

Pet Owners Failing to Evacuate

Pet ownership is the single most common factor associated with human evacuation failure that can be positively affected when the threat of disaster is imminent. Based on multiple studies of actual evacuations 20-30% of all human evacuation failures can be attributed to pet ownership. Research has shown that this behavior is principally a phenomenon of households without children and is directly correlated with the number of pets in a household. Planning and preparedness activities are key to reducing this problem. Planning efforts should identify vulnerable pet owners and preparedness efforts should develop community-based approaches to help, such as buddy systems amongst neighbors. Emergency managers can also help reduce the number of people, who do not evacuate because of pets, by offering them free cardboard cat carriers and dogs leashes as officials go door to door to announce the need to evacuate with pets. Although most evacuees are able to find a place to stay on their own, prior identification of a pet-friendly shelter where owners can find temporary shelter for themselves and housing for their pets provides further encouragement to pet owners to evacuate with their pet. Transportation supplies, such as carriers, collars and leashes can be made available on demand through agreements between local emergency managers, pet accessory retailers and other suppliers.

Human Evacuation Failure

Our group at Purdue University studied human behavior after mandatory evacuation from flooding in Marysville, California, in January 1997. We surveyed the residents of Yuba County by random telephone interviews and compiled detailed information on nearly 400 disaster victims. The overall evacuation rate was about 80%. Of the persons who failed to evacuate, nearly 80% owned pets (Table 27-2). We were able to determine the most important risk factors for human evacuation failure.

Table 27-2 Evacuation of households in Marysville, California, during floods of January 1997

Population affected	Total size of population	Percent of total population
All residents	60,500	100.0
Failed to evacuate	11,737	19.4
Failed to evacuate and owned pets	9,284	15.3 (79.1% of all who failed to evacuate)
Failed to evacuate and owned		
1 pet	3,388	5.6
2 pets	2,683	4.4
3 pets	1,393	2.3
≥4 pets	1,820	3.0

For 7% of pet owners the primary reason for not evacuating was the pets. A closer look at the data revealed several other risk factors. Evacuation failure occurred primarily in households without children up to the age of 18 years.

In these households the chance of evacuation failure more or less doubled for every additional cat or dog owned. For example, a household with three cats or dogs was nearly eight times less likely to evacuate from the flood than a family without a pet. This implies that ownership of multiple pets may be the single most important reason that humans do not evacuate from

disasters.

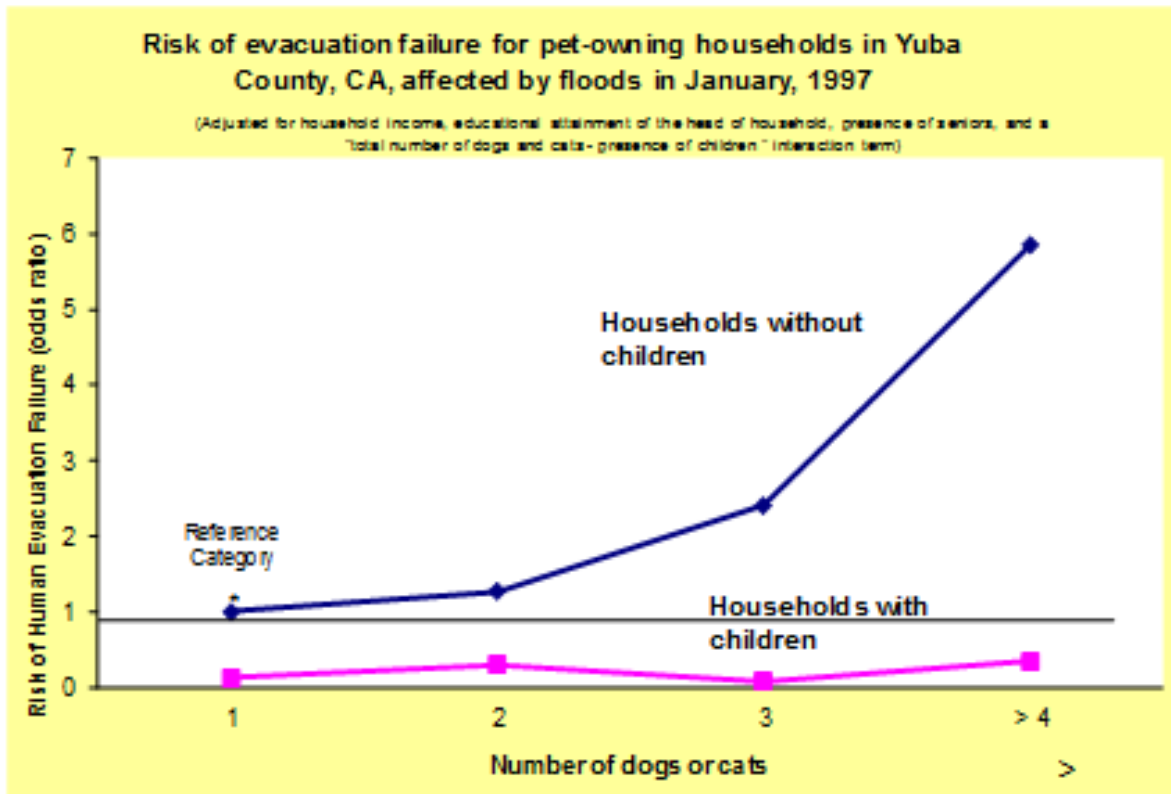


Chart showing the correlation the likelihood of pet owners not evacuating with the number of pets owned and whether the household has children.

Only limited evidence suggests that seniors do not evacuate because of pets. The main reason for seniors' failure to evacuate is that they do not have the social support networks they need. Seniors' not knowing where to take their pets is part of that deficiency, not a cause of it.

Approximately 30.5% of human evacuation failures could be attributed to dog ownership and 26.4% to cat ownership. Specific reasons that cat owners would not evacuate were concurrent dog ownership (54%), cats' not having carriers (10%), and cats' not having visited a veterinarian (14%). The only factor that affected dog owners was the number of dogs.



The human-animal bond in disasters. (Photo by Kerri Marshall.)