

A photograph of two dogs, likely Papillons, in a metal cage. The dog in the foreground is looking directly at the camera with its tongue slightly out. The dog in the background is looking upwards. The cage bars are visible in the foreground and background.

Puppy Buyer Complaints

A Ten Year Summary 2007-2017



**THE HUMANE SOCIETY
OF THE UNITED STATES**



Photo Credit: John Moyer for The HSUS



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Photo Credit: Amie Chou for The HSUS

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Unsuspecting buyers often fall in love with puppies in pet stores, having no idea they came from puppy mills and may be sick. Fortunately, this puppy was offered for adoption at a pet store that was working to find homes for rescued puppies from an animal shelter.

Puppy Buyer Complaints - A Ten Year Summary 2007-2017

The Humane Society of the United States receives complaints from buyers of sick puppies on a daily basis. Over a ten-year period (2007-2017), our puppy mills campaign received **5,118** puppy buyer complaints. The complaints came in by way of [our online complaint form](#), by email, and through our puppy mill tip line (1-877-MILL-TIP). Pet 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).

Troubled buyers contact the organization for many reasons; some are seeking information about how to pursue their consumer complaint and obtain reimbursements needed to cover veterinary care, others seek information about where their pet store puppy really came from, some want the seller investigated for potentially illegal or cruel conditions, and many have concerns about the welfare of other dogs on the property.

The 5,118 complaints received represent only a small fraction of all sick puppy complaints nationwide. Many buyers of sick puppies report their complaints directly to the seller, to local animal control or law enforcement, to a consumer group such as the Better Business Bureau, or on a website such as [riporffreport.com](#), instead of contacting a national animal welfare group. Many others, absorbed in trying to provide urgent care to a sick puppy, do not contact anyone at all.

Staff members 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. The Humane Society of the United States alerted some complainants, for example, to their states' puppy lemon laws or referred them to local law enforcement or animal control agencies, if warranted. Some complaints were forwarded to The HSUS' Animal Rescue Team or other departments for potential investigation.

Over a ten-year period (2007-2017), our puppy mills campaign received 5,118 puppy buyer complaints.



Photo Credit: Kathy Milani for The HSUS

In January 2018, the CDC concluded an investigation into an infectious disease outbreak that sickened 113 people, most of whom had made recent contact with puppies from Petland stores. The CDC found that the highest number of infections occurred in Ohio, Florida and Illinois – the same three states from which we received the highest number of pet store complaints.



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Common buyer complaints

Many puppy buyers complained of multiple problems with their puppy, but some concerns came up with greater frequency.

The most common illnesses reported were:

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

The most common congenital defects reported 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

The most common temperament problems reported were:

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

Because deadly diseases in puppies may have an incubation period of up to two weeks, it is common for puppies to seem healthy at the 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.

“We picked a puppy named Lugnut from Nextdaypets.com. We were naive in not understanding the world of puppy mills and transports. It was a cash only deal with no purchase agreement. Our puppy was hospitalized with parvovirus within four days of arriving at our home. According to our vet, due to the incubation period, they feel that this dog arrived to us sick. We have reached out to both the breeder and the transporter and our requests for a refund have been denied. We are very close to no longer being able to financially support to keep this puppy alive as he has been hospitalized for five days now and our bills are over \$4,000. [...] We are so close to losing the puppy that we loved.”

— Sabrina H.

“All the paper work from original purchase and AKC did not match up. The original papers showed one breeder name and birthdate and the AKC said another breeder and birthdate. The store confirmed that it was a puppy mill and offered to reimburse the cost of the puppy in exchange for [me] not suing the company. However, a month or two later the puppy became ill and the vet confirmed it is genetic and two dogs were bred that shouldn't have been. The dog was given two weeks to live at this point, but fortunately has surpassed that time. However, the veterinary bills and cost of the necessary medicine (taken twice daily) is upwards of \$8,000. We contacted the local government agencies who say this store has been flagged and that this owner has been shut down in the past and reopens under new store names in different locations.”

— MaryBeth C.

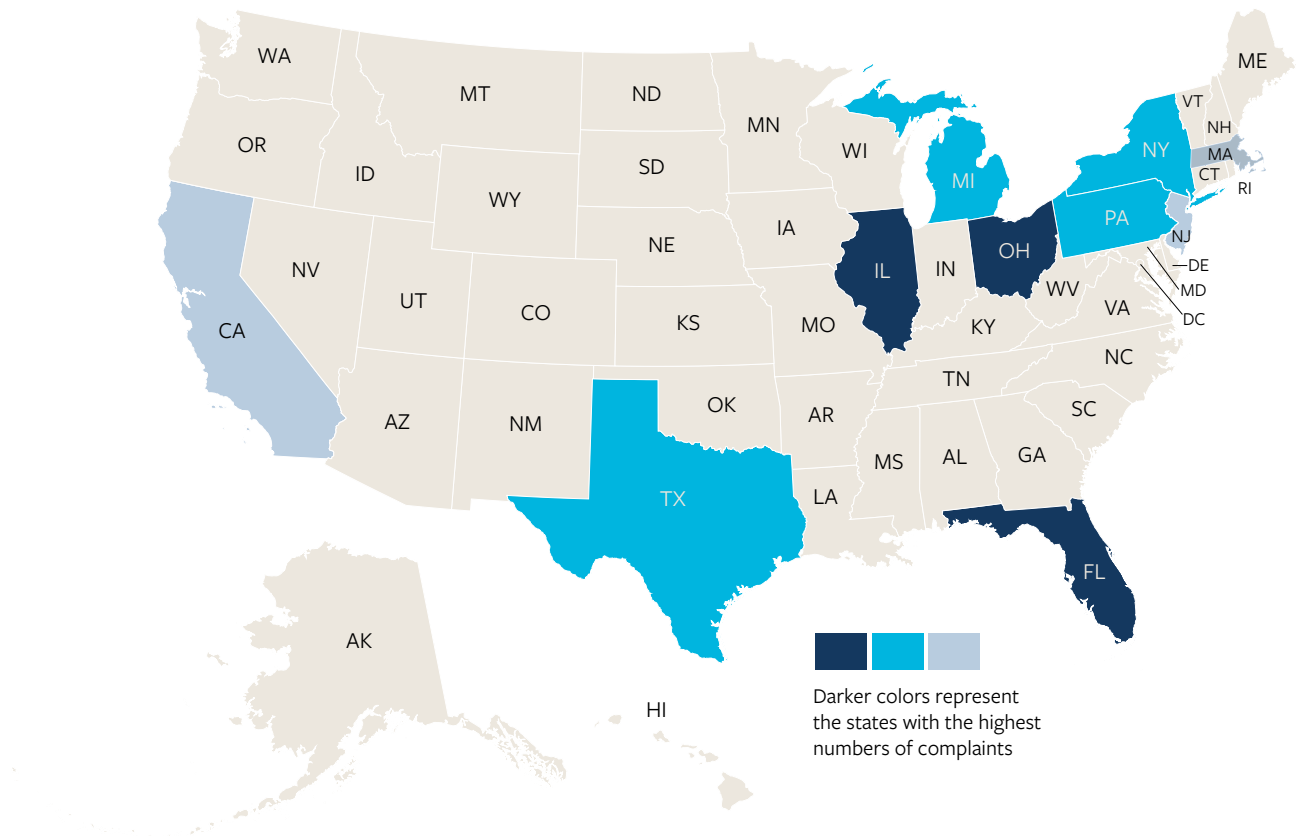


A Chihuahua was one of over 250 animals found in a breeding facility in Shelby, Ohio.



A Boston terrier looks out of her cage at a puppy mill near Tylertown, Mississippi. The Humane Society of the United States and the Humane Society of South Mississippi took custody of about 80 dogs from the property.

Top 10 States for Pet Store Complaints 2007 - 2017



States with the highest numbers of complaints

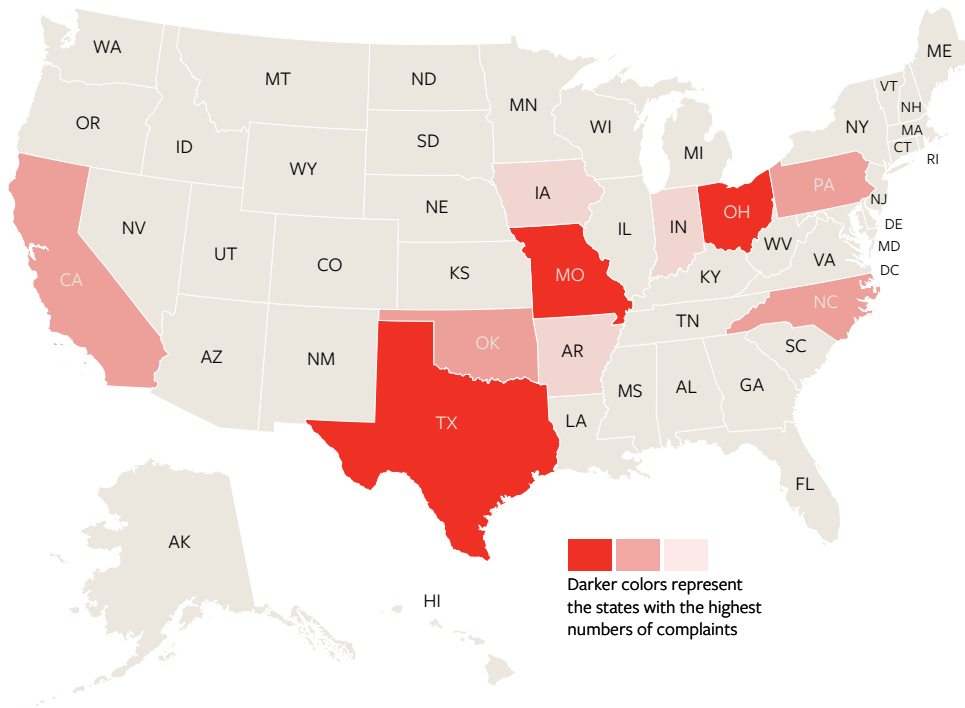
For each complaint, we kept a record of the buyer's state in addition to the sellers' state(s). For example, if a Virginia consumer complained about a puppy she purchased online who was shipped to her from Missouri, the complaint would be logged as a Virginia consumer complaining about a Missouri business. A Florida consumer who purchased a puppy from a Florida pet store who was shipped to the store from Arkansas would be logged as a Florida consumer complaining about 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 pet store location was logged.

Florida had the highest number of *consumers* submitting complaints, followed by **Ohio and California**.

The states where *businesses* generated the most complaints (from buyers in all states) were **Florida, Missouri and Ohio** in that order.

The highest number of complaints about puppies purchased from *pet stores* involved stores located in **Florida, Ohio, Illinois, New York, Pennsylvania and Michigan** in that order.

Top 10 States for Breeder Complaints 2007 - 2017



Missouri generated the highest number of complaints about *breeders*. 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 **Texas, Ohio, Oklahoma and California**, in that order.

The top states for *broker* (dealer or “middleman”) complaints were **Florida, Missouri, Kansas, Iowa and Pennsylvania** in that order.

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 The Humane Society of the United States as follows:

- **3,036** of the **5,118** complaints (about 59 percent) involved direct sales from a **breeder or a broker**.
- **2,082** of the **5,118** complaints (about 41 percent) involved puppies purchased from a **pet store**.
- **963** of the **3,036** breeder/broker puppy buyer complaints involved puppies purchased **over the internet**. This amounts to **32 percent** 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.

Buyers deceived

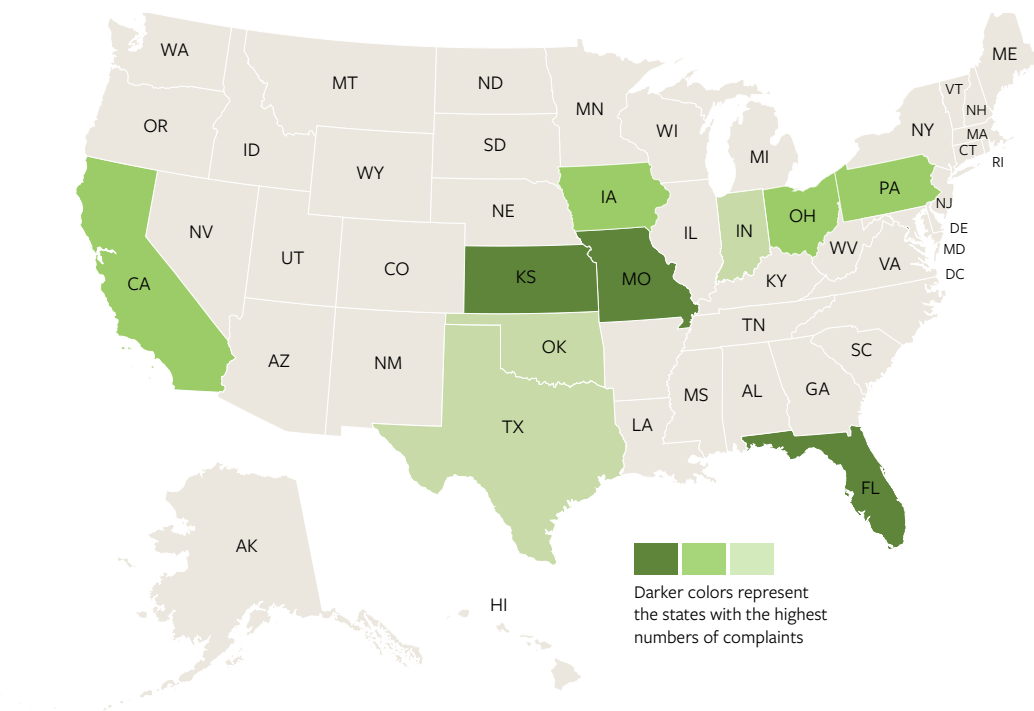
Although their primary complaints were about receiving a sick pet, many puppy buyers also complained about broken promises, deceptive marketing, health contracts that were not honored, and/or a seller’s attempts to cut costs by skimping on vet care or requiring the buyer to take the puppy only to the seller’s participating veterinarian. Some buyers said that pet sellers discouraged them from taking a very sick puppy to an emergency vet, insisting that their health warranty was only valid if the animal was taken to the pet store’s vet. This often resulted in delayed care for a puppy who became sick on a weekend or after regular business hours.

In addition, a number of pet store customers complained they were sold puppies under financing programs that were actually pet leasing programs, which forced them to incur still more expenses.

Top 10 States for Broker Complaints 2007 - 2017

Most of the brokers we received complaints about sell to pet stores or on large internet sites that pose as breeder collectives.

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). This may have resulted in some brokers or middleman dealers being listed as breeders.



One buyer said that upon agreeing to finance her puppy from a New York pet store, she was pressured to buy special supplements and foods and use only specific veterinarians to keep her warranty valid:

“We were going to pay for the dog through a leasing company called Wags Financing. [...] The lease total came to \$1,567.69. We were then informed that to qualify for their life insurance policy on the dog, we would have to purchase the ‘Health Extension Food and Vitamin program’ from them. [...] We were [then] told that to ensure this policy was valid, we had to bring her to a veterinarian they are affiliated with.”

The buyer’s puppy ended up being so gravely ill that she decided to return the puppy and cancel the lease, which wasn’t easy. She found numerous other complaints online about buyers who used the same store and leasing

program and had similar problems. The buyer concluded: *“My husband, my 4 year old daughter and I are all heartbroken to have had this happen. Even though it was only a few days with this puppy, we already treated her like family and did all that we could to care for her. It was difficult to make the decision to return her, but we felt it was better for us to not have to watch the puppy suffer or to be burdened financially.”*

Some complainants said they were encouraged to put the cost of their puppy on high interest credit cards offered by the pet store’s finance partner. These cards had such high interest rates that the practice might be considered predatory lending, leading consumers to spend many times the original price of the puppy – which compounded their financial peril when high veterinary bills were added to the mix.

Many buyers felt deceived when sellers sold them puppies under “health guarantees” or warranties that ended up being worth very little, or which ultimately were not honored. The buyers quickly ended up with a sick animal and high vet bills. One internet buyer, whose puppy was ultimately diagnosed with a heart defect, described the experience with her puppy’s breeder as follows:



An American Bulldog named Gigi was purchased from a breeder in California for \$18,000 by a buyer who did not see her prior to purchase. She arrived with labored breathing, patches of missing fur and was malnourished. Gigi soon passed away due to cardiopulmonary arrest stemming from pneumonia, pulmonary edema and mange, which were allegedly left untreated by the breeder.

“Bought boxer with ‘health guarantee.’ Before purchase I was given a document of his vet check saying he was healthy, no defects found. The next day after getting him we took him to our vet and a heart murmur grade 2 was heard. Six months later [it was] confirmed by echo [echocardiogram]. Health guarantee contract states that if puppy has congenital defect that [the online seller] will be responsible for treatment costs for 10 years. After murmur [was] confirmed they presented me with a new contract saying if they pay \$997.50 now, I waive all future dealings with them and void original contract. I refused to sign. Now they are dodging my calls and keep saying that they’ll call me back after talking to their supervisor. This has all been so stressful. I am worried for my puppy, the possible future costs, and being lied to through this whole process.”

A number of buyers said they suspected the pet stores of downplaying their puppy’s health issues and/or using vets who treated their puppies with the least expensive and often ineffective treatments. One buyer whose puppy was diagnosed with an upper respiratory infection (URI) wrote:

“My puppy has URI and it is supposed to be under contract. After calling [the pet store] to report the problem on Sunday she insisted that I take the puppy to her vet. I refused and said I wanted to take him to my vet that I know and trust. She informed me that they would not cover it if my vet gave the puppy anything other than Baytril. She said Clavamox would not work in her puppies and her vet knows that so I have to give my puppy Baytril. After I spoke with my vet he informed me that Baytril is not recommended in puppies because it causes problems with their joints. I called [the pet store] and she said that is why I needed to use her vet because he knows that Baytril works and they have not had a problem with it in their puppies. I told her that Bayer the company that makes Baytril says to not give it because it can harm their joints. She then told me that all medicines have side effects and if I don’t use Baytril my dog is going to end up in the E.R. on oxygen because he will get pneumonia and die, [and] when this happens they will not pay for it because I refused Baytril. I bought a Neapolitan Mastiff he is going to be 150 pounds grown. We can’t risk his joints now. This lady is mean and tries to bully me to do things her way instead of the right way. She told me she has had a pet store for 17 years but in my mind that does not make her better than my vet who went to school eight years and has been practicing for 20+ years. My puppy still has a snotty nose and if he gets worse the doctor will proceed with more treatment but it is not fair that I paid 2000 dollars for a dog and they won’t stand behind it unless I put his longterm health at risk.”



A Chihuahua named Kiki was purchased from a breeder in Ohio. Shortly after purchase, Kiki developed respiratory distress and was admitted into the hospital. Ultimately, she had to be euthanized due to her illness.



Gertie, a shiba inu puppy, was purchased as part of The HSUS's undercover investigation into a Manhattan pet store in 2017. She had multiple health problems, including pneumonia, but when the pet store staff sold her to a secret shopper, they claimed she just had a minor case of the sniffles. Due to the HSUS investigation, the store shut down within two months. Gertie was ill for several weeks, but she survived.

Photo Credit: Cary Smith for The HSUS

Conclusion

Behind the statistics of this summary are more than 5,100 puppies who suffered, and in many cases died, and more than 5,100 families or individuals who agonized along with their pets, often both financially and emotionally. It was common for complainants to use phrases such as “heartbroken” and “devastated” to describe the psychological effects of trying to save the life of their sick puppy.

Witnessing their beloved pet experience ongoing pain and distress, and sometimes death, was often compounded by financial worries. Many buyers reported that they went into debt in an attempt to treat their puppy's problems, while at the same time, many still owed lending companies thousands of dollars for the purchase of a pet who was no longer living. When the puppies survived, many faced future surgeries or would require costly medications or therapies for the rest of their lives.

Disease risks aren't always limited to the puppy; several common diseases found in puppy mill dogs can spread to humans, including parasites like giardia and infections such as brucellosis. In January 2018, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) [concluded a study](#) of 113 people who became sick with a drug-resistant form of

campylobacter bacteria, and reported that the majority of the people with the illness had come into recent contact with a puppy from a Petland pet store. The CDC found that the majority of the illnesses occurred in Ohio, Florida and Illinois – the three states that also came up highest on our list of pet store complaints.

We compiled and released this information for several purposes. First, it's imperative 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 better understands 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 possibly dealing with the heartache of a sick pet.

Second, this report points out that certain states have a much higher number of complaints than others. This information makes it clear to policy makers that stronger laws and oversight are needed, especially in states linked to high numbers of complaints. Stronger oversight of puppy mills, online dealers and pet stores 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.

A puppy named Strider was purchased from a questionable seller in West Virginia. Within seven days, Strider was diagnosed with parvovirus and had to be euthanized.



Photo courtesy of the owner

Lastly, it's no accident that the majority of complaints we received involve a puppy purchased from a pet store or online. Websites and pet stores provide a curtain behind which some of the worst puppy mills hide. The Humane Society of the United States advises that consumers adopt a pet in person from a reputable animal shelter or pet rescue group, or buy only from a breeder they have met in person and carefully screened. Buyers should always visit the home where the puppy was born and raised, and ensure that all the pets on the property are kept in clean, spacious and humane conditions.

Buyers should insist that sellers provide health records on a veterinarian's letterhead. Potential buyers who witness troubling conditions can report it to the seller's local animal control or humane society, or [to us](#). More tips on how to get a puppy from a humane source can be found at humanesociety.org/puppy.

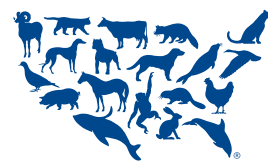
Methodology

The Humane Society of the United States collected the data that is the basis of this report 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 web form submissions, and/or by phone or email. Their complaints were then entered in an internal database of puppy buyer complaints. We attempted to follow up with every complainant, though 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.

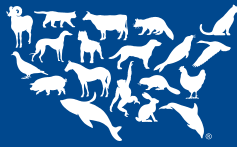


Photo Credit: Amie Chou for The HSUS

Puppies are usually sold by puppy mills at 8 weeks of age, but the breeding dogs live their entire lives in cages, never becoming part of a family.



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