



Undercover Investigation Report

Sick puppies and poor care found at Petland store in Novi, Michigan, with research finding at least a dozen Michigan pet stores are supplied by puppy mills

Michigan puppy store investigation

An HSUS undercover investigator worked behind the scenes as a kennel attendant at the Petland store in Novi, Michigan, where a hidden camera captured sick puppies, questionable veterinary care and unsafe conditions. The investigator also visited eight additional puppy-selling pet stores in the state as a “shopper.” The investigation took place beginning in July 2023 and continued for several months. Evidence studied by HSUS researchers revealed that all 12 of the stores for which records were available were selling puppies from out-of-state commercial breeders, also known as puppy mills, many of which had state or federal violations for issues such as dogs with bleeding wounds, and sick, injured, dirty or matted dogs. Many (at least 10) of the dealers supplying puppies to Michigan pet stores had such egregious animal welfare violations that they were listed in one or more of the [HSUS Horrible Hundred reports](#) on problem puppy mills.



A puppy in Petland Novi was suffering from “cherry eye,” a condition that requires surgery. Photo by the HSUS, 2023

The investigator’s primary job was working at the Petland store in Novi, where they witnessed puppies with issues such as unhealed wounds, coughs, eye and nasal discharge, bloody feces or urine, infections, and congenital defects. On many days, more than 10% of the puppies in the store were kept in isolation in a small back room due to illness, and on some days the percentage of sick dogs was over 20%. The investigator worked a total of 40 shifts inside the store, and witnessed a constant supply of ailing puppies, some of whom were sent back to their suppliers rather than receiving the necessary treatment for their conditions. The investigator witnessed dogs arriving at the store on large, crowded trucks from out-of-state dealers linked to puppy mills. The majority of puppies came from Indiana, Iowa, Missouri and Ohio.

“A couple puppies came [off the delivery truck] with dirty ears and another one had dried balls of feces caked on her back paws and between her toes. Took me a good while to remove them as painlessly as possible, but there was so much feces that two pebbles (from the breeder I guess?) were stuck in the feces, between the toes. Can’t imagine how uncomfortable it must’ve been for her to have all that between her toes and irritating her skin for so long!”

Investigator in Petland, Novi

By the numbers:

- **1,200 -1,800 = Estimated number of puppies sold per year by a single Michigan pet store** (Petland Novi). The vast majority are from out-of-state puppy mills.
- **10 = number of Horrible Hundred dealers who sold to pet stores in Michigan** between 2021 and 2023.
- **10% = Number of puppies held** in isolation kennels at Petland Novi on an average day due to illness; on some days, the number exceeded 20%.
- **80 seconds** = the typical time a Petland veterinarian spent “examining” a new puppy at the Novi store. Some examinations lasted around 30 seconds.
- **167 = number of puppy mills found selling to pet stores in Michigan**, including Barking Boutique (Comstock Park, Grand Rapids and another location that is now closed), Downtown Hound (Owosso), Westland Dog Food Co., Puppy Dog Nursery (Grandville), Family Puppy (Flint, Novi and Troy), Puppy Home Match (Troy), Puppygram Detroit (Berkley), Michigan House of Paws (Waterford), and Petland Novi. Some of the other stores in the state did not reveal the sources of the dogs they sell.

Petland Novi Investigation

Our investigator worked 40 shifts over a period of about eight weeks at the Novi Petland store, taking many hours of undercover footage. What follows are just a few of the concerns they documented.

- Several puppies who arrived at the store had obvious abdominal scabs or open wounds. The consulting veterinarian described some of the wounds as repaired hernias, but in some cases, wounds were opening back up or seemed infected. One puppy had an open abdominal incision that was being barely held together by a single stitch; the operation had apparently been done before the dog was shipped to the store. The puppy was one of several who apparently had been shipped to Petland before fully recovering from a surgery.
- Many puppies had visible blood in their feces, and at least one had bloody urine. The investigator did not observe any of these puppies with bloody feces going to a veterinarian for diagnostics, even if bloody stools persisted after deworming. Some puppies who had bloody feces were on the sales floor for public purchase.
- Other ailments in some of the puppies included large amounts of brown and black discharge in their ears, hacking coughs, eye discharge, greenish nasal discharge, sneezing, lethargy, shivering or vomiting.
- Some puppies were sent back to their breeders to meet unknown fates instead of being effectively treated for obvious ailments. These puppies included a shar-pei mix with large hematomas (blood-filled pouches) on her ears, a Chihuahua puppy with an open fontanel (large soft spot) on his head, and a German shepherd puppy with a persistent skin condition.

“[A Petland worker] admitted to me that ‘9 out of 10’ of their puppies end up showing up [positive] for parasites during the exam they’re supposed to get within 5 days of purchase.”

Investigator’s notes

The breeder of the shar-pei mix, Freeman Raber, appeared in the HSUS [Horrible Hundred list for 2023](#). The dog’s largest hematoma had tripled in size since her arrival at the store, but instead of treating her effectively, Petland sent her back to the puppy mill she came from. When taking her out of the sales window, a Petland manager told a worker to “get it out of the window cause everyone and their mother asks about that dog.”

The investigator also documented care and safety issues at the store.

The findings include:

- On several occasions, puppies fell out of their stacked cages and hit the hard floor. Conversations with Petland employees indicated this was a recurring problem. One worker said that in the past, a puppy broke a leg after falling from a high cage, and another broke a leg in a playroom.
- The investigator witnessed Petland staff yelling at the puppies or shouting obscenities at them on several occasions. Puppies were yelled at for not getting out of the way when a cage door was being opened, for trying to escape, or for resisting baths and grooming. Once, a kennel worker cursed loudly at a puppy when he was shrieking because his paw got slammed in a door. The worker then walked away without checking on the puppy or comforting him.
- Puppies who were prescribed twice-daily medications were only given their medication once on Sundays, because the shopping mall closes early that day. After 6:00 pm on Sundays, the puppies, sick or well, were then left in the store alone for about 12 hours, until about 6:00 or 6:30 a.m. on Mondays. On other days, the dogs might get their medications twice a day, but not on a 12-hour schedule.
- Undercover footage showed that many of the often-touted veterinary examinations of new puppies only lasted about 80 seconds, and sometimes about 30 seconds. During these examinations, the puppies were not taken to a veterinarian or even put on an examination table at the store, but were held up in the air in Petland's back room by kennel staff while a veterinarian quickly examined them.
- Petland kennel staff were instructed by management to draw up multiple medications for the dogs in a single oral syringe, risking cross-contamination of the medications.
- Medications were often listed in the puppy's record as "preventative" even when they were given due to an illness; presumably this was to avoid contradicting the signed health certificate so that the puppy could still be sold as "healthy."
- Antibiotics were given as a standard, preliminary medication for all puppies upon arrival. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [has linked](#) the over-use of antibiotics in puppy mill puppies to the proliferation of drug-resistant zoonotic illnesses, such as bacterial campylobacter jejuni infections in humans. Symptoms of the illness in both pets and people can include stomach pain, fever, nausea, diarrhea and bloody stools.



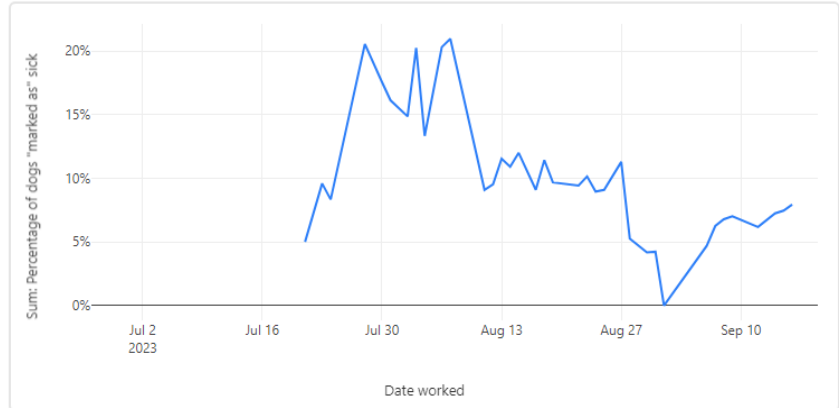
Some Petland staff said that puppies sometimes fell from the higher cages and hit the hard floor. Staff captured on undercover camera described at least one puppy who fell and broke a leg. *Photo by the HSUS, 2023*

“A customer complained [a poodle puppy] was sick while playing with him at about 11:00 am. At that time he was lethargic, weakly coughing with only some clear snot, and shivering, when before nobody had noticed any odd behavior.”

Investigator's notes

The investigation raises a number of issues regarding puppy mills, specifically:

A manager at the Novi Petland store indicated that **Freeman Raber in Baltic, Ohio**, was one of their steadiest puppy suppliers and had been sending them puppies for about a decade. Raber was in the HSUS [2023 Horrible Hundred report](#) after he was cited for improperly doing his own surgical procedures on the ears of several litters of puppies; Ohio state inspectors described the violation as “egregious” and sent his case for legal referral. Raber had more than 200 dogs at a recent inspection.



On average, the investigator said at least 10% of the dogs at Petland Novi were “marked as sick,” but that many others with signs of illness were not marked sick and were still available for sale.

The HSUS investigator witnessed puppies being unloaded from tiny cages on unmarked vans with out-of-state tags. The vans had their side windows blacked out with spray foam or lacked windows, so the puppies traveled in total darkness and no one passing by could see inside. On at least one occasion, a van worker had to use a flashlight to look for puppies in the darkened van. Another van worker complained about having to go “back to Illinois to pick up more of these f***ing yipping dogs.”

- Many of the puppies appeared dirty, wet or dazed as they were taken out of the darkened vans and roughly handed to pet store workers. They came with paperwork from large distributors (transporters or brokers) linked to puppy mills, such as Puppy Travelers in Missouri and Hakuna Matata in Iowa. Paperwork showed some of the puppies came from Ohio and Indiana.
- Paperwork reviewed by the HSUS shows at least five breeders who have been in the HSUS Horrible Hundred reports provided puppies to the Petland Novi store alone in recent years.



An HSUS undercover photo shows dogs in puppy mill conditions at a USDA-licensed breeder, Terry Cozart of Missouri, who sold to at least two pet stores in Michigan, the Petland in Novi and the Westland Dog Food Company in Westland. *Photo by the HSUS, 2020*

The Novi store is one of a total of 10 Petland stores that the HSUS has investigated since 2018. The other stores were in Florida, Georgia, Kansas (2), Kentucky, Texas (2), Virginia and Nevada. Again and again, at Petland stores from Texas to Kentucky, we found sick puppies behind the scenes, and false promises about their origins or health. This investigation proved again that Petland hasn’t changed; as the only national pet store chain in the country that still sells puppies, it continues to source dogs from massive commercial dealers, many of them with known animal care violations. In addition, Petland, like most puppy stores, cuts corners by allowing staff with little or no veterinary training to be the primary caretakers for frail and ailing puppies.

Other Michigan pet stores visited or investigated

HSUS researchers studied sourcing documents including Certificates of Veterinary Inspection for a total of 12 different puppy-selling pet stores in Michigan, and visited nine pet stores in person (Petland Novi plus eight others). CVIs include details such as the address from which the dog was shipped, the dog's age, the date the dog was examined by a veterinarian, and the destination (pet store).

The investigation revealed:

- Most of the stores visited claimed or implied that all their puppies came from high-quality breeders, but paperwork reviewed by the HSUS proved many of the stores purchased puppies from massive out-of-state brokers linked to inhumane puppy mills, while the remaining stores we reviewed had no transparency at all. The stores with no transparency either had no available records on file with the state, and/or no documents posted in the store to show the origins of their dogs.
- Photos from government inspection records of some of the breeders that sold to Michigan pet stores showed dogs with large lacerations or bloody wounds, or matted feces adhered to their fur. Some of the photos also showed dogs living in filthy conditions with piles of excreta around them and under them.
- CVIs studied by HSUS researchers and records seen by the investigator in the store showed that at least three of the stores (Barking Boutique, Puppy Dog Nursery and Petland Novi) purchased puppies from breeders who were in one or more of the HSUS Horrible Hundred lists of known puppy mills.
- A worker at Puppygram bragged that the owner “has relationships with 230 breeders in the country,” while another salesperson claimed they only use breeders “so clean you could eat off the floor.” At the same visit, the investigator filmed a live flea crawling on one of the store’s puppies.
- At Westland Dog Food Company, a worker admitted “most of our dogs come from out of state,” and at Pet City Pets in Ypsilanti, a worker said their dogs come from Amish breeders because “that’s how they make their money,” but also claimed, “they are not a puppy mill.”



In 2021, USDA inspectors found a dog who was suffering from three large lacerations at Vernon Bontrager's Grand Valley Kennels in Wisconsin. The state also inspected in 2021 and noted that newborn puppies died in the kennel after being attacked by other dogs. The breeder sold to the Barking Boutique. *Photo by U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2021*

The complete list of the nine stores and locations visited in person with an undercover camera is:

- Barking Boutique in Comstock Park and Grand Rapids
- Family Puppy in Flint, Novi and Troy
- Pet City Pets in Ypsilanti
- Petland in Novi
- Puppygram Detroit in Berkley
- Westland Dog Food Company in Westland

Six stores did not appear to have any recent CVIs on file with the state to show where their puppies were coming from, leaving their sources largely unknown. The stores with no known documentation included Teacup & Toys A Pet Boutique LLC in Birmingham, Pet City Pets in Ypsilanti, Woof Woof Puppies and Boutique in Southfield, VI Pets locations in Cutlerville and Holland, and Family Puppy in Flint.

“There was a very, very loudly hacking puppy in a display cage, hacking so bad she was visibly struggling and had white foam around her mouth. It was loud enough that I heard it from the other side of the kennels and to such a degree that I was startled by it.”

—Investigator in Petland Novi, Sept. 2023

Conclusion

The investigation proved what animal advocates have been saying for decades: puppies don't belong in pet stores in Michigan, and most of them come from puppy mills. The problems in the puppy pipeline are deeply rooted and endemic and are not limited to the breeders who supply the stores, but also exist in the transport process and in the pet stores themselves.

HB 4838, introduced in the Michigan legislature in June 2023, would end the sale of kittens, rabbits and puppies in retail stores across the state, pushing the public toward more humane sources of puppies, such as reputable rescue groups and animal shelters, or small, local breeders they can meet in person. Seven other states have passed laws ending the sale of puppies in pet stores. Michigan should become the next.