

2018

## Assessment of Recent Cases of Animal Hoarding in Germany: The Challenge for Animal Shelters and Public Authorities

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### Recommended Citation

Arnold, Sophie; Mackensen, Henriette; Ofensberger, Evelyn; and Rusche, Brigitte (2018) "Assessment of Recent Cases of Animal Hoarding in Germany: The Challenge for Animal Shelters and Public Authorities," *People and Animals: The International Journal of Research and Practice*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 1, Article 7. Available at: <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/paij/vol1/iss1/7>

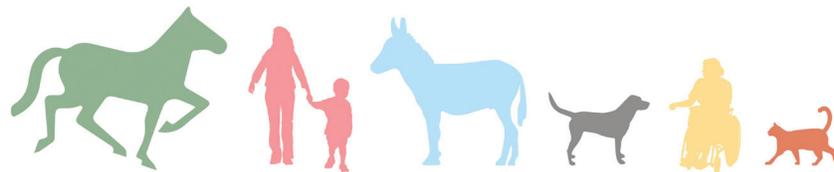
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# Assessment of Recent Cases of Animal Hoarding in Germany: The Challenge for Animal Shelters and Public Authorities

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*People and Animals: The International Journal of Research and Practice*

Volume 1 | Issue 1 | ISSN: 2575-9078

(2018)

## Assessment of Recent Cases of Animal Hoarding in Germany: The Challenge for Animal Shelters and Public Authorities

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**Keywords:** animal hoarding, human-animal-interaction, collecting of animals, collecting disorder, animal abuse, cats, small mammals

**Abstract** Animal hoarding is a severe problem in the field of human-animal interaction. The goal of this study was to assess the current situation of animal hoarding in Germany. Reports of animal hoarding cases were collected from animal shelters and public media between January 2012 and December 2015; 120 cases were analyzed. A total of 9,174 animals were hoarded during the investigated time period. The results showed that cases involving cats were most common, followed by cases involving dogs and small mammals. The average number ( $\bar{x}$ ) of animals hoarded per case was 76 ( $\bar{x} = 43$ ). Small mammals were hoarded in greater numbers than any other type of animal ( $\bar{x} = 88$ ,  $\bar{x} = 53$ , Tukey's HSD,  $p < 0.05$ ). Most hoarders in this study were middle-aged females. Animal hoarding is a current and serious animal welfare problem for which a stronger interdisciplinary approach is needed. Responsible institutions such as veterinary, legal, and health departments need to improve cooperation and provide continuous help for hoarders and animals. Psychological and practical help for repeat offenders, but also for potential hoarders, could improve the situation sustainably. The German Animal Welfare Association (Deutscher Tierschutzbund e.V.) is an umbrella organization of more than 550 animal shelters in Germany. It provides financial and practical help in animal hoarding cases. This study follows up Sperlin's veterinary dissertation (2012) and gives an overview of animal hoarding cases in Germany.

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## Introduction

Animal hoarding is a term for the condition of pathologically collecting animals (Patronek, 1999). It has been characterized by the Hoarding of Animals Research Consortium (2017) as an accumulation of more than typically kept animals, the failure to provide adequate care and living conditions for the animals, and the impairment of their health and safety, often resulting in dead, sick, or injured animals. The owner of the animals is unable to recognize his/her inability to provide the necessary minimal care. As a result of this, she/he is also incapable of understanding the impact of that failure on the animals, the household, and other human occupants of the dwelling. Despite this grave incapacity, the owner of the animals may not stop accumulating animals, which leads to increasingly uncontrollable conditions.

Furthermore, the person involved often neglects himself or herself as seriously as the hoarded animals. Typically, affected persons are not actively trying to receive assistance and they may even reject help. In some cases, signs of dementia can be observed (Patronek, 1999) and repeat offenders are common (Sperlin, 2012).

The hoarding disorder was included in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Health Disorders* in 2013. The DSM-5 states: “Animal hoarding may be a special manifestation of hoarding disorder. Most individuals who hoard animals also hoard inanimate objects. The most prominent differences between animal and object hoarding are the extent of unsanitary conditions and the poorer insight in animal hoarding” (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Since animal hoarding has not been listed as an official subtype of the hoarding disease, its diagnostic classification remains controversial (Frost, Patronek, Arluke, & Steketee, 2015; Gahr, Connemann, Freudenmann, Kölle, & Schönfeldt-Lecuona, 2014; Mataix-Cols, 2014).

According to Patronek, Loar, and Nathanson (2006), there are three main types of hoarders: the “overwhelmed caregiver,” the “rescuer hoarder,” and the “exploiter hoarder.” The defined types also appear in a variety of mixed forms.

The overwhelmed caregivers often live very close to their animals. They may become increasingly isolated from the outside world, and while trying to provide care, gradually lose control of the animals, who then reproduce excessively. As a result, the person acquires additional animals more or less passively.

The rescuer hoarders have a missionary-style goal of saving animals. They actively collect animals or refuse to stop accommodating more and more individual animals. When the numbers increase, the situation leads to a gradual loss of adequate resources and health care for the animals (Sperlin 2012). Both the overwhelmed caregivers and the rescuer hoarders can bond to their animals in unusually close, sometimes extreme and relentless ways (Frost, Patronek, & Rosenfield, 2011).

The exploiter hoarders, on the other hand, acquire animals to serve their own needs and can appear to be indifferent to the suffering of the animals. Exploiters may display many characteristics of anti-social personality disorder, in that they are manipulative and narcissistic, and appear to lack guilt or remorse (Frost et al., 2015).

Two other types defined by Patronek et al. (2006) are the “incipient hoarder” and the “breeder-hoarder,” which represent intermediate stages. The incipient hoarder still achieves minimum standards of animal care, but has already started losing control. There still may be awareness of the problematic conditions and attempts to improve, but if nothing changes dramatically, a worsening of the situation can be expected. The breeder-hoarder initially started breeding animals either for money or for showing them in public. The breeding continues although the living conditions deteriorate and the animals are neglected. Often the animals do not live in the breeders’ home and the owner’s living conditions are not as impaired as that of the animals.

In a review of six cases from Canada, Reinisch (2009) classified 40% as overwhelmed caregivers, 20% as rescuer hoarders, and 40% as exploiters. According to a German study, the two most common types are: the overwhelmed caregiver (39.7%) and the rescuer hoarder (39.7%) (Sperlin 2012). Sperlin

(2012) also found 35.2% of the hoarders met the definition of a breeder and 13% were “exploiters.”

Animal control authorities often have to work on a certain animal hoarding case for many years until they can discover the full extent of the situation (Calvo, Duarte, Bowen, Bulbena, & Fatjó, 2014). Frequently the suffering of the animals is particularly shocking, as the number of animals living under poor conditions is especially high. Several authors have published assessment reports in Germany highlighting the difficulties veterinary services have when confronted with animal hoarding cases (Schroff & Jäger, 2014; Senft, 2012; Wilczek, 2009). The German animal welfare law (Tierschutzgesetz [TierSchG] 1972) describes the general requirements that have to be fulfilled when animals are kept as pets or farm animals. It also enables veterinary services to confiscate animals if they are substantially neglected, severely abused, or mistreated (§ 16a TierSchG art. 1 [1–3]). The requirements for owning a pet are specified in different regulations, guidelines, and expert opinions and serve as the basic orientation for animal control authorities. However, in order to prove an animal hoarding situation and to be allowed to confiscate the involved animals, the veterinarian has to document solid evidence in advance. This is often difficult due to the isolating behavior of many hoarders. Schroff and Jäger (2014) emphasize that the protection of animal welfare can only be fulfilled if inspections of critical households can be performed more easily. In Germany, state veterinarians have to follow a strict policy in entering private households. Schroff and Jäger (2014) claim that animal control agents should have an immediate right of visitation, not merely when an urgent operational need or imminent danger is assumed. Vaca-Guzman and Arluke (2005) also reported about difficulties in enforcement. Hoarders develop different and creative strategies to get around official inspections and legal requirements. In Germany, it is well known that they even move to different areas, evading official orders. Sperlin (2012) recommends that during official inspections of households with animals, two very simple indications can point to a problematic household: uncontrolled reproduction, especially

when inbreeding is found, and the inability of the owner to state the exact number of animals he or she is keeping. A close collaboration between veterinary services, health services, and other involved institutions is therefore indispensable. Additionally, it would be beneficial to improve the collaboration between veterinary offices in different regions or states, and to implement a centralized national register that reports manifest hoarders (Arnold 2015).

## Research Problem

Animal hoarding is a phenomenon that is not widely recognized, although it is a psychological, public health, animal welfare, and environmental health issue. It concerns the hoarders themselves, the affected animals, the people living in the same household and the surrounding neighborhood, and the veterinarians and animal welfare staff dealing with the problem. Furthermore, air pollution by ammonia and the risk of spreading zoonotic diseases are additional possible negative consequences. The goal of this study is to give an overview of recent animal hoarding cases in Germany, focusing on the animal types and numbers of hoarded animals per case. We will also follow up on the research of Sperlin’s dissertation published in 2012, analyzing animal hoarding cases by using a questionnaire.

## Methods

Between January 2012 and December 2015 the authors of this study collected media reports of animal hoarding cases and internal reports of animal shelters that were involved in housing the affected animals. The animals were categorized in the following groups: dogs; cats; small mammals including rabbits, guinea pigs, mice, hamsters, and others like chinchillas, degus, hamsters, and gerbils; birds; farm animals including horses; and wild or exotic animals. The information available sometimes included the numbers and types of animals, and the gender, age, and background of the animal keeper,

which was taken into account. The figures were descriptively analyzed. The means of the numbers of animals affected per type were compared by using an ANOVA and Tukey's HSD.

## Results

In total, 120 cases of animal hoarding from all over Germany were analyzed with 9,174 animals involved. The animals studied were those still living by the time the authorities intervened. There were many cases in which dead animals were found. Veterinarians frequently had to euthanize animals when they were too ill, or when lifesaving treatment or transportation would have caused unjustifiable pain or suffering to the creature. Shelters regularly reported financial difficulties and short staff when housing animals that had been involved in hoarding cases. Costs reported from the shelters ranged from 850 to 83,000 Euros per case.

## Animals

The number of cases per year ranged from 20 cases in 2013 to 48 cases in 2014. The highest number of animals affected by animal hoarding in one year was 3,098 animals reported in 2012 (Table 1).

Looking at the different types of animals that were specified, the animals found in highest numbers in

animal hoarding cases in Germany were small mammals ( $n = 3,333$ ), followed by cats ( $n = 2,082$ ), farm animals including horses ( $n = 1,154$ ), dogs ( $n = 939$ ), birds ( $n = 456$ ), and wild or exotic animals ( $n = 280$ ) (Table 1). Nine hundred thirty animals were additionally documented; however, classification was not possible because some reports only mentioned the occurrence of certain animals but not their exact numbers or type of animal.

In most cases only one type of animal (61%,  $n = 73$ ) was hoarded. In 13% ( $n = 15$ ) two types, in 9% ( $n = 11$ ) three types, in 5% ( $n = 6$ ) four types, and in 13% ( $n = 15$ ) more than four types of animals were involved. Looking at the different types of animals, in 58% ( $n = 38$ ) of the cases cats were hoarded solely, without other types of animals in the same household. For dogs this was the case in 33% ( $n = 16$ ), for small mammals in 37% ( $n = 17$ ), and for birds in 12% ( $n = 2$ ) of the cases.

Regardless of the number of different types of animals kept within one household, cats were hoarded in most of the cases (54%,  $n = 65$ ), followed by dogs (40%,  $n = 49$ ), small mammals (39%,  $n = 47$ ), birds (15%,  $n = 18$ ), farm animals (6%,  $n = 7$ ), and wild or exotic animals (10%,  $n = 12$ ) (Figure 1). Within the group of small mammals rabbits were most often found (25%,  $n = 30$ ), followed by guinea pigs (12%,  $n = 14$ ), mice and rats (8%,  $n = 10$ ), and others (8%,  $n = 9$ ).

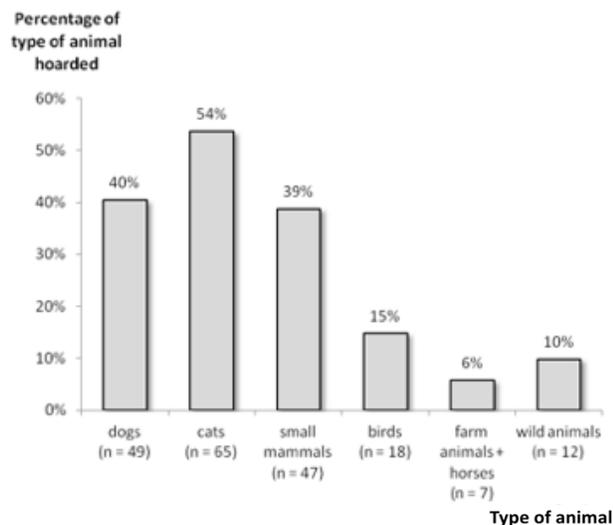
The average number of animals hoarded per case was 76 ( $\bar{x} = 43$ ). In 2012 the highest number occurred

**Table 1** Number of cases and animals affected.

Year	Number of cases	Number of animals affected						All animals together
		Dogs	Cats	Small mammals*	Birds	Farm animals incl. horses	Wild or exotic animals**	
2012	22	249	338	1,258	148	974	29	3,098
2013	20	113	451	130	50	—	151	1,145
2014	48	219	856	1,125	189	91	1	2,574
2015	30	358	437	820	69	89	99	2,357
Total	120	939	2,082	3,333*	456	1,154	280	9,174

\* Including 1,121 rabbits, 869 guinea pigs, 1,045 mice and rats, and 295 others like chinchillas, degus, hamsters, and gerbils.

\*\* For example, snakes, tortoises, caimans, raccoons, monkeys, spiders, scorpions.

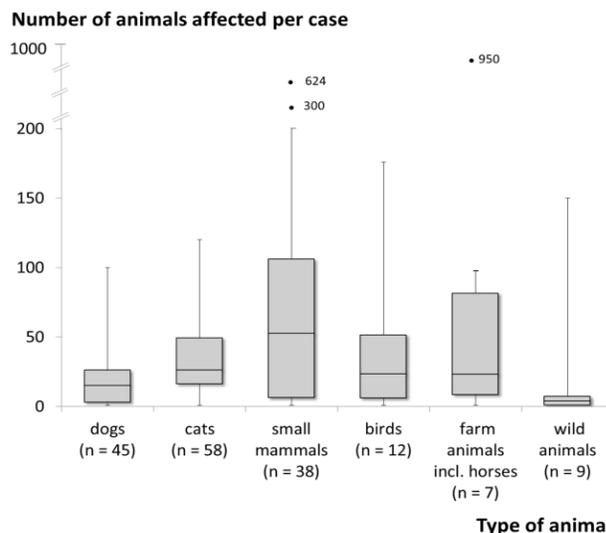


**Figure 1.** Percentage of the types of animals in cases of animal hoarding in Germany between 2012 and 2015. Percentage does not sum to 100% as in some cases more than one type of animal was hoarded.  $N_{\text{cases}} = 120$ ,  $N_{\text{animals}} = 9174$ . Wild animals include exotic animals.

in a case with 974 animals; the same year the lowest number found was a case with only 7 animals—in both cases several carcasses were additionally documented. In 22 documented cases the hoarder was classified as a breeder-hoarder, as in the case of the 974 animals. This case included 950 farm animals like sheep, goats, chicken, and 24 dogs. In the case with the 7 confiscated animals, which were dogs and cats, the owner had already moved three times, while repeating her hoarding disorder. Unfortunately, because of a lack of information it was not possible to calculate the percentage of repeat offenders in total.

Looking at the average numbers of the different types of animals per case, it turned out that small mammals were hoarded in greater numbers than any other type of animal ( $p < 0.05$ ). The average numbers of animals affected per case and animal type were: 88 small mammals, 38 birds, 36 cats, 34 farm animals, 31 wild or exotic animals, and 21 dogs (Figure 2). Within the group of small mammals mice and rats were hoarded in greatest numbers ( $\bar{x} = 149$ ), followed by guinea pigs ( $\bar{x} = 79$ ), rabbits ( $\bar{x} = 51$ ), and others ( $\bar{x} = 37$ ).

As 12 cases involved wild or exotic animals, this led to specifically difficult hoarding situations as many of



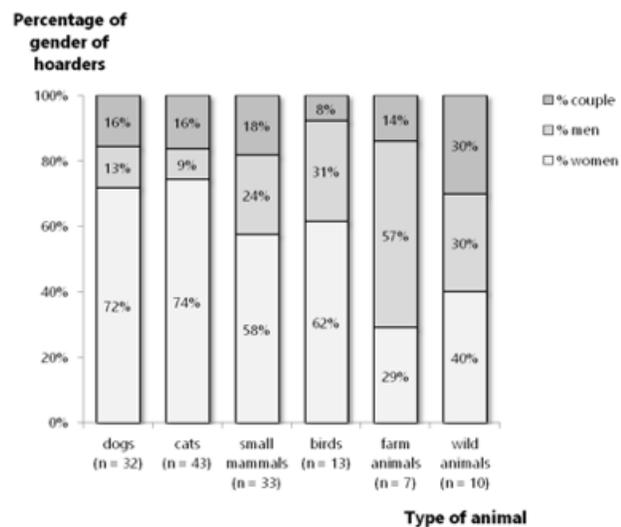
**Figure 2.** Distribution of the number of animals hoarded per household compared to types of animals in Germany between 2012 and 2015. In some cases more than one type of animal was hoarded;  $N_{\text{cases}} = 120$ ,  $N_{\text{animals}} = 9174$ . Wild animals include exotic animals.

these nondomesticated species are especially difficult to accommodate. This fact decreases the chances of a successful rehoming of the animals after being treated and cared for in animal shelters. Wild or exotic animals included, for example, snakes, tortoises, caimans, raccoons, monkeys, spiders, or scorpions.

### Humans

Unfortunately, the material collected did not reveal extensive biographical information about the hoarder. The gender of the hoarder was mentioned in 79 of the 120 cases. In 67% ( $n = 53$ ), a woman was documented as the main owner of the animals, in 18% ( $n = 14$ ) a man, and in 15% ( $n = 12$ ) a couple. On average, women hoarded 58 animals, men hoarded 170 animals, and couples hoarded 117 animals. Women were found to hoard mainly cats and dogs, whereas men dominated as hoarders of small mammals and birds (Figure 3).

The average age of a hoarder in this study was 55 years old. Ten percent ( $n = 2$ ) of the individuals were under the age of 35, 55% ( $n = 11$ ) between 40 and 60 years old, and 35% ( $n = 7$ ) over 60 years of age.



**Figure 3.** Percentage of the gender of the hoarder compared to types of animals in cases of animal hoarding in Germany between 2012 and 2015.  $N_{\text{cases gender-known}} = 79$ ,  $N_{\text{animals}} = 6834$ . Wild animals include exotic animals.

In one case involving 280 animals, the hoarder kept about 100 rabbits, 100 guinea pigs, and 80 cats, which were all reproducing without control. Interestingly, the woman recognized her problem at one point and asked for help at a local animal shelter. In 10 cases of this study, the hoarder similarly asked for help. In five cases, the owner of the animals had died, which led to the detection and confiscation of the animals.

## Discussion

In Germany, the problem of animal hoarding is poorly recognized and scientific studies are scarce. This survey includes media reports and internal reports from animal shelters. Of course, any of these reports might be subjective, leading to results that have limited objectivity. Nevertheless, the high number of cases surveyed establishes a strong overview of the extent of animal hoarding in Germany. Furthermore, it should be noted that the findings of this study also reflect results of other publications worldwide (see the references below). This gives weight to the assumption

that the phenomenon of animal hoarding appears in all Western civilizations in similar dimension. This concept needs to be verified by further research.

Ofensberger (2008) observed 30 cases of animal hoarding in Germany between 1999 and 2008. She reported a steady increase in reported cases during those years. Animal hoarding cases can be very costly due to a need for quarantine, special nutrition necessary for the animals, particular grooming, additional staff, and veterinary care. According to Sperlin (2012), two to three animal shelters or similar institutions are necessary to accommodate the confiscated animals of one animal hoarding case. Animals with behavioral disorders, pregnant animals, or young animals often need considerable time and effort for their rehabilitation and accommodation. Also, wild or exotic animals with special requirements for housing and feeding can lead to extremely high costs, which the shelters or the responsible authority have to bear; the hoarder himself or herself is usually not able to pay for these costs.

The internal reports of the animal shelters revealed that the shelters themselves usually bear most of the cost caused by animal hoarding cases. However, in Germany, as long as the shelters act exclusively on behalf of the authorities, the community is in fact obligated to reimburse their expenses. To enable this reimbursement, some shelters have contractual agreements with their communities. The mentioned reports all came from privately run shelters, the German Animal Welfare Association being their umbrella organization. It needs further research to see if there are differences between privately run shelters and shelters fully financed by their communities.

## Animals

In the present study, 120 hoarding cases accumulated 9,174 animals between 2012 and 2015 with a mean of 76 animals per case. Patronek (1999) reported 39 animals per case. Sperlin (2012) studied 501 cases of animal hoarding and found a share of 105 ( $\bar{x} = 44$ ) animals involved per case. These differing results exist because of the broad range of

numbers an animal hoarding case can have. In this study, the smallest number of animals confiscated was 7 animals (accompanied by dead carcasses); the highest number found was 974 animals.

In accordance with other studies, cats were the species present in most cases (54%). Patronek (1999) found a share of 65% cases with cats, Reinisch (2009) 66%, and Sperlin (2012) 51%. Two studies in Spain and Australia found cases affecting dogs reported more often than cases with cats (Calvo et al., 2014; Joffe, Shannessy, Dhand, Westman, & Fawcett, 2014). As a consequence, Calvo et al. (2014) asked for further research to interpret whether there are cross-cultural differences in the types of species hoarded. Dogs were the second most common animal in our study (40%), as well as in other studies from Germany and the United States (Sperlin, 2012; Patronek, 1999). Sperlin reported that in 13% (rats, mice, hamsters, chinchillas) to 20% (rabbits) of the cases small mammals were involved; our study found a total share of 39% of cases with small mammals, rabbits being affected in 25% of all cases. However, if present in a case small mammals were hoarded in larger numbers than any other species. This result confirms the results collected earlier by Sperlin (2012).

### *Humans*

The findings of the present study are consistent with studies conducted earlier in the United States, Canada, Australia, and Germany, in which animal hoarders are most likely to be female and middle aged or older (Joffe et al., 2014; Patronek, 1999; Patronek et al., 2006; Reinisch, 2009; Sperlin, 2012). A classification of the different types of hoarders, like Patronek et al. (2006) implemented in 2006, was not possible in the current study due to the limited amount of information available—however, such classification would have been interesting. Sperlin (2012) reported that 1/3 of hoarders showed mental disorders, such as obsessive-compulsive disorders, alcoholism, or depression. According to her survey, only 18% of the hoarders received psychological help. In Germany, animal hoarding is not a recognized psychological

disorder (Gahr et al., 2014), and affected people are in most cases classified as criminally liable. Therefore, authorities like health services are limited in mandating necessary and sufficient psychological support for the hoarders. In most cases only veterinary authorities are involved in the cases, focusing on the animal welfare part of the problem. However, based on their expertise, they are only allowed to prohibit or restrict the keeping of animals. In terms of helping the hoarder, they can only give a call to the health services that might be able to improve the person's mental or physiological health. Additionally, clinical experience in dealing with persons associated with animal hoarding is scarce (Gahr et al., 2014). It appears that animal hoarding is to some extent congruent with generalized hoarding disease as both have a disposition to chronic progression and difficulties in treatment (Berry, Patronek, & Lockwood, 2005; Patronek & Nathanson, 2009; Sperlin, 2012). Without counseling intervention, recidivism in animal hoarding is the norm (Berry et al., 2005; Patronek & Nathanson, 2009). Additionally, people affected are usually not willing to actively look for psychological support (Patronek & Nathanson, 2009; Sperlin, 2012). Without sustainable psychological help for the hoarder, no long-term solution for the human or the animals can be achieved. Unfortunately, there are no published reports of evidence-based psychotherapeutic or pharmacological treatment of animal hoarders (Gahr et al., 2014; Patronek & Nathanson, 2009). Therefore, the current recommendation is a close collaboration between psychotherapists and involved authorities (i.e., veterinary or health services) (Patronek & Nathanson, 2009). Primary psychotherapeutic measures including cognitive-behavioral oriented measures (CBT) (Gahr et al., 2014; Patronek & Nathanson 2009) and treatment of occurring comorbid psychological disorders like addictive disorders, depression, personality, or obsessive-compulsive disorder (Patronek et al., 2006; Patronek & Nathanson 2009) should be considered. Establishing peer support groups similar to already existing groups for people affected by hoarding disease could prove to be helpful as well.

## Conclusion

Animal hoarding is a severe problem in the field of human–animal interaction. In the current study most hoarders were found to be middle-aged females. Cats were most often involved. Yet the average number of hoarded animals per household was highest within the group of small mammals. The problem of animal hoarding is still not widely recognized. Unfortunately the full extent of an animal hoarding case is often only discovered when responsible authorities confiscate the animals living in a household. The affected animals are then transferred to animal shelters or similar facilities. They usually need extensive veterinary care and strict quarantine to avoid disease transmission to other animals in the shelter or to the animal care staff. Many animals also need special behavioral care and training because they are shy, traumatized, or simply not properly socialized. As a result of the large number of animals involved and their frequent poor health conditions, shelters periodically reach their financial and personnel limits.

In Germany there are different institutions responsible for solving public health and animal welfare problems. Unfortunately there is not one national authority in charge, but in each federal state different local departments fulfill their role: veterinary services, for example, focus on the animals and their well-being, legal state services work on solutions using legal rules and regulations, and local health departments provide medical and psychological help for the humans involved. To provide ongoing help for animals and hoarders, the institutions need to improve cooperation with one another. Additionally, psychological and practical help for repeat and potential offenders needs to be developed to create sustainable solutions.

## Summary

Animal hoarding is a severe problem in the field of human–animal interaction. The goal of this study was to assess the current situation of animal hoarding in Germany. Between January 2012 and December

2015 the German Animal Welfare Association (Deutscher Tierschutzbund e.V.) collected 120 cases of animal hoarding in Germany, including 9,174 animals. The average number of animals per case was 76. Regardless of the exact number of animals per case, cats were hoarded most often. However, looking at the number of animals per case, small mammals were affected in greater numbers than any other type. Most hoarders in this study were middle-aged females. The average age of a hoarder in this study was 55 years old. A clear differentiation of the different types of hoarders was not possible.

The German Animal Welfare Association (Deutscher Tierschutzbund e.V.) is an umbrella organization of more than 550 animal shelters in Germany. It provides financial and practical help in animal hoarding cases. Animal shelters often reach their limits when housing animals that have been involved in hoarding cases. This is due to the often high numbers of animals that have to be accommodated in a short time. In Germany there are different institutions responsible for solving public health and animal welfare problems. Unfortunately, there is not one national authority in charge. To provide ongoing help for animals and hoarders, the institutions need to improve their cooperation. Additionally, psychological and practical help for repeat and potential offenders needs to be developed to create sustainable solutions.

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