilize the program. By “bargain hunters” we are talking about people who would spay/neuter their animal anyway, but take advantage of the low-cost program because of its price. Obviously, money spent on people who would spay/neuter anyway wastes valuable resources that could better be spent on other projects addressing companion animal overpopulation.

One common solution is some sort of “financial needs” test such as requiring Medicaid or public assistance eligibility to participate in the program. These policies have been demonstrated to reduce the number of bargain hunters in the program, but they also reduce the number of people participating in general. The fact is that there are some people who are not “low income” by any measure but who simply are unwilling to spend much to spay/neuter their animal. These people truly would not spay/neuter their animal without a low-cost spay/neuter program that includes them. Though one might disagree with their personal value system, the fact remains that giving these people a discount makes a difference in reducing overpopulation.

Ultimately, each program must evaluate its own unique situation to decide how to strike a balance regarding these issues. The proper balance depends on program resources, the particular profile of that community, and the precise mission of the program.

Money is not the only answer

Reducing costs for spay/neuter can reach enough people to have a significant impact on overpopulation and euthanasia. However, money is not the most important factor for most people who do not spay/neuter their animals.

In a national study done by Ralston Purina in 2000, cost of the procedure was not the most common reason given for either dogs or cats. The most common reason given for not spaying or neutering both dogs and cats was that the respondent simply hadn’t “bothered to do it yet”. For dogs, the second most common response was a desire to breed the animal. As mentioned previously, cost was mentioned more frequently for cats than dogs and 8-10% of dog and cat guardians didn’t spay/neuter because they thought it was “cruel” or “not natural”.

In a regional study of dog guardians, FIREPAW found similar reasons. This study also found that the best predictors of which dog guardians leave their dogs unfixed were sex and education level in that order. In fact, 92% of respondents who did not fix their dogs were either male or did not have a bachelor’s degree (compared to 75% of the total population of respondents). It should be noted that income was one of the variables measured in the study, and education was found to be a better indicator than income of who will spay/neuter. The FIREPAW study also found some other interesting trends:

- People who did not spay/neuter their animal were more likely to be male than their counterparts who did spay/neuter their dog.
- People who did not spay/neuter their animal were more likely to have lower levels of education relative to their counterparts who did spay/neuter their dog.
- People who did not spay/neuter their animal initially paid a lower average price for their dog relative to their counterparts who did spay/neuter their dog.

- People who did not spay/neuter their animal were more likely to live in a single-family home than their counterparts who did spay/neuter their dog.
- Respondents who did not spay/neuter their animal were much less likely to license their dogs.
- Single-family home dwellers most frequently gave “breeding” as their primary reason for not spay/neutering their animal (43%).
- The percentage of people who cited “breeding” as their primary reason for not spay/neutering their dog went up with the level of education, while those without any college were more likely to give “the dog does not go out” as their reason for not spay/neutering their animal.
- Urban respondents were more likely to say that “concerns about mutilation” (29%) was the primary factor in their decision not to spay/neuter. They were less likely to report that “breeding” (14%) or “wanting to have puppies”(0%) were the important factors in their decision.
- The frequency of breeding being cited as the primary reason for not spaying/neutering a dog went up as family size increased.
- For higher income people, breeding was the most common primary reason cited for not spaying/neutering a dog while for low income people, cost, concerns about mutilation, and wanting puppies were the most common primary reasons cited.
- Of those who did not spay/neuter their dog, 58% reported that they were likely to change their decision if they had the option of a chemical spay/neuter process that involved an annual shot rather than surgery. (Note: Such an option is not yet publicly available but is currently in the experimental stage).

On a positive note, the FIREPAW study also found that the public seemed to be open to education on the topic of spay/neuter and its link to euthanasia. When FIREPAW provided a short informational paragraph on this topic, people expressed a much higher willingness to spay/neuter their animal in the future. In fact, after providing the additional information, the only major remaining objection people had was cost. In other words, low-cost programs combined with some basic public education quite likely is enough to turn the people around who still do not spay/neuter their animal.