

# Pet neuter surgeries fall off during pandemic, driving shelter overpopulation

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Progress made over decades to control overpopulation of dogs and cats through high-volume spay-neuter surgeries is at risk thanks to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, a team of University of Florida

researchers conclude in a new study.

The impact—felt both at community shelters and [veterinary clinics](#)—includes sharp declines in spay-neuter surgeries after the initial pandemic-triggered [lockdowns](#), followed by staffing shortages in clinics and shelters, overcrowding and lagging pet adoption rates. All of these problems are compounded by a nationwide shortage of veterinarians, which has been felt even more acutely in shelters and spay-neuter clinics, the researchers say in a study that appears today (Sept. 13) in *Frontiers of Veterinary Science*.

The study focused on the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on the volume of surgical procedures performed by spay-neuter clinics, said Simone Guerios, D.V.M., Ph.D., a clinical assistant professor of shelter medicine at UF and the study's lead author.

The team drew its research from 212 clinics nationally, all of which make use of the cloud-based clinic management software program Clinic HQ, which is specifically designed for facilities that focus on spay-neuter and preventive health care services.

"The high level of spay-neuter achieved over the past five decades is the single most important driver of reduced pet [overpopulation](#) and euthanasia in animal shelters," Guerios said. "The rise in subsidized spay-neuter access helped drive the euthanasia of shelter pets in the United States from an estimated 13.5 million in 1973 to 1.5 million in 2019."

Using 2019 as a baseline, the UF team aimed to determine the impact of the pandemic on the volume of spay-neuter procedures performed in 2020-2021 at the 212 clinics, which collectively performed more than 1 million surgeries per year and were on track to increase surgeries by 5% over the previous year.

But in the 24 months from January 2020 through December 2021, 190,818 fewer surgeries were performed at the clinics studied than would have been expected had 2019 levels been maintained, the researchers found.

"If a similar pattern was experienced by other spay-neuter programs in the United States, it would suggest there is a deficit of more than 2.7 million spay-neuter surgeries that animal welfare organizations have yet to address," said co-author Julie Levy, D.V.M., Ph.D., the Fran Marino Endowed Distinguished Professor of Shelter Medicine Education at UF's College of Veterinary Medicine.

All the impacts of the pandemic combined have the potential to undermine progress made in controlling pet populations and euthanasia in shelters, Levy added.

"Currently, shelters are in crisis mode, with overcrowding and lagging adoptions," Guerios said. "Pet overpopulation seems to be increasing, leading to increased shelter euthanasia for the first time in many years."

The UF College of Veterinary Medicine is responding to societal needs by increasing class size and remodeling its surgical training facility to enhance surgical skills development. The college also offers four courses and clerkships specifically designed to provide students with real-world spay-neuter experience, Levy said.

As part of these hands-on learning opportunities, UF veterinary students spay and neuter thousands of [cats](#) and [dogs](#) in their local communities, she added.

"Through our recent expansion of class size to meet the increasing demand for veterinary graduates, along with unique certificate programs and shelter medicine internships, our college is taking proactive action to

address these disturbing trends in animal healthcare and well-being," said Christopher Adin, D.V.M., chair of UF's department of small animal clinical sciences, which oversees the college's shelter medicine program.

**More information:** 58 COVID-19 associated reduction 57 60 in elective spay-neuter surgeries 59 62 for dogs and cats, *Frontiers in Veterinary Science* (2022). [DOI: 10.3389/fvets.2022.912893](https://doi.org/10.3389/fvets.2022.912893)

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