

# STRAY DOG CRISIS: NATIONAL

In response to a growing public safety crisis, the Supreme Court of India recently issued a significant directive. It has ordered the governments of Delhi and the National Capital Region (NCR) authorities in Noida, Gurgaon, and Ghaziabad to capture and relocate stray dogs to designated shelters. The Court described the situation as 'grim' and emphatically stated that 'infants and young children, at any cost, should not fall prey to rabies', signaling an urgent need for effective and balanced solutions.

## 1. The Scale of the Problem: A National Health Crisis

The stray dog issue in India has reached critical proportions, posing severe public health and safety risks.

### **Immense Population**

India is home to an estimated 60 million stray dogs, which constitutes a staggering 37% of the entire global stray dog population.

### **Widespread Dog Bites**

A dog bite occurs every 10 seconds in the country, leading to over 3 million reported cases annually.

### **Epicenter of Rabies**

India is tragically known as the global epicenter for rabies-related deaths. The disease claims two lives every three hours, making it a relentless public health threat. The national goal of eliminating rabies by 2030 is currently unattainable without effective stray dog population control.

### **Vulnerability of Citizens**

Infants, young children, and the elderly are disproportionately affected. A recent spate of fatal attacks in major cities like Delhi, Telangana, and Punjab has highlighted the extreme danger posed to the most vulnerable members of society.

### **General Health Hazards**

Beyond bites and rabies, stray dogs contribute to other health hazards through the spread of diseases and contamination of public spaces.

## 2. Root Causes: A Complex Web of Factors

The crisis stems from a combination of societal trends, individual behaviors, and administrative failures.

### **Irresponsible Pet Ownership**

The number of pet dogs in India is rising rapidly, reaching 30 million in 2024 with an annual growth rate of 10–15%. A significant portion of the stray population originates from irresponsible ownership, which includes:

#### **Abandonment**

Owners frequently abandon pets that become old, sick, or inconvenient.

#### **Unneutered Pets**

Failure to sterilize pet dogs leads to uncontrolled breeding, often with the stray population.

#### **Lack of Identification**

The absence of mandatory registration or microchipping makes it impossible to trace abandoned dogs back to their owners.

### **The Issue of Proxy Petting (Street Feeding)**

While often well-intentioned, the practice of feeding stray dogs directly on the streets contributes significantly to the problem. This act makes dogs territorial and aggressive, leading them to defend their feeding spots and attack perceived threats, including non-feeding residents. This phenomenon mirrors the issue seen with monkeys in urban India, where public feeding emboldens the animals and increases human-animal conflict.

## **Patchy and Underfunded Municipal Action**

Municipal laws across the country mandate the sterilization of stray dogs and the establishment of shelters. However, implementation of these laws is inconsistent, patchy, and chronically underfunded, rendering them largely ineffective.

## **3. A History of Ineffective Control Measures**

Past attempts to manage the stray dog population have proven to be both inhumane and unsuccessful.

### **Lethal Measures (Culling)**

Historical methods included electrocution, poisoning, and shooting. These measures were not only cruel but also scientifically ineffective. Killing dogs created a vacuum in the ecosystem, and the reduced competition for food and resources led to increased breeding rates among the surviving dogs, quickly replenishing the population.

### **Sterilization Drives (Animal Birth Control - ABC Programme)**

The ABC programme, introduced in 1992 and formalized into law in 2001, is the current national policy. For this programme to be effective, it requires sterilizing at least two-thirds (around 70%) of a canine population within a very short timeframe to halt population growth. No Indian city has ever consistently achieved this critical target. Furthermore, any progress made is often undone by unsterilized pet dogs breeding with the stray population.

## **4. The Legal and Ethical Dilemmas**

The issue is complicated by a web of conflicting laws and deeply divisive ethical questions.

### **Contradictory Legal Frameworks**

#### **Protection for Feeders**

Citizens who feed stray dogs are protected under Article 51A(g) of the Constitution, which lists compassion for living creatures as a fundamental duty.

#### **Animal Welfare vs. Public Safety**

Laws like the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (PCA) Act (1960) and the Animal Birth Control (ABC) Rules (updated in 2023) prioritize animal welfare. However, they create a conflict with Municipal Acts, which are responsible for public safety. Municipalities are legally restricted from euthanizing stray dogs unless they are mortally ill or incurably diseased.

#### **'Community Animals' Status**

The legal recognition of stray dogs as 'community animals' further complicates efforts by authorities to remove them from public spaces, even when they pose a threat.

### **The Central Debate: Right to Life vs. Right to Safety**

The Supreme Court has repeatedly affirmed that stray dogs have a right to live, cautioning against indiscriminate killing. This stance raises profound ethical questions:

1. Can the right to life of stray animals be allowed to override the fundamental human right to safe public spaces, especially for children and the elderly?
2. Is it truly ethical and compassionate to allow millions of animals to suffer from homelessness, disease, starvation, and injury on the streets?

## **5. Toward Humane and Balanced Solutions**

A sustainable solution requires a multi-pronged approach that balances compassion with public safety and accountability.

### **Promote Responsible Pet Ownership**

Implement mandatory pet registration, microchipping, and sterilization to prevent abandonment and hold owners accountable.

**Manage Community Dogs Responsibly**

Establish designated feeding zones away from residential areas to reduce territorial aggression. Invest in building and maintaining high-quality shelters for unadoptable or aggressive dogs.

**Foster Public Awareness and Education**

Launch nationwide campaigns to educate citizens on responsible pet ownership, dog behavior, and safe interaction with stray animals. Integrate lessons on empathy and responsibility towards animals in school curricula.

**Enforce Accountability**

Create clear legal frameworks that hold both irresponsible pet owners and community feeders accountable for the welfare of the animals and the safety of the community.

**Establish a Coordinated National Strategy**

Form a National Task Force, as proposed by MP Karti Chidambaram, to coordinate efforts across states, standardize policies, and ensure consistent implementation of humane and effective control measures.

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