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# Why don't more Angelenos license their dogs?

Posted September 4, 2014 by Sarah Rogozen | 1 Comment | ]

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*Photo by Samantha Hemphill*

Call it the doggie DMV.

Like drivers registering their cars, Los Angeles County dog owners are required to purchase licenses for their pets. But many people either don't know the law or they ignore it. In fact, most of California's dogs are unlicensed – as many as 84 percent, [the Sacramento Bee reported](#) in 2011.

**Brought To You By:****Contributed By**[Sarah Rogozen](#)**About "Which Way, LA?" – The Blog**

This blog is KCRW's continuing exploration of what Los Angeles is made of, one story at a time.

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And that's a problem, warn public health officials, who say licensing helps them curb disease, limit the stray dog population, and reunite missing pets with their families. The licensing process also connects private dog owners to a larger infrastructure of government and health services.

To receive a license, owners fill out paperwork, pay a fee, and vaccinate their pet.

(Click [here](#) to learn more about how to license your dog.)

When a dog receives its rabies shot, it can also get a quick health check, said Sgt. Chuck Miller of the [Southeast Area Animal Control Authority \(SEAACA\)](#), which serves cities like Norwalk and Pico Rivera.

And when canvassers knock on doors to check if licenses are up to date, they can educate dog owners about pet safety and listen to their concerns. "Since you're out on the sidewalk there, people are going to ask you more questions about 'oh, I have a stray cat problem, I have a barking dog problem,'" Miller said.

But some critics argue that those canvassers with their clipboards are intrusive.

"From my experience of that group of policemen coming and demanding to see the paperwork for the dog, there wasn't much education going on. If you don't have papers, they will write you a ticket," said Ami Moore, who runs a Chicago-based organization called the National Institute of Canine Experts. "It's just a way for the government to collect one more fee from you."

## Uncertain Numbers

Just how many L.A. County dogs are unregistered is unclear.

Officials at various animal control departments cite licensing rates between fifty and eighty percent. While that may be true for individual agencies, the county's overall licensing rate appears to be much lower.


Licensing is handled by a patchwork of animal control teams, police departments, and contracted non-profits.

KCRW compiled licensing records from the majority of these agencies to create a [database](#) of the county's registered dogs. (Organizations that handle licensing for a handful of inland cities withheld records.)


We found 449,034 animals. (You'll see slightly fewer in the database – learn more about our data [here](#) )

The American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) offers an online [Pet Ownership Calculator](#) that uses national survey data to estimate that Americans own approximately one dog for every three households.

Excluding the jurisdictions which withheld records, the AVMA's formula estimates 1,139,279 dogs in LA County – almost three times as many animals as we found licensed.


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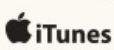


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The city of Los Angeles does not know its licensing rate because it doesn't know how many dogs live within its boundaries, said Brenda Barnette, general manager for the department of animal services.

There is no census of local dogs, and it would be hard to compile one, said Taimie Bryant, a law professor at UCLA who works on animal issues. "Animals don't behave like countable humans," Bryant said. "They don't go to school. They don't go to the doctor unless their people take them."

"They may run in the streets," Bryant said, "but it's hard to know if you're counting the same individual twice. It's all guesstimation."

Some agencies use canvassing records to gauge how many animals they should expect. Barnette said Los Angeles measures success by keeping track of the number of dogs sold each year and trying to continuously increase licensing compliance.

### Why Don't People License?

There are many reasons why dog owners don't fill out their paperwork. Some residents told KCRW they were unfamiliar with the law and surprised that pet ownership involves a formal registration process.

"There's a component of the public who was raised with pets that were just kind of in the backyard," said David Bloom, formerly with [L.A. County Animal Care and Control](#).

The government must also contend with significant inertia. "It just doesn't get to the top of their to-do lists," said Peter Weinstein, executive director of the Southern California Veterinary Medical Association. "It's a pain in the butt."

Once someone does register their dog, the authorities follow up every one to three years, depending on the jurisdiction. Owners behind on their fees can be cited for non-compliance.

"Why even let them know that you have a dog?" asked Venice resident Jennifer Ritch. "I get that reminder every year now. If I had never gotten her licensed in the first place, they wouldn't know I had a dog. It seems to penalize the people who tried to do the right thing."

Some pet owners have additional reasons to hide, Weinstein said. Local laws limit the number of dogs a resident can own. (Rules vary; the city of Los Angeles permits three dogs per household.)

Individuals who own too many animals might license the number of dogs they are allowed and leave the rest unregistered. Or they might license none at all.

Dog breeds could also be relevant. Pit bulls – the fifth most common breed in our database – face extra scrutiny from some landlords and animal control officers who worry the dogs might be violent.

For this reason, said Robin Purcell of rescue and advocacy organization Angel City Pit Bulls, a number of owners choose not to license.

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Even though proponents say that licensing pays off, local shelters don't always return dogs to their owners – one of the key benefits of buying a license, Bryant said. "Dogs fall through the cracks. People aren't calling the owner. People aren't reading collars or scanning microchips correctly," she said. "There's difficulty just getting people to answer the phone. Licensing your dog doesn't get you much."

Lt. Carlos Pineda, who oversees enforcement for L.A. County Animal Care and Control, said that his department puts great effort into reuniting owners with their pets. Officers consult national microchip registries when local records prove inadequate. "You know, we are pet owners too," he said. "We know how frustrating it is when the dogs get out and don't come home."

Still, Bryant thinks that until more owners feel licensing gives them tangible benefits, they will continue to evade the law.

### **Income Disparities**

Dog licenses cost around \$20 for spayed or neutered animals, and significantly more for unaltered ones.

The fees can be a burden to low-income pet owners, Weinstein said.

Animal control departments are aware of this. Many offer low-cost vaccination clinics, and L.A. County tries to connect residents with low-cost providers of spaying and neutering, which Pineda said is usually a greater source of financial stress than the license fee itself.

Penalties for non-compliance can also add up, so the city of Los Angeles is considering implementing a new policy that will allow people who haven't licensed their dogs to simply comply with the law rather than pay fines, Barnette said.

Weinstein suspects that licensing rates increase as income does.

In general, our data appears to support this. But there are exceptions.

The AVMA formula suggests that Beverly Hills and Compton have similar licensing rates – around 45%. (The city of Los Angeles licenses Beverly Hills's dogs, while animals in Compton are licensed by the county.)

Some low-income cities appear to have high licensing rates. Based on the formula's estimates, Huntington Park, which licenses its own dogs and has a median income of \$36,620, is eighty-five percent successful.

These calculations are inexact – individual L.A. County regions may have different pet ownership rates than the AVMA's national average.

And Pineda said that licensing compliance across income does not vary much in the areas L.A. County officers canvass, because they knock on every door.

### **Effective Licensing**

Far away from the hills of Los Angeles, Tara Lowes, an animal services manager in Calgary, Canada, said that her department’s emphasis on successfully returning lost dogs to their owners, as well as its efficient online sign-up and payment system, helps it effectively enforce licensing laws.

Calgary’s census tracks both dogs and people. Lowes’ most recent data shows that 102,000 dogs are licensed out of 122,000 living in the city.

Lowes said that licensing rates have been increasing, and generating substantial benefits. Eighty-six percent of lost dogs, if registered, are reunited with their humans.

“When there is a license on an animal, people take care of their animal,” she said. “They’re more careful about what their animal is doing. People make sure their animals don’t bite.”

Lowes’ agency uses social media and community newsletters to advertise licensing, and they supplement those efforts by visiting dog parks and checking each dog there for an up-to-date tag.

Barnette said that the city of Los Angeles has recently renewed their canvassing efforts in South L.A., where licensing rates appear to be low.

It is too soon to tell if the recent push has been successful, Barnette said, but she feels optimistic about the work they have done so far.

SpcLA president Madeline Bernstein said that enforcement will be the key factor in raising licensing rates.

“People won’t do what they don’t want to do unless they have to do it. They’ll ride it out until they get caught, but the odds are they never will,” she said.

“In my entire life, I’ve never encountered an officer who asked me about my dog license.”

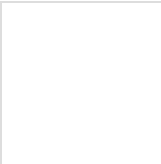
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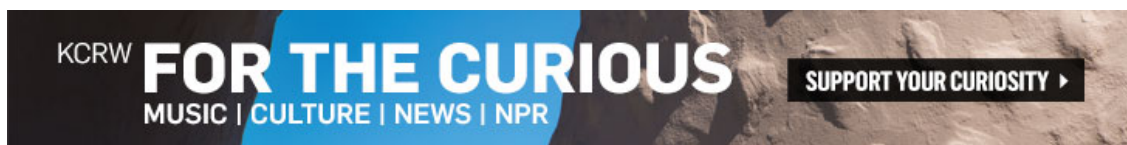


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