



Key issues to consider related to mandated 24/7 cat containment

Why is mandated 24/7 cat containment proposed by some groups?

Mandated 24/7 cat containment (also known as a 24-hour cat curfew) is generally proposed because of a belief that it will reduce wandering cats and associated issues such as nuisance complaints or potential wildlife predation, and protect cats from potential harm. While it seems logical and compelling that mandated 24/7 cat containment would reduce the number of wandering cats and associated issues, this assumption is not supported by the evidence.

Is mandated 24/7 cat containment effective at reducing wandering cats?

The evidence in Australia and internationally clearly shows that mandated 24/7 cat containment is not an effective strategy to reduce wandering cats or associated issues such as nuisance complaints or potential wildlife predation. Mandated 24/7 cat containment is already proven to be a failure at reducing wandering cats in both the short, medium and long-term.

RSPCA Australia *Identifying Best Practice Domestic Cat Management in Australia* 2018 report acknowledges:

“Overall, councils with cat containment regulations have not been able to demonstrate any measurable reduction in cat complaints or cats wandering at large following the introduction of the regulations”.

In the **City of Yarra Ranges** (Victoria), in the 3rd year after mandating 24/7 cat containment:

- cat-related complaints increased by 143%
- Yarra Ranges Council acknowledged that the significant increase in cat complaints, is likely to be a result of the introduction of a 24-hour cat curfew in 2014.
- impoundments increased by 68%
- euthanasia increased by 18% (human population only increased by 2%) (Yarra Ranges 2021)

Yarra Ranges Council data

Measure	2012/13	2016/17	Difference	% Change
Resident population	149,026	152,246	+3,220	^ 2.16%
Cat Nuisance complaints	237	576	+339	^ 143 %
Cats impounded	440	738	+298	^ 67.7 %
Cats euthanased	232	273	+41	^17.67 %

In the **City of Casey** (Victoria), 20 years after introducing mandated 24/7 cat containment:

- the number of cats impounded was still 296% higher than baseline (from 264 cats in 1998 to 1,047 cats in 2019/20), more than double the rate of the human population increase.
- In 2000, Casey received 349 cat nuisance and related complaints which had increased to 376 complaints in 2020/2021 (Casey Council 2001 & 2021a, b).

Casey Council data

Measure	1998	2019/ 20	Difference	% Change
Resident population	156,128	364,600	208,472	^134%
Cats impounded	264	1047	783	^296%



The number of cat nuisance complaints and impoundments are important parameters because they reflect the size of the wandering cat population in the surrounding area.

The **City of Hobsons Bay** (Melbourne, Victoria) has publicly acknowledged that mandated 24/7 cat containment is not an effective strategy for reducing the number of wandering cats or associated issues and has rejected cat curfews (Hobsons Bay 2014).

Some **USA jurisdictions** have introduced mandated 24/7 cat containment known as cat “leash laws” which have proven to be ineffective and impossible to enforce. When leash laws are passed, animal control impound more stray cats because they do not have an “owner” to contain them. This results in more cats being impounded and then killed but without reducing the overall number of roaming cats in the area. A number of **USA jurisdictions** have repealed their cat leash laws because they found they were unenforceable (Smithfield Virginia USA 2003, Edmonds City Council Washington USA 2012, Gretna City Council LA USA 2014, Hughes 2002, Alley Cat Allies 2022).

Based on data from councils, 24/7 cat containment regulations would not provide any measurable benefit in reducing complaints, cat impoundments, potential wildlife predation or cat-related costs and would instead increase costs to local governments.

Why is mandated 24/7 cat containment not effective at reducing wandering cats?

Mandated 24/7 cat containment is not an effective strategy to reduce wandering cats because most wandering cats are strays with no owner to contain them. For the remaining cats with an owner, containment is often not achievable due to property limitations (for e.g. rental properties), lack of financial resources and concerns about contained cat welfare (McLeod 2015, van Eeden 2021).

Stray cat population

Stray cats are usually overlooked when mandated 24/7 cat containment is proposed, even though stray cats represent the majority of wandering cats. Most cats entering animal welfare shelters and council pounds are classed as strays, originate from low socio-economic areas and were born in the preceding 6 to 12 months (Kerr 2018, Alberthsen 2013 & 2016, Miller 2014, Ly 2021, Rinzin 2008, Zito 2016).

Most stray cats are semi-owned domestic cats being fed by people who do not perceive they own the cat but have an emotional attachment to the cat (Rand 2021). When mandated cat containment is introduced it creates a significant barrier to semi-owners being willing or able to take full ownership and responsibility for the stray cat they are feeding due to the imposition of an added responsibility and potential penalty associated with cat ownership. Transforming cat semi-owners to full owners represents the **key solution** to reduce the number of wandering cats and associated issues (Banyule City Council 2020, Cotterell 2021, APWF 2021), but mandated cat containment actively prevents this resolution.

Mandated cat containment perpetuates the failed *Trap, adopt or kill* approach

Mandated cat containment results in more stray cats being trapped, impounded and then killed because they do not have an “owner” to contain them. However, this *Trap, adopt or kill* approach does not reduce the overall wandering cat population in the area overtime because it results in low-level *ad hoc* culling, insufficient to override the high cat reproductive rate, immigration of new cats into the area and increased survival of juveniles (Lazenby 2015, Miller 2014, Tan 2017 & RSPCA Australia 2018). The result is a repetitive cycle of trapping, impounding and killing cats, followed by new cats being trapped, impounded and killed, over and over again, but without reducing the number of wandering cats over time (Boone 2019, NSW Animal Seizures – Pound Data Reports, RSPCA Australia 2021, Hughes 2002).

High-level culling or desexing is required to produce a sustained decrease in wandering cats. However, high-level culling is cost prohibitive for local governments and unacceptable to the majority of the community (Rand 2019) and there are no published reports of high-level culling at the suburb or city level being successful (Boone 2019).

Why is mandated 24/7 cat containment unfeasible?

Enforcement of mandated 24/7 cat containment is problematic and essentially impossible for several reasons including:

- Enforcement can only be undertaken by cat trapping programs and cat-trap loan schemes.
- It is difficult or impossible to capture cats in breach of containment regulations. Animal Management Officers (AMOs) are not able to chase cats that are wandering at large in breach of containment.
- The majority of trapped and impounded cats are not owned or traceable to an owner so there is no possibility of taking any enforcement action because an owner cannot be identified (Lancaster 2015, RSPCA Australia 2018). The experience of councils that have introduced mandated 24/7 cat containment shows that limited infringement notices have been issued (Hobsons Bay 2014).
- Trapped unidentified cats then need to be rehomed or euthanased, increasing costs for cat management and increasing the number of cats euthanased, which negatively affects the mental health of staff involved.
- Enforcement is very time-consuming and costly requiring expansion of cat-trap services, purchase of additional traps to reduce waiting times, and additional staff to deal with the increased nuisance complaints, trapping and impoundments that occur after mandated cat containment is introduced.
- Trapping by AMOs is very time-consuming because multiple trips to the site are often required including a trip to set up the trap and then trips to check the trap each morning (for animal welfare reasons) and to reset the trap each evening until the cat is caught. Times required to trap cats can range from an average of 8.9 days to 29 days per cat to trap 90% of the target cats (Nutter 2005, Lazenby 2015).

Based on the evidence in Australia and internationally, mandated 24/7 cat containment is essentially unenforceable, rendering mandated 24/7 cat containment impractical and unfeasible. Hume City Council in Melbourne Victoria stated in 2018 that 'cat impoundment statistics and learnings from other councils demonstrate that a cat curfew would be largely unenforceable' (Hume Council 2018). The City of Hobsons Bay (Victoria) also acknowledged in 2014 that introduction of mandated cat containment would lead to community expectations about enforcement that cannot be delivered (RSPCA Australia 2018, Hobsons Bay 2014). This is consistent with findings from USA (Smithfield Virginia USA 2003, Edmonds City Council Washington USA 2012, Greta City Council LA USA 2014, Police Chief Rowland Payson City Council Utah USA 2003, Alley Cat Allies 2022).

What are the negative consequences of mandated 24/7 cat containment?

Based on the evidence, mandated 24/7 cat containment has many negative consequences including:

1. Increases cat nuisance complaints to local governments because an expectation is created in the community that cats should not be seen.
2. Increases cat impoundments because increased nuisance complaints and community expectations that cats should not be seen both lead to increased cat trapping and impoundment (Yarra Ranges 2021, RSPCA SA 2022b).
3. Increases euthanasia of healthy and treatable cats and kittens in council pounds, shelters and veterinary clinics because the more cats impounded, the more cats euthanased (Kreisler 2022, Marsh 2010).
4. Increases well-documented and life-threatening mental health damage to staff and community residents caused by the euthanasia of healthy cats and kittens including depression, traumatic stress and increased suicide risk (Baran 2009, Reeve 2005, Rohlf 2005, Rollin 2011, Tiesman 2015, Whiting 2011).



5. Increases costs to local government for cat trapping and management. Costs of impounding, returning to owner, rehoming or euthanasing cats are typically \$500/cat (\$250 to \$750 or more per cat). Trapping, impounding and managing 100 more cats per year costs approximately \$500,000, ultimately paid by rate-payers.
6. Increases staff burnout, staff turnover and attrition rates associated with the euthanasia of healthy and treatable cats and kittens (Australian Veterinary Association 2022, Rogelberg 2007).
7. Promotes continuation of the reactive and ineffective typical approach to domestic cats in Australia known as *Trap, adopt or kill* which has failed to reduce the number of wandering cats over many decades (Boone 2019, NSW Animal Seizures – Pound Data Reports, RSPCA Australia 2021).
8. Creates a major disincentive for cat ownership, reducing cat adoption and increasing euthanasia.
9. Actively prevents resolution of the wandering cat issue because it creates a significant barrier to semi-owners taking full ownership of the stray cat they are feeding – this is the **key solution** to significantly reduce the number of unwanted kittens born and the number of wandering cats and associated issues (Banyule City Council 2020, Cotterell 2021, APWF 2021).
 - Semi-owners represent a **huge pool of potential cat adopters** for shy and timid stray cats which are difficult to adopt and are at high risk of euthanasia in shelters, pounds and veterinary clinics. Semi-ownership of cats is common with 3% to 9% of Australian adults feeding daily an average of 1.5 cats they do not perceive they own (Rand 2019, Zito 2015).
 - Cost is the main barrier to desexing, not lack of education or knowledge about the benefits of desexing. Most semi-owners will take full ownership of the stray cats they are feeding, registering their details on the cat’s microchip and registration databases if offered free desexing and microchipping as part of Community Cat Programs (please see below).
 - But mandated containment is a major barrier to this process because most semi-owners are in low socio-economic areas in low-income households unable to afford containment system costs (\$700-\$2000+), and many are in rental properties. On average across Australia, 20% of households (2.4 people) live on less than \$650 per week (Rand 2021, ABS data 2022).
10. Criminalises cat ownership for low-income households and people with ‘door-dasher’ cats. Mandated 24/7 cat containment ignores social justice of legislation and the inability of low-income households and those with difficult to contain door-dasher cats to comply. Even an expensive containment enclosure does not prevent door-dasher cats from escaping.
11. Increases cat relinquishment and abandonment due to the imposition of an added responsibility and potential penalty to cat ownership (RSPCA SA 2022a).
12. Places semi-owned stray cats being fed by people who have an emotional attachment to the cat at significant risk of being impounded and killed. 42% of all cats impounded by Australian councils are euthanased (Chua 2022 MPhil thesis).
13. Increases risks to pet cats of being trapped and killed.
 - One third of cat owners lose their pet at least once in the pet’s lifetime and 41% of lost cats are indoor-only cats, as pet cats can still become lost through windows or doors accidentally left open.
 - Even microchipped pet cats aren’t guaranteed to be safe as microchips are not necessarily found on the first scan of a cat, and it is recommended that if no microchip is found, that cats should be scanned over 3 consecutive days. Even then, microchips can be faulty or move around the cat’s body and may not be found, leading to pet cats being killed (Lord 2008, Lancaster 2015).

14. Negatively impacts the welfare, quality of life, and health of some contained cats which can include obesity, immobility, lower urinary tract disease and behaviour problems increasing risk of relinquishment or abandonment (RSPCA Australia 2018, Palmer & Sandoe 2014).
15. Increases risks of cruelty towards cats, increasing animal pain and suffering.
16. Increases the number of wandering cats due to influxes of new cats after dominant resident cats are trapped and removed and increased survival of juveniles (Lazenby 2015, Miller 2014).

What are evidence-based solutions to reduce wandering cats and associated issues?

a) Community Cat Programs

Community cat programs based on high-intensity free desexing and microchipping of cats targeted to areas of high cat impoundments and complaints (which are typically the low socioeconomic areas) are recommended to significantly reduce the number of wandering cats and issues such as nuisance complaints or wildlife predation (less wandering cats means less potential wildlife predation). These programs are very effective at converting semi-owners who are feeding stray cats into full owners and preventing unwanted kittens being born. Scientific evidence, including from Australia, repeatedly demonstrates that community cat programs significantly reduce:

- the number of wandering cats impounded by councils and shelters
- cat complaints.
- euthanasia of healthy and treatable cats and kittens and the associated negative mental health impacts on staff and community residents.

Recent Australian data demonstrate that community cat programs are cost-effective and result in a 30-50% decrease in council pound cat intake, more than an 80% reduction in cat euthanasia and a 30-50% decrease in cat nuisance complaints over 1 to 3 years, with these parameters reflecting the decrease in the surrounding wandering cat population (APWF 2021, Banyule City Council 2020, Boone 2019, Cotterell 2021, Gunther 2021, Kreisler 2019 & 2022; Levy 2014, Spehar & Wolf 2019; Swarbrick 2018).

In stark contrast to Yarra Ranges and Casey, in the **City of Banyule** (Melbourne, Victoria) which does not have mandated cat containment, in the third year after implementing a high-intensity free desexing program (community cat program) targeted to where cat-related calls and impoundments were occurring which is typically the low socio-economic areas (Cotterell 2021, Banyule 2020):

- impoundments decreased by 61%
- euthanasia decreased by 74%
- cat-related calls decreased by 64% (from 11 to 4 cat calls/1000 residents)
- since 2013, Banyule has spent \$60,000 on its free desexing program and saved \$397,500 on cat impoundment costs alone.

b) Bed-time feeding of cats

Bedtime feeding of cats is recommended as a highly effective way to assist cat owners at minimal to no additional cost to keep owned pet cats safely inside at night and prevent potential wildlife predation. This feeding involves feeding cats inside at bedtime and ensuring all doors and windows are shut for the night, providing owners with a way to safely confine their cat in the house/dwelling overnight.

Bed-time feeding should be widely promoted to raise awareness among cat owners to increase cat containment at night, however, containment should not be made mandatory because mandating containment leads to increased costs and enforcement difficulties for local governments and other unintended negative consequences including severe mental health impacts on community residents and staff associated with euthanasing healthy cats and kittens, and the creation of barriers which prevent resolution of the wandering cat issue.



What about mandated night curfews?

Mandated night curfews are also not an effective strategy to reduce wandering cats because most wandering cats are strays with no owner to contain them. For the remaining cats with an owner, containment may not be achievable due to property limitations (for e.g. rental properties), lack of financial resources and concerns about contained cat welfare (McLeod 2015, Eeden 2021). It might also be difficult to achieve with “door-dasher” cats and poorly socialised cats that are not house trained, where mandating containment then criminalises cat ownership. Mandated night curfews also create a barrier to semi-owners taking full ownership of the stray cat they are feeding (which is the key solution to the wandering cat issue) due to the imposition of an added responsibility and potential penalty associated with cat ownership.

Do domestic cats in urban areas have an impact on wildlife populations?

Wildlife protection is an argument often proposed as a reason for mandated cat containment, critically however, there is no evidence that domestic cats in urban areas negatively impact native wildlife populations. Nor is there any evidence that cat restrictions in urban areas benefit wildlife populations.

An ongoing issue is that feral cat impacts are often wrongly attributed to domestic cats, even though they are two very distinct populations with different behaviour and ecology.

The impact of feral cats on native wildlife in natural environments is well-documented. Surprisingly however, and contrary to popular belief, there is actually no scientific evidence demonstrating population viability or conservation impacts at a population level on Australian wildlife by domestic cats living around people.

Despite this lack of evidence, domestic cats in Australia still receive significant blame for negative impacts on native wildlife populations. Multiple Australian studies have been unable to detect a measurable impact in urban areas of domestic cats on native mammals (Maclagan 2018, Lilith 2010), or birds (Grayson 2007), but found that vegetation quality, housing density, distance from bushland and size of bushland were significant factors. Other studies demonstrate the positive impact cat predation has by reducing the numbers of rats that predate bird nests (Matthews 1999). Very importantly, domestic cats that are obtaining food intentionally or unintentionally from humans predate significantly fewer animals than feral cats which have to hunt to supply all their nutritional needs (Murphy 2019, Woinarski 2017).

False blame for native wildlife impacts directed at domestic cats living in urban areas (including owned cats, semi-owned cats being fed by people and unowned cats receiving food unintentionally from people such as from food waste bins) is very dangerous and harmful because it is used as a justification for the use of lethal control methods for domestic cats. This perpetuates the unnecessary killing of healthy cats and kittens, and associated severe mental health damage to community residents, council pound, animal shelter and veterinary staff caused by the killing of these healthy cats and kittens. This false blame can also be used as a justification for cruelty towards cats, increasing cruelty towards cats and increasing pain and suffering. Given it has never been proven that the presence of cats in urban areas has any impact on wildlife populations, communities and governments should not assume that just because cats are present it means they are having wildlife population impacts.

Summary

It is imperative that domestic cat regulations are evidence-based reflecting the available science to ensure they are effective and humane. Mandated cat containment should be rejected because it is not an effective strategy for reducing wandering cats or issues such as nuisance behaviours or potential wildlife predation. In addition, mandated cat containment has unintended negative consequences including psychological harm to people associated with the euthanasia of healthy cats and kittens, and preventing resolution of the wandering cat issue by creating a barrier to semi-owners taking full ownership of the stray cat they are feeding which represents the key solution to reducing wandering cats. Furthermore, mandated cat containment is an unfeasible strategy because it is essentially unenforceable. Instead of ineffective mandated cat containment, evidence-based solutions including proactive Community Cat Programs and Bed-time feeding which are non-lethal and humane, and do not cause psychological harm to people, should be implemented urgently.

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