



Puppy Buyer Complaints

A 15-Year Summary 2007-2022



**THE HUMANE SOCIETY
OF THE UNITED STATES**

COMMON BUYER COMPLAINTS.....6


STATES WITH THE HIGHEST NUMBERS OF COMPLAINTS.....8

COMPLAINTS BY BUSINESS TYPE.....9

BUYERS DECEIVED9


CONCLUSION..... 12

METHODOLOGY 13

A close-up photograph of a dog's face, showing its eyes and fur, with a semi-transparent blue overlay. The dog's eyes are looking directly at the camera.

“ The vet they [the pet store] sent us to gave him a clean bill of health. One day later, he was back at that vet for pneumonia. ... We paid over \$5,000 while he was there for a week in the oxygen tank. [The pet store] refused to reimburse even though the dog was still under their 14-day warranty the entire stay. He made it through the pneumonia only to be diagnosed with pyloric stenosis two months later. [He had a] congenital deformity that wasn't allowing him to digest food. That surgery cost over \$7,000, and he will need special care and medicine for it for the rest of his life.”

— Adrienne A.



Unsuspecting buyers often fall in love with puppies in pet stores, having no idea they came from puppy mills and may be sick. Fortunately, the puppies shown here were offered for adoption at a pet store working to find homes for homeless puppies from an animal shelter.

In March 2021, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention concluded a second investigation into a multidrug-resistant infectious disease outbreak that sickened 56 people, many of whom had made recent contact with puppies from Petland stores. The CDC found that the highest number of infections occurred in Minnesota, Nevada and Ohio. In total, between two investigations, over 160 people were infected.

Puppy Buyer Complaints

A 15-Year Summary 2007–2022

The Humane Society of the United States receives complaints from buyers of sick puppies on a daily basis. Over a 15-year period (2007-2022), our puppy mills campaign received **7,887** puppy buyer complaints. The complaints came in by way of our online complaint form, by email and through our puppy mill tip line. Pet buyers complained about sick puppies sold by a variety of sources, including pet stores, breeders (both in person and online) or middleman dealers (sometimes known as brokers).

Troubled buyers contact us for many reasons. Some are seeking information about how to pursue their consumer complaint and obtain reimbursements needed to cover veterinary care. Others seek information about where their pet store puppy really came from. Some want the seller investigated for potentially illegal or cruel conditions, and many have concerns about the welfare of other dogs on the property.

The 7,887 complaints received represent only a small fraction of all sick puppy complaints nationwide. Many buyers of sick puppies report their complaints directly to the seller, to local animal control or law enforcement, to a consumer group such as the Better Business Bureau or on a website such as [ripoffreport.com](https://www.ripoffreport.com) instead of contacting a national animal welfare group. Many others, absorbed in trying to provide urgent care to a sick puppy, do not contact anyone at all.

Staff members from the Humane Society of the United States made an attempt to follow up with each complainant to check on each puppy's well-being and survival and to offer advice on how to resolve each complaint. The HSUS alerted some complainants, for example, to their states' puppy lemon laws or referred them to local law enforcement or animal control agencies, if warranted. Some complaints were forwarded to our Animal Rescue Team or other departments for potential investigation.



Over a 15-year period (2007-2022), our puppy mills campaign received 7,887 puppy buyer complaints.

RECENT TRENDS

Petland, the only national pet store chain in the United States that still sells puppies, claims that it is improving its supply chain, but complaints about sick Petland puppies are on the rise. For example, we received **30%** more Petland puppy complaints in 2018-2022 compared to 2013-2017.

Over the past five years, complaints about campylobacter infections in puppies have been on the rise. The increase has occurred in the wake of a study by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention of an outbreak of multidrug-resistant campylobacter cases linked to pet store puppies.

In several states that passed large numbers of ordinances prohibiting the sale of puppies in pet stores (California, Illinois, New Jersey), complaints about pet store puppies have trended down over time.



A German shepherd named Cinder was rescued with more than 50 dogs from an alleged puppy mill in Maryland.

“ We picked up our puppy on a Sunday, and by Wednesday she was admitted to an emergency vet and tested positive for parvovirus (a deadly disease). She barely survived and cost us thousands of dollars. ”

- Amy M.

Common buyer complaints

Many puppy buyers complained of multiple problems with their puppy, but some concerns came up with greater frequency.

THE MOST COMMON ILLNESSES REPORTED WERE:

- Intestinal parasites such as worms, giardia and/or coccidia.
- Respiratory issues such as bronchial infections and pneumonia.
- Infectious diseases that can be deadly to puppies, such as parvovirus and canine distemper.
- Ear problems such as infections and mites.
- Skin disorders such as mange.
- Urinary infections and bladder issues.
- Hypoglycemia (low blood sugar, which can lead to seizures or unconsciousness).

THE MOST COMMON CONGENITAL DEFECTS REPORTED WERE:

- Seizures or suspected neurological issues.
- Skeletal disorders with the hip, elbow or knee.
- Hernias (umbilical and inguinal).
- Heart murmur or heart disease.
- Liver disease such as liver shunt.
- Eye issues such as cherry eye, cataracts and blindness.
- Deafness.

THE MOST COMMON TEMPERAMENT PROBLEMS REPORTED WERE:

- Fearful behavior (i.e., hiding, shaking, running away as if never socialized).
- Aggressive tendencies (i.e., biting or snapping).
- Abnormal behavior (i.e., walking in circles repeatedly, eating feces).

Deadly diseases in puppies may have an incubation period of up to two weeks, so it is common for puppies to seem healthy at the time of purchase, only to become sick or even die within days. Some buyers reported spending thousands of dollars trying to save the life of a sick puppy, with a few spending more than \$20,000 in veterinary bills attempting to save the life or ease the suffering of their pet.

“ Sunny passed away yesterday from an autoimmune disorder called necrotizing meningoencephalitis. I notified [the seller] right after his first seizure. Yesterday when he passed, he had a 30-minute seizure [on the way to the emergency room]. [The seller] said they would they give us another dog for 50% off or reimburse us 25% of his purchase price [\$400]. But we are absolutely traumatized and completely financially broke after spending \$10,000 this past week. ”

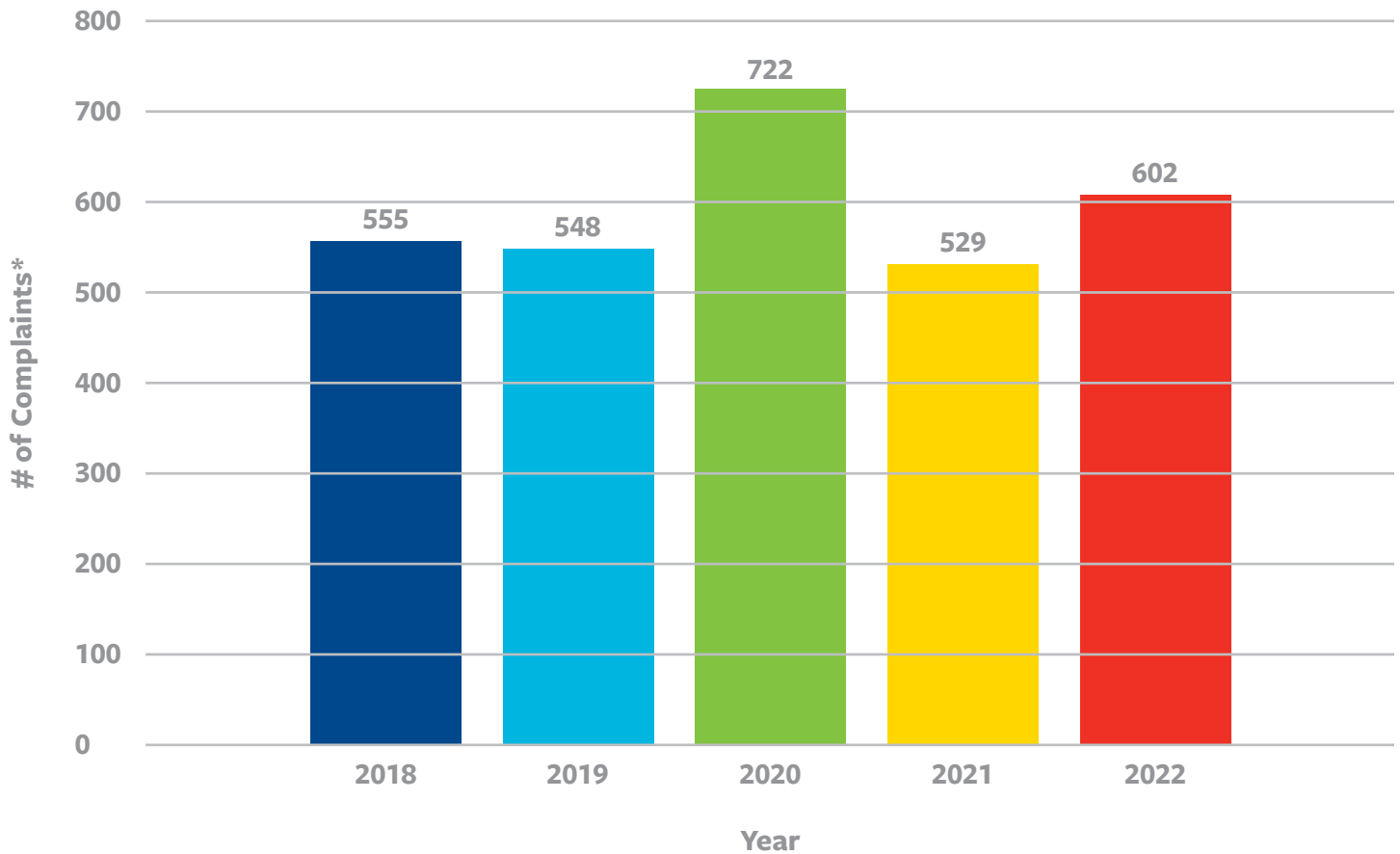
— Sara S.

“ [The seller] sold us an unfit puppy. Within the first days we discovered that he had parvovirus, kennel cough, an ear infection and giardia. He almost died, but we got him care in time to save his life. The vet bills were over \$5,000 in total within the first two weeks of us having him. He is still not completely well a month in. ... Every vet we saw told us we needed to get our money back because the animal was unfit for sale. This whole ordeal has been traumatic for our family. ”

— Andrea D.

*The buyers' quotes in this document are taken from actual complaints reported to the HSUS. Some statements have been edited for clarity.

TOTAL NUMBER OF CONSUMER COMPLAINTS: FIVE-YEAR TREND

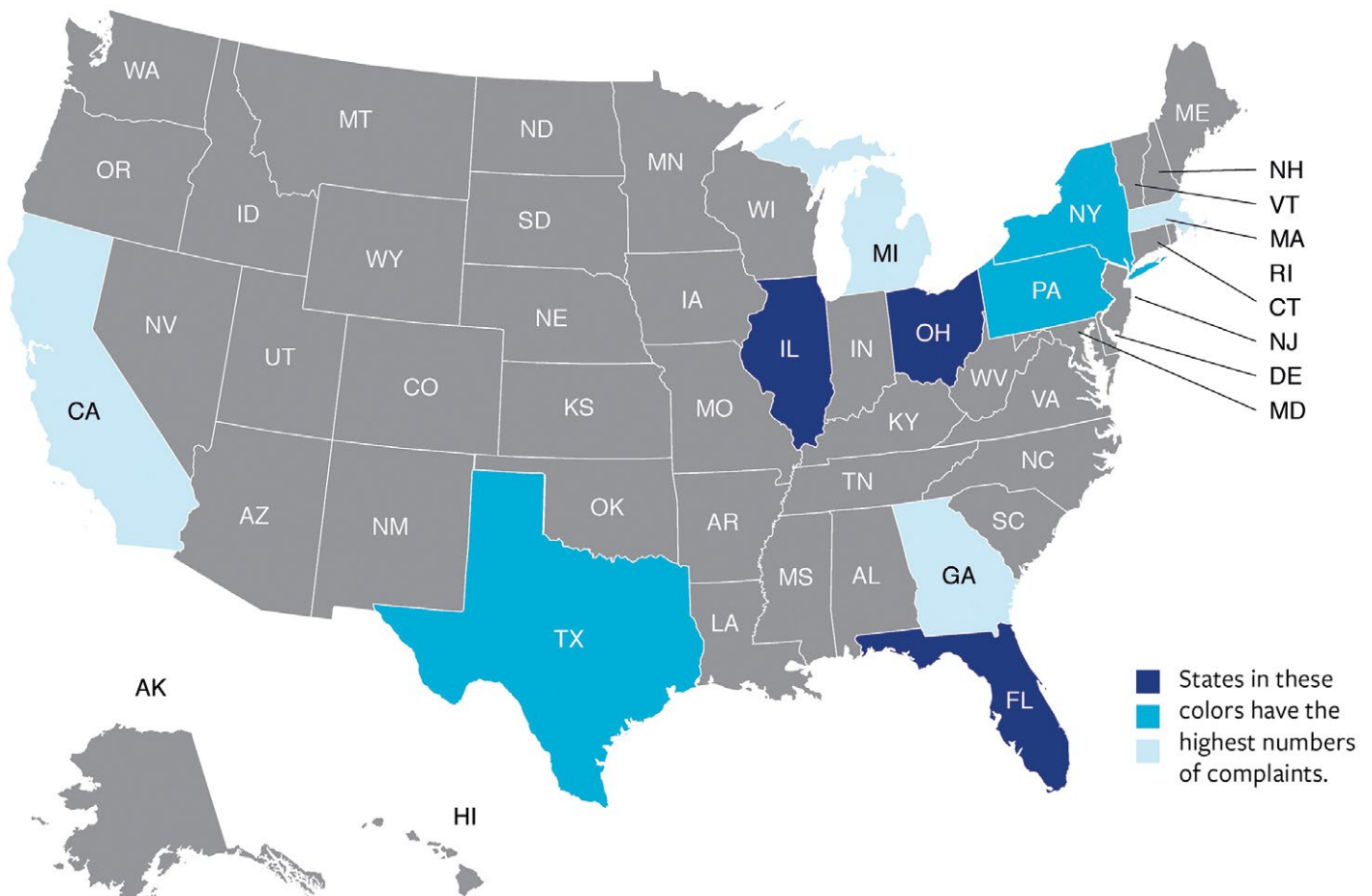


*The HSUS only receives a small number of all puppy complaints nationwide.



Dog sales boomed in 2020 as COVID-19 kept people at home. As a result, consumer complaints about sick puppies submitted to the HSUS increased. We also heard from a number of families who were allegedly scammed during the pandemic into buying puppies online who didn't exist.

TOP 10 STATES FOR PET STORE COMPLAINTS 2007–2022



STATES WITH THE HIGHEST NUMBERS OF COMPLAINTS

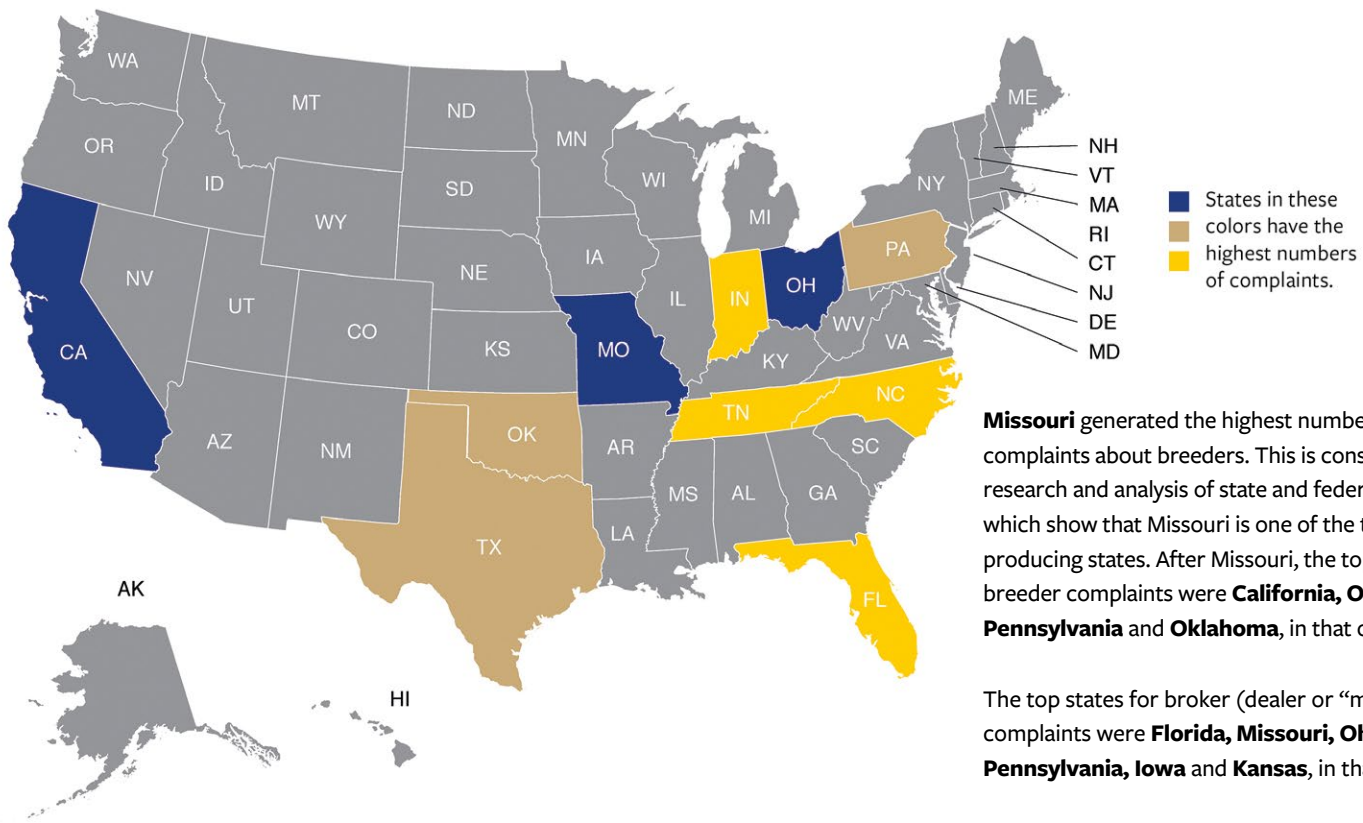
For each complaint, we kept a record of the buyer's state in addition to the seller's state(s). For example, if a Virginia consumer complained about a puppy she purchased online who was shipped to her from Missouri, the complaint would be logged as a Virginia consumer complaining about a Missouri business. A Florida consumer who purchased a puppy from a Florida pet store who was shipped to the store from Arkansas would be logged as a Florida consumer complaining about both a Florida business and an Arkansas business. If the buyer did not know where the puppy came from before reaching the store, then only the pet store location was logged.

California had the highest number of consumers submitting complaints, followed by **Florida** and **Ohio**.

The states where businesses generated the most complaints (from buyers in all states) were **Florida**, **Missouri** and **Ohio**, in that order.

The highest number of complaints about puppies purchased from pet stores involved stores located in **Florida**, **Ohio**, **Illinois**, **New York**, **Texas** and **Pennsylvania**, in that order.

TOP 10 STATES FOR BREEDER COMPLAINTS 2007–2022



Missouri generated the highest number of complaints about breeders. This is consistent with research and analysis of state and federal records, which show that Missouri is one of the top puppy-producing states. After Missouri, the top states for breeder complaints were **California, Ohio, Texas, Pennsylvania** and **Oklahoma**, in that order.

The top states for broker (dealer or “middleman”) complaints were **Florida, Missouri, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Iowa** and **Kansas**, in that order.

COMPLAINTS BY BUSINESS TYPE

Although many complaints involved more than one seller (puppies sold for the pet trade often change hands multiple times), each complaint was categorized according to the acquisition sources of the puppies, which were reported to the Humane Society of the United States as follows:

- **5,219** of the **7,887** complaints (about 65%) involved direct sales from a **breeder or a broker**.
- **2,668** of the **7,887** complaints (about 34%) involved puppies purchased from a **pet store**.
- **1,086** of the **5,219** breeder/broker puppy buyer complaints involved puppies purchased **over the internet**. This amounts to **21%** of all breeder/broker complaints.

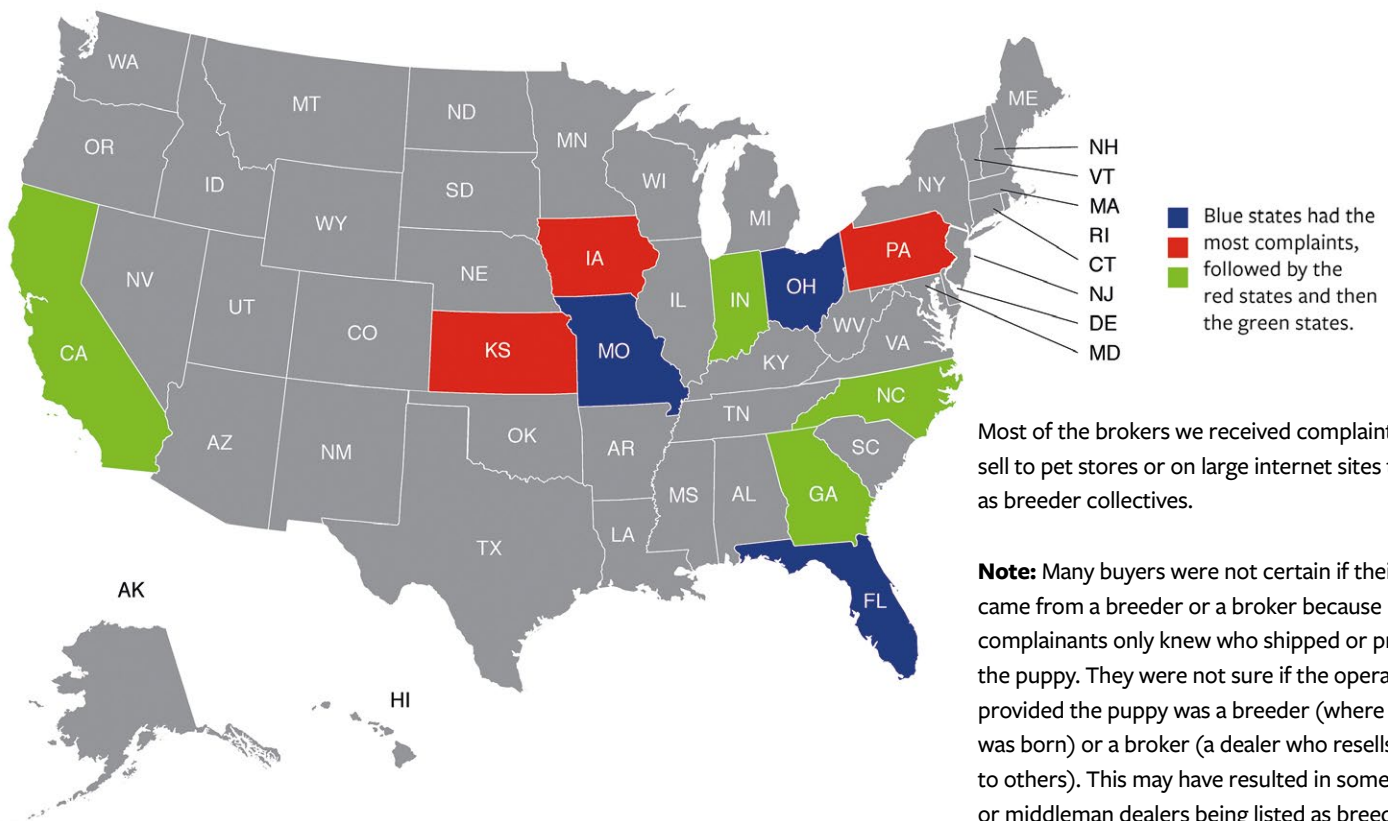
Note: In some cases, buyers of a sick puppy identified the store but did not know the name of their puppy’s breeder or broker. In other cases, they submitted a complaint about both the store and the broker or breeder who had supplied the puppy to the store.

BUYERS DECEIVED

Although their primary complaints were about receiving a sick pet, many puppy buyers also complained about broken promises, deceptive marketing, health contracts that were not honored, and/or a seller’s attempts to cut costs by skimping on vet care or requiring the buyer to take the puppy only to the seller’s participating veterinarian. Some buyers said that pet sellers discouraged them from taking a very sick puppy to an emergency vet, insisting that their health warranty was only valid if the animal was taken to the pet store’s vet. This often resulted in delayed care for a puppy who became sick on a weekend or after regular business hours.

In addition, a number of pet store customers complained they were sold puppies under financing programs that were actually pet leasing programs, which forced them to incur still more expenses.

TOP 10 STATES FOR BROKER COMPLAINTS 2007–2022



Most of the brokers we received complaints about sell to pet stores or on large internet sites that pose as breeder collectives.

Note: Many buyers were not certain if their puppy came from a breeder or a broker because many complainants only knew who shipped or provided the puppy. They were not sure if the operation that provided the puppy was a breeder (where the puppy was born) or a broker (a dealer who resells puppies to others). This may have resulted in some brokers or middleman dealers being listed as breeders.



One buyer said that upon agreeing to finance her puppy from a Texas pet store, she was pressured to buy special supplements and foods to keep her warranty valid:

“I purchased a puppy from [a Texas pet store]. He seemed perfectly fine, but he has been coughing and sounding like he is very congested. It sounds like he is choking or cannot breathe right. We were told that he was up to date on all shots and healthy, but it does not sound like it. We were also told we would pay only \$12,000, which is still excessive, and when I looked over the contract again it said we would end up paying \$16,000 in total. ... I was told the puppy had a lifetime warranty, but as I had already signed they said the only way I could keep the warranty was if I purchased food and vitamins from there every 90 days.”

Some complainants said they were encouraged to put the cost of their puppy on high-interest credit cards offered by the pet store’s finance partner. These cards had such high interest rates that the practice might be considered predatory lending, leading consumers to spend many times the original price of the puppy—which compounded their financial peril when high veterinary bills were added to the mix.

“I purchased a new arrival. Male mini Australian shepherd for \$4,700.00. They gave me a credit [card limit] of \$9,000.00. Their contract is done on a computer that the employee gives you a summary on each page and then has you sign. ... What they left out to tell me is that my interest fee is 24.99%! Found out when I got my bill. I called freaking out, so they gave me interest free for 1 year. ... Our [dog] was sick a couple days after bringing him home. ... He had a runny nose and bad cough.”



This bulldog named Dijon was purchased from a pet store in New York City. Shortly after purchase, she was diagnosed with giardia and a respiratory infection. Despite treatment, Dijon had recurring giardia infections for months.

Many buyers felt deceived when sellers sold them puppies under “health guarantees” or warranties that ended up being worth very little or were ultimately not honored. The buyers quickly ended up with a sick animal and high vet bills. One internet buyer, whose puppy was ultimately diagnosed with parvovirus, described the experience with her puppy’s breeder as follows:

“Online seller said I was receiving a perfectly healthy puppy with a 2-year health guarantee. My puppy became ill with parvo within 3 days of arriving at my home. ... [The breeder] refuses to help with any of the medical expenses and says I should bring [her] home and self-treat. ... The medical bills are \$3,000 at present. She is still in the hospital, fighting for her life. [The breeder] offered to reimburse me [the purchase price] in exchange for not reporting them to any agencies, leaving a negative Google review and removing all other social media posts regarding [the puppy] in any negative way.”

A number of buyers said they suspected the pet stores of downplaying their puppy’s health issues and/or using vets who treated their puppies with the least expensive and often ineffective treatments. One buyer whose puppy was diagnosed with an upper respiratory infection and a parasite wrote:

“We unknowingly purchased a sick puppy. They told us he was fine and had been vet checked a week before we bought him. That night we brought him home he started showing signs that he was sick, we took him to the vet that [the store’s] warranty was offering and they told us he had giardia and a strong respiratory infection. The first 2 weeks with him the vet scheduled him appointments every day because he couldn’t breathe and was hacking. He passed the infection onto my healthy female Pom whom I’ve had for 10 years. She passed with serious bronchitis respiratory infection. The emergency vet couldn’t save her after admitting her to the hospital, leaving us with a high vet bill. ... My puppy is still sick to this day.”

Another buyer whose puppy was diagnosed with pneumonia wrote:

“Purchased a mini bulldog, [and] that same night I brought her home she had a cough. I assumed this was kennel cough since they sent home paperwork about kennel cough being completely normal. I have two other bulldogs at home (5 years old and 9 months old). I took the new puppy to the vet [within four days] and was advised she needed to have immediate eye surgery for her cherry eye that developed the second day of having her and [that she] had pneumonia. She wasn’t eating or drinking anything, even when [I tried] to hand-feed her. I went back to the vet [days later] and was advised her pneumonia was worse and very severe [and] that she needed to be hospitalized ASAP. ... She is currently in an incubator receiving oxygen treatments with an IV. She has also got the 9-month-old sick as well.”



This puppy purchased from a breeder in Tennessee was diagnosed with a genetic defect, pneumonia and a fungal infection. Despite treatment, the puppy sadly passed away shortly after purchase.

Conclusion

Behind the statistics of this summary are more than 7,800 puppies who suffered, and in many cases died, and more than 7,800 families or individuals who suffered along with their pets, often both financially and emotionally. It was common for complainants to use phrases such as “heartbroken” and “devastated” to describe the psychological effects of trying to save the life of their sick puppy.

Witnessing their beloved pet experience ongoing pain and distress, and sometimes death, was often compounded by financial worries. Many buyers reported that they went into debt in an attempt to treat their puppy’s problems, while at the same time, many still owed lending companies thousands of dollars for the purchase of a pet who was no longer living. When the puppies survived, many faced future surgeries or would require costly medications or therapies for the rest of their lives.

Disease risks aren’t always limited to the puppy: Several common diseases found in puppy mill dogs can spread to humans, including parasites such as giardia and infections such as brucellosis. In March 2021, the CDC concluded a second study ([cdc.gov/campylobacter/outbreaks/puppies-12-19/index.html](https://www.cdc.gov/campylobacter/outbreaks/puppies-12-19/index.html)) of 56 people who became sick with a drug-resistant form of campylobacter bacteria.

The CDC found that many of the people with the illness had come into recent contact with a puppy from a Petland pet store and that the majority of the illnesses occurred in Minnesota, Nevada and Ohio. In total, between two investigations, over 160 people were infected.

We compiled and released this information for several purposes. First, it’s imperative to warn consumers about the many problems that affect commercially raised puppies and their buyers, often due to uninformed or impulsive purchases from questionable sellers. When the public better understands the potential pitfalls of purchasing from questionable sellers, or from any puppy breeder they have not personally visited and carefully researched, they can avoid financially supporting puppy mills and possibly dealing with the heartache of a sick pet.



Rosie was one of three puppies relinquished to local authorities by American Kennels pet store in New York City in the wake of an HSUS undercover investigation. She suffered from several ailments, including kennel cough and giardia, and she required complicated hip surgery before she was 1 year old.

Second, this report shows that certain states have a much higher number of complaints than others. This information makes it clear to policymakers that stronger laws and oversight are needed, especially in states linked to high numbers of complaints. Stronger oversight of puppy mills, online dealers and pet stores can help stop potentially cruel conditions before they become entrenched and can help ensure that only healthy and well-raised puppies are offered for sale to the public.

Lastly, it’s no accident that nearly half of complaints we received involve a puppy purchased from a pet store or online. Websites and pet stores provide a curtain behind which some of the worst puppy mills hide. The Humane Society of the United States advises consumers to adopt a pet in person from a reputable animal shelter or pet rescue group or buy only from a breeder they have met in person and carefully screened. Buyers should always visit the home where the puppy was born and raised, and ensure that all the pets on the property are kept in clean, spacious and humane conditions.

Buyers should insist that sellers provide health records on a veterinarian’s letterhead. Potential buyers who witness troubling conditions can report it to the seller’s local animal control or humane society or to us. Visit [humanesociety.org/puppy](https://www.humanesociety.org/puppy) for more tips on how to acquire a puppy from a humane source.

Puppies are usually sold by puppy mills at 8 weeks of age, but the breeding dogs live their entire lives in cages, never becoming part of a family.



Methodology



This puppy, purchased from a pet store, was diagnosed with kennel cough and later developed pneumonia.

The Humane Society of the United States collected the data that is the basis of this report from anecdotal rather than statistical sampling data. It is a very small sample of all of the events that likely occurred nationwide during the time period studied. Consumers volunteered the information via web form submissions and/or by phone or email. Their complaints were then entered in an internal database of puppy buyer complaints. Although we attempted to follow up with every complainant, not all complainants responded to follow-up inquiries. This report was based on the date each complaint was received rather than the purchase date of the puppy. Consumer complaints that were of a general nature or did not involve a puppy purchase were omitted from the sample.

Our mission

We fight the big fights to end suffering for all animals.

Together with millions of supporters, the Humane Society of the United States takes on puppy mills, factory farms, the fur trade, trophy hunting, animal cosmetics testing and other cruel industries. Through our rescue, response and sanctuary work, as well as other direct services, we help thousands of animals in need every year.

We fight all forms of animal cruelty to achieve the vision behind our name: a humane society.



**THE HUMANE SOCIETY
OF THE UNITED STATES**

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