

Animal Hoarding in Israel: Description and Implications of Animal Welfare and Suggested Resolutions

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ABSTRACT

Animal hoarding, a complex and often-misunderstood phenomenon, presents significant challenges to both individuals and communities. This paper offers a comprehensive review of the literature on animal hoarding, synthesizing key findings from various disciplines including psychology, sociology, veterinary medicine, animal welfare and public health. The review identifies common characteristics of animal hoarder's, such as a deep emotional attachment to animals, social isolation, and a lack of insight into the harm caused by their behavior. Furthermore, the paper explores the multifaceted nature of animal hoarding, examining its psychological, social, and ethical dimensions. Three hoarding cases that were treated by the Animal Welfare Department of Veterinary Services and districts' referents are presented, demonstrating the complexity of the theoretical division of hoarders' types. Hereby, we further discusses the impact of hoarding on both human and animal welfare, including the risks of neglect, disease transmission and environmental deterioration. Additionally, the paper highlights the challenges in identifying and intervening in cases of animal hoarding, including legal and ethical considerations. Drawing on this review, the paper proposes a conceptual framework for understanding animal hoarding that integrates individual, interpersonal, and systemic factors. This framework emphasizes the need for a multidisciplinary approach to addressing animal hoarding, highlighting the important collaboration between mental health professionals, social services, animal welfare organizations, and law enforcement agencies. Finally, the paper discusses implications for research, practice, and policy, advocating increased awareness, prevention efforts, and support services for individuals at risk of or affected by animal hoarding. By advancing our understanding of this complex phenomenon, this paper aims to contribute to interventions that are more effective and ultimately may improve the well-being of both humans and animals impacted by hoarding behaviors.

Key Words: Animal Hoarding; Animal Welfare; Law; Public Health; Mental Health.

INTRODUCTION

Animal hoarding phenomenon

Hoarding is a personality disorder characterized by the pathological collection and hoarding of various types of objects, such as furniture, newspapers, appliances and

more. There are hoarders who collect and hoard animals, in addition to hoarding objects or regardless (1). Animal hoarding, like any other hoarding, is a personality disorder that can stem from many reasons such as mental disorders, difficulty connecting with the environment, unrealistic or illogical perception of reality, anxiety and

trauma, depression, searching for meaning and self-worth, the need to help a large number of animals, and more.

One of the characteristics of hoarding is a loss of control over the situation, leading to deterioration of living conditions that may harm the holder and its environment. The hoarder fills his living area with objects, finds it difficult to arrange and clean his home, does not maintain cleanliness and hygiene, neglects his surroundings and himself, and overall does not allow himself adequate living conditions. The definition of this phenomenon is holding numerous animals in a human enclosure, and the inability to provide them with minimal living conditions, take care of their needs and take care of them, thereby harming them through no fault of their own and denying the situation to some extent (2). Hoarded animals are physically and mentally affected: they often suffer from neglect, diseases and parasites. Mentally, they might develop abnormal behaviors such as fear, sensitivity to touch, attachment and attention seeking, separation-related behavior, urination and defecation when left alone, or repetitive behaviors (3).

Although little is known about this phenomenon, animal hoarding is believed to occur in every community and remains poorly understood (4).

The typical characteristics of an animal hoarder:

1. Possession of a large number of animals objectively and in relation to the ability to care for them.
2. Possession of companion animals mainly cats, dogs, and additional types of animals (5, 6).
3. Inability to care for animals and take care of all their livelihood needs.
4. Denial of the situation and unrealistic perception of reality
5. Self-neglect and the neglect of the all animals and premises.

According to literature, there are three types of hoarders: the "overwhelmed caregiver", the "rescuer hoarder" and the "exploitative hoarder" (7, 8):

1. **The "overwhelmed caregiver"**: A person who decides to take care of animals in order to save them and find them good homes, out of an understanding that there are animals that need help and with a sense of mission and self-meaning. His personal value is related to the collection and care of animals. Collecting animals is usually done passively:

they arrive to his possession through private bonds, people who hear about him and make contact, or authorities who consider him an association. At first, he manages to provide the animals with their livelihood needs, but soon he loses control of the situation, both financially and therapeutically, but does not stop receiving more and more animals and does not try to improve the situation. Moreover, he usually isolates him-self from society.

2. **The "rescuer hoarder"**: Similar in motives and characteristics to the "overwhelmed" caregiver, but sees rescuing animals not only as part of his self-definition, but as a life task that slowly becomes an uncontrollable need. He does not take into account his ability to care for animals in the first place as a prerequisite for the task, although at the beginning of his actions he possesses certain abilities. He is usually very afraid of death and this fear motivates him to actively and passively collect animals: both from outside sources and by self-collection. He believes that he is the only one who can take care of the animals properly and even works to put animals up for adoption, but slowly become reluctant to remove them and concentrates mainly on saving them. Hence, very quickly the number of animals exceeds his ability to care for them. He is unable to refuse accepting additional animals from the outside, and he isolates from the society. However, he still maintains a certain relationship with others due to the desire to continue receiving animals. Nevertheless, he tries to prevent intervention as much as possible and is characterized by manipulative qualities.
3. **The "exploitative hoarder"**: Actively collect animals in order to satisfy his needs (such as money or prestige). He often seems social, charismatic, having personal charm and manipulative, but lacks empathy for people and animals. He is indifferent to them and even deny their condition. He usually does not cooperate with authorities or any other intervention. This type of hoarder thinks and believes that he knows best, condescends and considers himself an anti-establishment expert. He is often able to lie and cheat in order to get his own and all ways are legitimate in his eyes.

The importance of understanding the types of hoarders can influence how they are treated. The "overwhelmed caregiver" and the "rescue hoarder" are able to cooperate with the authorities' demands, but the "rescue hoarder" will not cooperate, so enforcement measures must be taken (7). In many cases, characteristics of the three types of hoarders can be found in one hoarder or the development of all three types in the same hoarder, over time.

CASES DESCRIPTIONS

Case 1:

A man in his 40's began collecting stray cats at his home, following the death of his beloved cat, and was worried about cats on the street. At the same time, he made contacts with citizens and authorities to transfer to him stray cats that needed to be cared for. Within a short time, he reached holding of 500-600 cats in a closed enclosure and found it very difficult to care for them financially and physically. Following repeated complaints about the cats' poor state of holding, representatives of the authorities arrived at the scene and began a process of arrangement with him, which often failed due to his lack of cooperation and inability to take responsibility for the situation. He used to move the cats between different enclosures, in different households, and it did not improve the situation at all. The last holding place was very dirty, it smelled strongly of ammonia, the cats looked neglected and sick and after being examined it was found that some of them were infected with leishmania, which is a zoonotic disease. The case came to the attention of the authorities responsible for enforcing the Animal Welfare Law and the municipal veterinary service. Due to the infestation of the disease, great distress was expressed by the neighbors, and in light of all these, the hoarder agreed to cooperate: he hired an attending veterinarian who examined all the cats and marked them with an electronic chip. The infected cats were euthanized and the remaining cats (30 in number) were transferred to another facility, treated with preventive treatment (vaccination, deworming and treatment against skin parasites), neutered and spayed. It was agreed that the hoarder would not continue to collect cats and would focus on the remaining cats. As long as the hoarder persisted in the agreement, no indictment will be filed against him. The case was accompanied by the authorities, together with the hoarder's father, and long talks were held with him during the

visits that took place. The local authority continued to monitor the situation, but no public health authority intervened.

Case 2:

A man in his 30's who was working as a taxi driver and during his work noticed stray cats, some of which to him appeared sick, and decided to collect them, treat them, neuter and sterilize them and put them up for adoption. He soon realizes that it was difficult to find a home for all cats and found it difficult to take care of all the cats. Following the complaints that arrived to the authorities and lead to their intervention, he made sure to move with all the cats in his custody from one authority to another, in order to avoid interference. According to his perception, he is the only one who could save the stray cats from their cruel fate. While he suffers as a result in his personal life, he was still unwilling to separate from his cats and return them to the places from where he collected them. He used to move with the cats from one place to another and disperse the cats to other residences, without updating the authorities and by literally concealing the data. This behavior caused increased stress to the cats and demonstrated his lack of reliability in actually rescuing them.

Case 3:

A 60-year-old woman, who lived alone in an apartment in a urban residential building owned 43 cats. At first, the woman kept "Khao Manee" cats (Thai cats) in order to breed and sell them, and following a personal loss, the number of cats she kept grew to include stray cats collected from the street. Following complaints from neighbors about the bad smell coming from the apartment, representatives of the authorities came for an inspection but were unable to obtain the cooperation to carry out a proper inspection of the apartment. Due to real concern for the welfare of the cats, a court order was issued allowing entry into the apartment to document the findings. The inspection found 43 cats living in an apartment full of furniture and objects, a lot of dirt, cat secretions and various types of garbage. There was a very strong smell of ammonia in the apartment since the windows were closed for fear of the cats escaping. Additionally, the woman scattered odor fresheners throughout the apartment, which made the smell worse. Only one bowl of drinking water and one litter box were found, and some frozen meat in the freezer that was used as cat food. The cats were found to be neglected, thin, suffering from skin infections and skin and ear parasites. The

woman had no documentation of veterinary treatments or vaccinations for the cats. Due to the difficult state of possession, the cats were confiscated.

DISCUSSION

Animal hoarding, a distinct subset of hoarding disorder, has a significant public health impact on the humans involved, as well as animal welfare. Individuals exhibit self-neglect, apathy, social withdrawal and object hoarding; living within squalid, deteriorated, structurally unsafe and uninhabitable premises, alongside neglected animals (6). The critical issue that lies in the heart of animal hoarding from the "animal welfare" point of view is the failure to provide them with minimal care (9).

The difference between hoarding animals and keeping a large number of animals

A holder of an animal is responsible for providing it with all its needs, taking care of it, taking care of its health and preventing its suffering (10). For this purpose, a person who owns an animal must know what is required in order to keep an animal and what are its natural needs. Naturally, people keep animals that are familiar, such as dogs and cats, but some people will keep parrots, reptiles, and farm animals. The number and types of animals depend to a considerable extent on the ability of the holder to provide them with all their needs and care for them, as well as to provide them with a sufficiently large and suitable living area. The holder will take into account his financial ability, the size of the enclosure he can provide and his attitude towards the animals in his custody, as sentient being, with necessary natural needs and being part of the family and household lifestyles.

Keeping animals without taking this responsibility is considered animal hoarding. Moreover, animals are perceived by the hoarder as an object and its collection fulfills a mental need, similar to the collection of inanimate objects, and when the conditions of possession are examined, the basic holding requirement by law are not fulfilled.

Implications of hoarding:

The implications of the hoarding on the immediate environment relate to sanitary problems that can reach the point of health hazards:

- **Noise:** mainly in the possession of dogs and poultry.

- **Dirt and filth:** Animals soil their environment and the hoarder is unable to clean and maintain proper hygiene. In addition, the living area full of animals is also loaded with animal-related equipment and lack of concern for waste disposal – all of which tend to invade a neighbor's living area or yard or residential building.
- **Bad smell:** due to poor hygiene conditions and a large number of animals.
- **Poor maintenance of a residential complex:** the neglect in residential complexes of hoarders not only of the animals and their living conditions, but also of the hoarder's living conditions and place of residence.
- **Animal morbidity:** a large number of animals, neglect of living conditions and their care provokes, among other things, pathogens that can also be zoonotic (such as in Case 1 – Leishmaniosis in cats).
- **Decline in property value:** Hoarder's living area is severely damaged, as are the other properties nearby. Neighbors of hoarders suffering from the hazards find it difficult to sell their properties and the value of their property drops significantly.
- **Pests:** Sanitary hazards attract pests (such as flies, rats and mice). These pests damage the hoarder's habitat and its immediate environment.
- **Isolation from society:** In many cases, the hoarder is isolated from his environment as part of the hoarder's characteristics, and also due to the hostile attitude of the environment. This includes his family members, many of whom fail to help him, do not receive cooperation from him, surrender to the situation and cut off contact with him.
- **Possible health hazards to the hoarder** due to the sanitary conditions self-neglect and lack of medical attention.

Legislation regarding welfare and protection of animals

The Israeli Animal Welfare (Protection of Animals) Act from 1994, aimed at protecting animals and preventing them from unnecessary suffering, including prohibiting animal abuse, torture and cruelty (10). The title of the law contains two main sections: 2A: "No person shall torture, cruel or abuse an animal in any way", and 2A1(a): "The owner or occupier of an animal must provide for its livelihood, take care of its

health and prevent abuse" (10). These clauses are subjected to interpretation but also reinforce each other. An owner of an animal who does not provide living needs and does not take care of the animal's health neglects the animal he owns and chronic neglect constitutes abuse. A hoarder who neglects animals in his custody is actually abusing them passively and over time and violates the law. In addition to the main Animal Welfare Act, there are the Animal Welfare (Protection of Animals) (Possession Not for Agricultural Purposes) Regulations, from 2009 (hereinafter: the "Keeping Regulations"; 11), which set minimum conditions for the care and keeping of animals, including the provision of medical treatment and prevention of suffering.

The possession regulations specify the minimum conditions necessary for satisfying the needs of animals and constitute a necessary minimum threshold, below which is considered an offense. To the extent that many sections of the Possession Regulations are not complied with, this is considered a violation of the provisions of the Animal Welfare Act itself. In some countries, there are specific animal hoarding legislations, for example, in Hawaii, Illinois and Colorado (12, 13, 14). The regulations in Hawaii refers to a specific number of animals (it is forbidden to keep more than 15 animals), refers only to dogs and cats and describes the conditions for keeping them (12). In Illinois there is a reference to a large number of animals, but no specific number is specified. However, the quantity of animals is subject to interpretation, there is no reference to the type of animal and the holding conditions which they are examined (13). In Colorado, there are legislations in various municipalities relating to limiting the number of pets in a housing unit. In most municipalities, there is a restriction to keep 4-6 dogs over the age of 4 months (14). Other states in the United States have legislations that prohibits hoarding in general. (15).

Different types of hoarders: is the division precise?

The classical idea of dividing hoarders into three different types ("the overwhelmed caregiver", "the rescuer" and "the exploiter") is intended to ease dealing with the situation, but based on the experience of the Animal Welfare Department. In most cases, there is no clear distinction between the three types rather a fusion of the different characteristics. For example, in case be characteristics that are suitable for both the "overwhelmed caregiver" (caring for the animal, loss of control

over the situation, separation from the environment) and the "rescuer hoarder" (active and passive collection, contact with the environment, fear of death). In case 2, on the other hand, we can see characteristics of a "rescuer hoarder" (rescue as part of self-definition, active collection, does not differentiate from the environment, manipulates and prevents intervention by the authorities), and of the "exploitative hoarder" (knows best, condescending, anti-establishment). Nevertheless, case 3 began with characteristics of the "exploitative type" and over time characteristics of the "saving type" were interwoven with it. Patronek *et al.* (2006) described different treatments for the different types, however, we found that there is an overlapping in the types of treatment and the division is inconclusive (8). For example, Case 1, which corresponded in its characteristics to the "the overwhelmed caregiver", did not cooperate until there was a danger to health and the health of those around it. Even Case 2, which suited the characteristics of the "rescuer type", there was no cooperation from the beginning to the end of the intervention, including cheating of the law enforcement officials, contrary to the potential for cooperation with this "type", according to Patronek (8). Case 3 is characterized by the traits of the "exploitative type", but clearly, the characteristics of the "saving type" can be seen. In this case, only enforcement methods improved the situation, and welfare agencies were ineffective until representatives of the authorities intervened.

Ways of coping with hoarding

In order to influence and deal with the phenomenon, it is first necessary to understand the existing obstacles: Since cases of animal hoarding reach the sanitation authorities, the municipal veterinary services and the enforcement authorities of the Animal Welfare Act and its regulations – the treatment begins and continue by those authorities. They operate under the authority of the Animal Welfare Act and treat neglected animals, but they are unable to treat the hoarder. The hoarder suffers from a personality disorder, has difficulty integrating into the community, harms his entourage and his environment, and is likely to repeat collecting more animals and harm them. Most of hoarding cases that reach the court are hardly handled in a practical and efficient manner. The hoarder isn't usually perceived by the court as a criminal, furthermore the punishment existing in the law is not suitable for the treatment and prevention of continued hoarding. The hoarder does not turn to the welfare authorities and

the Ministry of Health for help, since hoarders usually deny and condescend over the establishment. Unfortunately, the authorities of the Ministry of Health and Animal Welfare cannot intervene to influence and improve the hoarder's condition in the absence of powers, a psychiatric opinion or a court order.

So how can we influence and improve?

The improvement in these cases lies in the broad consensus of all stakeholders and relevant authorities, that animal hoarding cases are complex situations that require the intervention and cooperation of several authorities. The causes for animal hoarding and the specific characteristics may vary; however, the outcomes remain constant: the harm to the animals. Optimal coping with animal hoarders incorporates aspects related to the conditions of the residential complex, sanitary conditions, safety of the residential complex (whether there are minors in the residential complex), animal welfare, and concern of harm to public health.

In the hoarding assessment, cooperative terminology should be used, which applies to all relevant authorities and interested parties:

1. Enforcement under the Animal Welfare law: as it is a criminal law, it is rather challenging for law enforcement officials and the court to treat the hoarder as a criminal. More importantly, the act of abrupt removal of animals, prosecuting and effectively criminalizing individuals with potential mental health issues also poses questions of public interest. Legal action is only part of the solution with high levels of repetition (up to 100%) reported (16, 17).
2. It is possible to ask the court to issue an order requiring diagnosis and treatment of the hoarder and thus begin a process of mental health treatment and animal welfare intervention combined.
3. Turning to a district psychiatrist and submitting a request for observation out of fear of harm to himself or his environment. Harm to the environment may concern public health aspects and possible suffering of animals, which are consciously sensing living beings. The examination can raise conclusions that will require the treatment providers and the hoarder to work together, monitor his condition, and thus prevent harm to himself, to his environment

and to animals. He may even receive many social rights that other mentally ill people receive.

4. Legislation of bylaws in local authorities that relate to the restriction of keeping animals in residential compounds. It is important to take into account that Israel is becoming densely populated (18), and keeping large numbers of animals in residential compounds may be problematic for both the public and animal welfare.
5. Legislative amendments related to sanitation: sanitation, noise, odor and other hazards.
6. Education and information regarding the proper keeping of animals and the responsibility of owners to them.

SUMMARY

Animal hoarding entails many challenges related to animal welfare, hoarders' health and the environment. Given that animal hoarding is linked to mental health, the treatment is particularly complex. The causes and characteristics of the disorder can be different, but the result is, most often, real harm to animal welfare. Under the "One Welfare" notion, when one comes to solve the problem, there is a need for a holistic solution that will benefit both humans and animals, and this requires sensitive cooperation of all parties, which rarely are required to work together. As in many cases, prevention may be a key factor and can be obtained by initial identification of risk factors, which will lead to early and close supervision and legal actions, especially by limiting the possession of the number of animals at the earliest possible stage.

Overall, this review demonstrates the importance of a multidisciplinary approach to manage animal hoarding, for the benefit of both animals and human subjects.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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