



Animal Ethics and Well-Being with Dr. Frank McMillan

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What is a puppy mill?

The definition of a puppy mill seems relatively straightforward. It's a place that mass-produces puppies, isn't it? The term, however, is actually a source of considerable confusion and debate. And this ambiguity creates wiggle room that has very important implications for the welfare of the dogs who spend any part of their lives in these breeding facilities.

To start with, there is no "official" or legal definition of puppy mill, and there is no definition that everyone agrees upon, even among animal welfare organizations. The two most common views of what constitutes a puppy mill are (1) any dog-breeding operation that produces large numbers of puppies and (2) those breeding operations in which dogs are kept in deplorable conditions with little or no medical care. The second definition is frequently distinguished from the first by the word "substandard," which is used to demarcate a purported line between the cleaner large-scale breeders and those that operate in unacceptable, or "substandard," conditions. The breeders themselves use this "substandard care equals puppy mill" definition, but so does the American Veterinary Medical Association.

Let's think about this. Does limiting the definition of puppy mill to "substandard" breeding operations make sense? Recently I was watching an Animal Planet program about puppies sold by Petland pet stores. At one point the narrator, talking about an undercover agent, stated, "He's gotten into over two dozen suspected puppy mills." What is a "suspected" puppy mill? The narrator states at another point, "It's up to Mike to collect definitive evidence that Petland suppliers are operating puppy mills." What evidence would prove that a breeding facility is a puppy mill? Are we saying that if an inspector walked through a large breeding facility and found no violations of the law, it would not be a puppy mill, but if he finds one animal suffering from neglect (say, a puppy who died of hypothermia because of inadequate heating in the building), then the facility instantly becomes a puppy mill? Does this make any sense?

In my attempt to clarify this issue, I will call these breeding operations what the people who own and operate them call them: high-volume breeding kennels.

Many high-volume breeders view the term "puppy mill" as

derogatory (like referring to a woman with 10 children as a "baby factory") and feel it should never be used. But where the implications for the welfare of dogs become particularly important is when the high-volume dog breeders do use the term. When they do, they use the second meaning I gave above: a puppy mill is not just any large-scale breeding kennel, but one that is "substandard."

It's very common to hear these high-volume breeders make statements like this: "We're not a puppy mill. Puppy mills are what you see on *Oprah* and those *60 Minutes*-like TV shows. We run a respectable breeding operation here." An ideal illustration of this view is the following passage from *The Kennel Spotlight*, the trade magazine for high-volume dog breeders, written by high-volume breeder Sharon Munk:

"Another term that extremely offends us is "puppy mill". We despise that word! It has a preconceived image about it. We all know what that image is — filthy, dirty, diseased. We prefer to use the term "sub-standard kennel" or "sub-standard facility" because that is what most people are talking about when they use the term puppy mill. By using the word "sub-standard facility", it separates those who are doing a good job, those who are concerned with animal welfare, those who are licensed and following the law from the true sub-standard facilities." (July/August 2007, p. 32)

High-volume breeders use the "substandard" label in an attempt to distance themselves from the "filthy, dirty, diseased" breeding operations. (I'm going to skip over the glaringly obvious problem of the fact that no high-volume breeders, no matter what condi-

tion their dogs are in, will call themselves a puppy mill. It's always "the other guy.")

Is there a clear line that separates "substandard" high-volume breeders from those who are, in the words of Ms. Munk, "doing a good job"? Research over the last two decades is increasingly showing that there is not. Numerous studies have clarified the factors that are helpful and those that are harmful to a dog's quality of life, and for many of these factors the cleanliness of the housing is unimportant. Deprivation of human companionship has been shown to be a powerful source of distress for dogs, and in both clean and filthy high-volume kennels, the dogs exert

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the greatest efforts at attention-seeking barking and howling at the front of their cages when they see a human being, just like we see in some animal shelters where the dogs are starving for human contact. In fact, this loud barking often leads puppy mill owners to debark their dogs to lessen the intensity of the noise.

Other stressful factors, such as being cooped up in tiny spaces, no toys or enrichment, no playtime, inadequate stimulation, and no freedom to “be a dog,” are all present in both the poorly maintained operations as well as the ones that are “doing a good job.” In short, the harm done to dogs has no line of distinction; the harm occurs at all levels of high-volume breeding, from the immaculately clean to the most appalling living conditions imaginable. The suffering is not relieved just because the prison is disinfected and glistening.

What about the laws to protect the dogs from neglect and cruelty? Wouldn't they serve as a benchmark for defining a puppy mill, such that high-volume kennels in compliance with the law would not be puppy mills and those in violation would be? No, and the reason is simple: The laws do not sufficiently take the recent research about canine psychological health and well-being into account. Therefore, the bar for lawful compliance is set so low that it fails to provide the dogs with adequate protection against known sources of suffering.

If high-volume breeders can portray their business as separate from puppy mills — particularly by using the deceptive term “substandard kennels,” for example — then they become successful in deflecting the public's attention to only the very worst of the worst breeding operations, so that they can continue their harmful practices without scrutiny. As long as they succeed in convincing the public that there is a line where no line truly exists, and people should only pay attention to the dogs on the other side of the line, the well-being of millions of dogs in the “clean” breeding kennels remains at grave risk.

Is there anything, then, that can be used to define a puppy mill? Yes, there is, and it is based on a very simple question: Are the needs of the dogs properly met? The physical needs, the comfort needs, the psychological needs, the security needs, and the social needs. In all animals, including the human kind, distress and suffering occurs when needs are not met. And this gives us our answer: A puppy mill is any dog-breeding facility that keeps so many dogs that the needs of the breeding dogs and puppies are not met sufficiently to provide a reasonably decent quality of life for all of the animals. Simple. And with no wiggle room. 🐾

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