

## JUST WHAT IS A PUPPY MILL?

Twenty years ago, people knew that a “puppy mill” was a substandard kennel where unhealthy over bred dogs were kept in horrible conditions. Today it’s not so easy. In the last decade of the 20th century, activist groups began to broaden the term to cover just about any kennel that they didn’t like. As a result, commercial kennels and hobby breeders with more than an arbitrary number of dogs have become targets for anti-breeding groups that lobby for laws to restrict these law abiding operations. These organizations stir up support for breeding restrictions and high license fees by deliberately blurring the lines between responsible breeding operations and real puppy mills. They use emotional rhetoric and pictures of dirty kennels and sickly dogs to imply that most or all breeders will subject their dogs to abusive lives unless they are regulated. Shelter and rescue workers who receive dogs from raids on squalid kennels often lead the fight for laws restricting or regulating breeding in an effort to close kennels they label as puppy mills. Some responsible breeders are so incensed at the existence of substandard kennels that they are willing to accept these punitive licensing schemes even though the costs may limit or destroy their breeding programs. Lawmakers who write bills aimed at preventing puppy mills leave the definitions up to those who lobby for the laws. As a result, publicity campaigns highlight kennels where dozens or hundreds of dogs are kept in poor conditions, but the bills themselves often target responsible hobby and commercial breeders with far fewer breeding dogs. So, how do we evaluate those bills and make sure that substandard kennels are cleaned up? First we have to define “puppy mill”. Is it ---a dirty, trashy place where one or several breeds of dogs are kept in deplorable conditions with little or no medical care and puppies are always available? --Any high-volume kennel? A clean place where several breeds of dogs are raised in acceptable conditions and puppies are usually or often available? ---a place where lots of dogs are raised, where breeding is done solely for financial gain rather than protection of breed integrity, and where puppies are sold to brokers or to pet stores? The answer depends on who you ask--- A hobby breeder dedicated to promoting and protecting a particular breed or two might consider all of the above kennels to be puppy mills. Animal shelter and rescue workers who deal daily with abandoned, neglected or abused dogs might agree. Operators of clean commercial kennels licensed by the United States Department of Agriculture or by state law will strongly disagree, for the very mention of “puppy mill” damages their business and that of the pet stores they deal with. John Q Dog Owner probably thinks of puppy mills as those places exposed on 20/20, Dateline, or Geraldo or pictured on fund raising pamphlets by the Humane Society of the United States and other animal rights charities. He has seen the camera pan back and forth over trash, piles of feces, dogs with runny noses and oozing sores, dogs crammed into shopping carts and tiny coops, rats sharing dirty food bowls and dry dishes. He has seen the kennel owner captured on tape, dirty, barely articulate, and ignorant of dog care, temperament, genetic health, or proper nutrition. But is the television crew simply seeking the sensational and applying these appalling conditions to the entire dog producing industry? Are the photos on the fundraising appeals accurate depictions of the majority of high volume kennels or are they used to generate disgust for breeders and dollars for treasuries? To be clear, we at Dog Owners Guide believe that kennel conditions and dog health, not numbers or profit motive, determine whether a kennel should be called a puppy mill. Evolution of high-volume kennels! The post-war boom of the late 1940’s led to more leisure time and greater amounts of disposable income. At the same time, farmers, mostly in the Midwest, were seeking alternative crops. Available money met with available supply, and the result was the development of the commercial puppy business. Retail pet outlets grew in numbers as the supply of puppies increased, and puppy production was on its way. Retail giants such as Sears Roebuck sold puppies in their pet departments and pet store chains were born. Unfortunately, many puppy farmers had little knowledge of canine husbandry and often began their ventures with little money and ramshackle conditions. They housed their dogs in chicken coops and rabbit hutches they already had, provided little socialization because they didn’t know that puppies needed this exposure, and often skipped veterinarian care because they couldn’t afford to pay. Organizations such as HSUS [before it joined the animal rights movement] investigated conditions at these farms and eventually were successful in focusing national attention on the repulsive conditions at breeding kennels they labeled as “puppy mills”. The substandard conditions highlighted in this campaign were a major force for the passage of the National Animal Welfare Act. “Puppy mill” first became synonymous with horrible conditions, then was used to indict any breeder who breeds lots of dogs, no matter what the conditions of the kennel or the health of the puppies. HSUS, PETA, and other animal rights groups planted and cultivated this “most kennels are puppy mills” idea in the public consciousness to legitimize themselves in the eyes of animal lovers and to collect millions of dollars in donations. The Animal Welfare Act! The Animal Welfare Act is administered by the US Department of Agriculture. The act lists several categories of business that handle dogs: PET DEALERS who import, buy, sell, trade, or transport pets in wholesale channels: PET BREEDERS who breed for the wholesale trade, whether for selling animals to other breeders or selling to brokers or directly to pet stores or laboratories: and