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Puppy Buyer Complaints: A Five-Year Summary, 2007-2011

The Humane Society of the United States

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Puppy Buyer Complaints A Five Year Summary, 2007-2011

The Humane Society of the United States receives complaints about sick puppies on a daily basis. Over a five-year period (2007-2011), our puppy mills campaign received **2,479** puppy buyer complaints. The complaints came to The HSUS via our website complaint form (www.humanesociety.org/puppycomplaint), by email, and through our puppy mills tip line. Buyers complained about sick puppies sold by a variety of sources, including pet stores, breeders (both in person and online), or middleman dealers (sometimes known as brokers).

Unsatisfied buyers contact The HSUS for many reasons; some are seeking information about how to pursue their consumer complaint, others seek information about where their pet store puppy really came from, many want the seller investigated or potentially shut down, and others simply want to share their stories as a warning to others.

But the complaints received by The HSUS represent only a small fraction of all sick puppy complaints nationwide. Some buyers of sick puppies report their complaints directly to the seller, to local animal control, or to a consumer agency such as their local Better Business Bureau, instead of contacting a national group. Many others do not contact anyone at all. Therefore the 2,479 complaints received by The HSUS represent just a very small sample of all consumer problems with sick puppies.



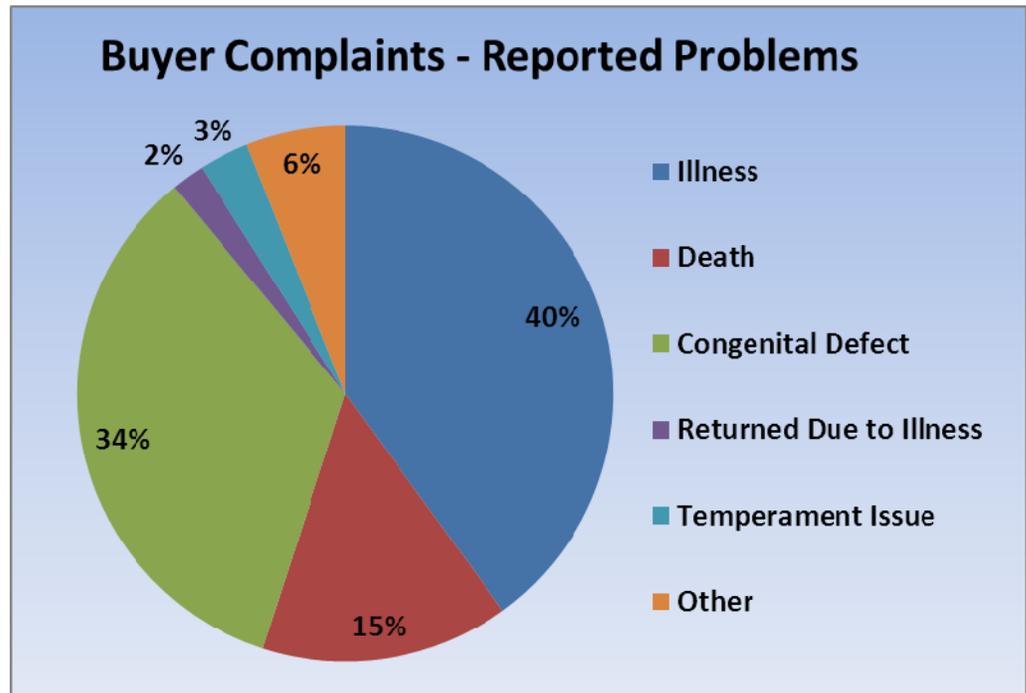
Pixie: Purchased from a Texas breeder via the newspaper, she died less than a week after purchase from an unknown illness.

Staff with The HSUS made an attempt to follow up with each complainant to check on each puppy's well-being and survival, and to offer advice on how to resolve each complaint. Some complainants, for example, were advised of their states' puppy lemon laws or referred to local law enforcement or animal control agencies, if warranted. Some complaints were forwarded to The HSUS's Animal Rescue Team or other departments for potential investigation.

HSUS is just one of many online forums for filing complaints about the purchase of sick pets, since searches on websites like www.ripoffreport.com, www.complaintsboard.com, and www.pissedconsumer.com yield numerous consumer complaints about sick and dying puppies. For this report, however, only complaints reported to The HSUS were counted.

Common Buyer Complaints

Many puppy buyers complained of multiple problems with their puppy, but for statistical purposes, each complaint was categorized according to the buyer's primary concern only. Of the **2,479** complaints received from puppy buyers, the numbers of reported health and other problems suffered by the dogs are as follows:



1,032 Illness: 40% of the sick puppies did not have an illness that led to a known premature death, but the dog(s) purchased were reportedly ill or became ill with a condition that was most likely present at purchase.

The most common illnesses reported in puppy mill puppies were:

- Intestinal parasites such as worms, giardia, and coccidia
- Respiratory issues such as bronchial infections and pneumonia
- Infectious diseases which can be deadly to puppies, such as parvovirus and canine distemper
- Ear issues such as infections and mites
- Skin disorders such as mange
- Urinary infections and bladder issues
- Hypoglycemia (low blood sugar)

840 Congenital defects: 34% of the complaints involved defects where the dog did not immediately fall ill with an infectious disease but suffers from a significant congenital or inherited condition. These dogs are not included in the "illnesses" figure above because in many cases the condition was not



apparent until several months or even a year or more after purchase.¹ If the dog had both an illness and a congenital defect, he or she was listed under “illness” only.

The most common congenital defects reported in puppy mill puppies were:

- Seizures or suspected neurological issues
- Skeletal disorders with the hip, elbow or knee
- Hernias (umbilical and inguinal)
- Heart murmur or heart disease
- Liver disease such as liver shunt
- Eye issues such as cherry eye, cataracts, and blindness
- Deafness
- Spinal disorders

364 Deaths: Approximately **15%** of the total complaints received involved a puppy who died shortly after purchase. In some cases a single complainant purchased more than one puppy who died. The number may be higher, since not all complainants follow up after reporting a sick or possibly dying puppy. The most common causes of death included parvovirus, pneumonia, and congenital conditions such as heart or liver defects.

85 Temperament issues: **3%** of the complaints were reported primarily due to a temperament issue which affected the dog’s quality of life or family safety. Some of these dogs had severe aggression issues that resulted in euthanasia, but they are not counted under deaths because no known physical condition was present at purchase. Not included in this figure are the many dogs who appeared fearful or maladjusted, yet were listed primarily under the “illness” category because that was the buyer’s primary complaint.



Weighing less than one pound, Ruby was purchased as a Christmas present from a Florida Petland store; she had recently been shipped from a breeding facility in Missouri. Soon after purchase, Ruby suffered a seizure and died from cardiac arrest.

Common temperament problems reported in puppy mill puppies were:

- Fearful behavior (for example: hiding, shaking, running away as if never socialized)
- Aggressive tendencies (for example: biting or snapping)
- Abnormal behavior (for example: walking in circles repeatedly, eating feces).

¹ The delay in onset is due to the fact that some inherited disorders don’t manifest until an animal reaches his or her adult size.



50 Returned due to illness. About **2%** of total complainants reported returning their puppy to the store or breeder due to illness, often stating that they could not afford the veterinary care to treat the puppy. It is possible that many of the returned puppies died or were euthanized after being brought back to the store or breeder, but we did not count them under “deaths” because their fate is unknown.

“I purchased [an] English Creme Golden Retriever puppy [who] had such severe hip dysplasia in both hips that at 4 months old the puppy could barely walk. We have had one hip replaced and still have one to go. The total cost for the surgery is \$13,000. This does not include all the visits to the vet as well as the orthopedic vet we had to see, as well as the X-rays and medication to keep him comfortable prior to doing the surgery.”

– Maureen T., Guilford CT

158 Other: 6% of complaints involved not receiving promised registration papers, sanitation or grooming issues (such as dogs delivered to the buyer with matted fur, fleas, overgrown nails, excessively dirty, or other signs of general neglect), the seller’s misrepresentation of puppy’s breed or size, etc.

Because deadly diseases in puppies may have an incubation period of up to two weeks, it was common for puppies to seem healthy at time of purchase, only to become sick or even die within one to ten days. Some buyers reported spending thousands of dollars trying to save the life of a sick puppy, with a few spending more than \$10,000 in veterinary bills attempting to save the life or ease the suffering of their pet.

“When I first held Franchesca, I noticed that she sneezed a few times and was very sleepy. The [pet] Store Manager mentioned that she had been sneezing and may be coming down with a cold....By 10:00 pm, Franchesca was throwing up and could barely hold up her own head. The x-rays revealed that Franchesca had Pneumonia in both lungs. It was estimated that the total costs [for treatment] could be as much as \$1,800.”

– Carrie E., Columbus OH

States with the Most Complaints Submitted to HSUS

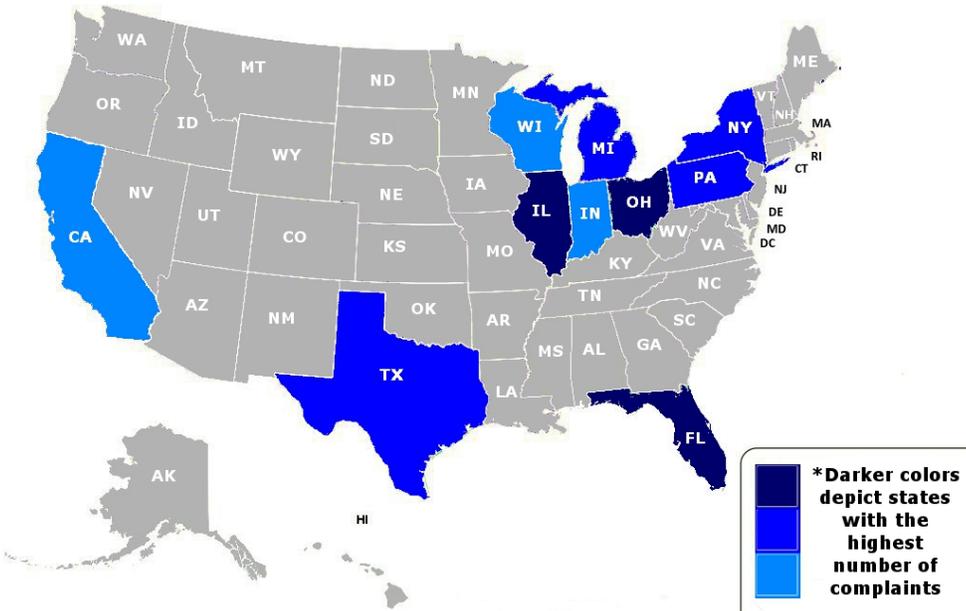
For each complaint, The HSUS kept a record of the buyer’s state in addition to the seller’s state(s). For example, if a Virginia consumer complained about a puppy she purchased over the Internet who was

shipped to her from Missouri, the complaint would be logged as a Virginia consumer complaining about a Missouri business. A Florida consumer who purchased a puppy from a Florida pet store that was shipped to the store from Arkansas would be logged as a Florida consumer complaining about



Pet Store Complaints by State

2007-2011



both a Florida business and an Arkansas business. If the buyer did not know where the puppy came from before reaching the store then only the state where the pet store was located was logged.

Florida had the highest number of *consumers* submitting complaints to The HSUS, followed by **Ohio and Illinois**.

The states whose *businesses* generated the most complaints

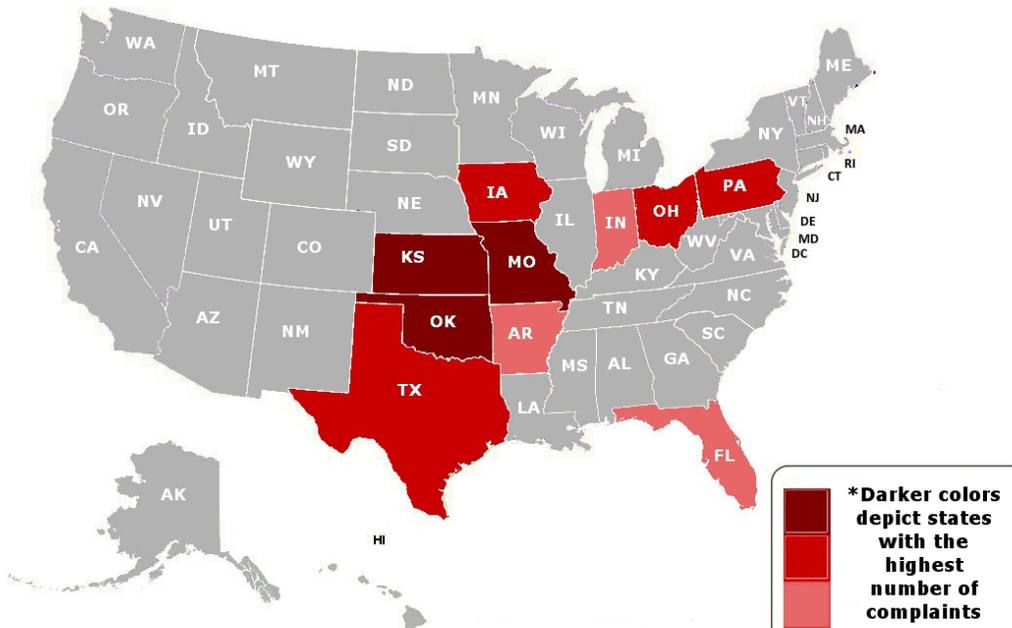
(from buyers in all states) were **Missouri, Florida, and Ohio**.

The highest number of complaints about puppies purchased from pet stores involved stores located in **Florida, Ohio, Illinois, Pennsylvania, New York, Michigan, Texas, California,**



Breeder / Broker Complaints by State

2007-2011



Wisconsin, and Indiana.²

Missouri generated the highest number of complaints about both breeders and brokers. This is consistent with research and analysis of state and federal records which has shown that Missouri is one of the top puppy-producing states. After Missouri, the top states for breeder complaints were **Oklahoma, Texas, Ohio, and Arkansas**. After Missouri, the top states for broker (dealer) complaints were **Florida, Kansas, Pennsylvania, and Iowa**.

Note: many buyers were not certain if their puppy came from a breeder or a broker because many complainants only knew who shipped or provided the puppy. They were not sure if the operation that provided the puppy was a breeder (where the puppy was born) or a broker (a dealer who re-sells puppies to others). For that reason, the breeder/ broker section is combined.

Complaints by Business Type

Although many complaints involved more than one seller (puppies sold for the pet trade often change hands multiple times), each complaint was categorized according to the acquisition source of the puppies, which were reported to HSUS as follows:

- **1,599** of the **2,479** complaints (about 65%) involved puppies purchased from a **pet store**.
- **880** of the **2,479** complaints (about 35%) involved direct sales from a **breeder or a broker**.
- **387** of the **880** breeder/broker puppy buyer complaints involved an **Internet** transaction. This amounts to **44%** of all breeder/broker complaints.

Note: In some cases, buyers of a sick puppy identified the store but did not know the name of their puppy's breeder or broker. In other cases, they submitted a complaint about both the store and the broker or breeder who had supplied the puppy to the store.

Deception and Broken Promises

Although their primary complaints were about receiving a sick pet, many puppy buyers also complained about broken promises, deceptive marketing, and/or a seller's attempts to cut costs by skimping on vet care or requiring the buyer to take the puppy to their participating vet.

² Some metropolitan areas with high concentrations of pet store complaints (for example: Chicago and Miami) often generated fewer breeder complaints since most large-scale dog breeders are not located in densely populated urban areas. Conversely, states with larger rural areas (AR, MO) that had many breeder/broker complaints often had a much lower number of pet store complaints.

One buyer, whose puppy has a serious joint disorder that will require surgery, described alleged deceit by her puppy's breeder as follows: *"She advised me the puppy was AKC and stated in the contract that she would provide me with the documentation within 10 days of the sale. The contract and guarantee also states that she would pay for any treatment in the [event] of a congenital health issue. [But now] the breeder has cut off all communications and left me with a crippled puppy."*

Often pet stores were accused by buyers of downplaying a puppy's alleged health issues and/or using vets who treated their puppies with the least expensive and often ineffective treatments. One buyer whose puppy was eventually diagnosed with pneumonia wrote: *"[The pet store] told me at the time that he may have a bit of kennel cough and that I had to take him to their vet. They gave me some pills, Albon and Flagyl and told me to give him that. He didn't improve, he actually got worse. I took him to their vet and he said he had a respiratory infection. More pills and a daily trip to the kennel for breathing treatments. Still no better. I ended up taking him to [another vet] where they immediately diagnosed him with Pneumonia. He was in ICU and almost died."*

Conclusion

Behind the statistics of this summary are more than 2,400 puppies who suffered and sometimes died, and more than 2,400 families or individuals who suffered along with their pets, both financially and emotionally. It was common for complainants to use phrases such as "heartbroken" and "devastated" to describe the psychological effects of dealing with a sick puppy. Witnessing their beloved pet experience ongoing pain and distress and sometimes death was often compounded by financial worries as many buyers reported that they went into debt in an attempt to treat their puppy's problems. It was not uncommon for complainants to state that their puppies would have to be on costly medications or therapies for the rest of their lives.

The HSUS compiled and released this information for several reasons. First, we want to warn consumers about the many problems that affect commercially-raised puppies and their buyers, often due to uninformed or impulsive purchases from questionable sellers. When the public understands better the potential pitfalls of purchasing from questionable sellers, or from any puppy breeder they have not personally visited and carefully researched, they can avoid financially supporting puppy mills and dealing with the heartache of a sick pet.

Second, The HSUS hopes to demonstrate that certain states have a high number of complaints in order to make it clear to lawmakers that stronger laws and oversight are needed, especially in states linked to numerous complaints. Stronger oversight of puppy mills can help stop potentially cruel conditions before they become entrenched, and can help ensure that only healthy and well-raised puppies are offered for sale to the public.

METHODOLOGY

The HSUS data that is the basis of this report was collected from anecdotal rather than statistical sampling data. It is a very small sample of all of the events that likely occurred nationwide during the time period studied. Consumers volunteered the information via HSUS web form submissions, and/or by phone or email. Their complaints were then entered in The HSUS's internal database of puppy buyer complaints. An attempt was made to follow up with every complainant to determine the fate of the puppy and gather additional details, however not all complainants responded to follow-up inquiries. This report was based on the date each complaint was received rather than the purchase date of the puppy. Consumer complaints that were of a general nature or did not involve a puppy purchase were omitted from the sample.