



Banning the Retail Sale of Small Mammals



Small mammals, sometimes called “pocket pets,” sold in pet stores include guinea pigs, hamsters, gerbils, mice, rats, rabbits, chinchillas, and ferrets. Banning the sale of these animals protects them from cruelty and reduces the pressure on shelters and rescues.

Pet Stores Acquire Small Mammals from Cruel Mills

Virtually all small mammals sold in pet stores come from large-scale commercial breeding facilities called mills. Cannibalization, sick and dead animals, lack of water, unsanitary housing, and overcrowding are common at small mammal mills and dealers that supply pet stores. Though regulated by the federal Animal Welfare Act, mills are rarely shut down or punished for violations.

For example, a guinea pig mill that supplied Sun Pet, a large animal dealer that sells to Petco, was raided by the Pennsylvania State Police after government inspectors found an immobile guinea pig being eaten alive by other guinea pigs. Inspectors also found dead and loose guinea pigs, filthy or missing water bottles, improper ventilation, dirty bedding, and overcrowding. The mill owner surrendered her license and was granted a new license the following year.¹

USDA inspectors have found extreme cruelty at Sun Pet itself. Pet stores have reported receiving dead or dying animals from Sun Pet.²

Small Mammals are Overwhelming Shelters

“Every other shelter that I’ve seen is struggling. They’re struggling with regular animals, but these exotics and small animals are ... becoming a problem across the nation.” - Katy Hansen, Animal Care Centers of NYC³

Many shelters are at a crisis point due to the influx of small mammals. The high number of guinea pigs surrendered in the last few years prompted Boston and

New York City to ban their sale.

Fewer people are interested in adopting small animals than cats and dogs. One shelter reported that it takes double or triple the time to adopt a small animal compared to a dog or cat.⁴

Some animals don’t even make it into the shelter system. Small mammals are routinely abandoned in streets and parks. Generally, these animals cannot survive on their own and will suffer and die unless they are rescued.⁵

Not “Starter Pets”

People often purchase these animals under the mistaken belief that they are easy to care for and good with children.

These species are primarily prey animals. They are easily frightened and skittish. Over time, elevated stress hormones can lead to illness and abnormal behavior.⁶ Young children often don’t have the fine motor skills or self-control to handle them properly. Children have accidentally dropped or squeezed guinea pigs, hamsters, and other small mammals, causing severe injury and death.⁷

While the purchase price of a small mammal is usually low, the supplies, cage, and veterinary care are expensive. These animals’ needs are often greater than families anticipate. For example, hamsters kept in small enclosures can develop psychological and behavioral problems such as biting and repetitive cage-biting that damage their teeth. Guinea pig cages have to be deep cleaned weekly to prevent bacterial diseases. Most of these animals are nocturnal or crepuscular (active at



dawn and dusk), which can be frustrating for people who want to interact with them during the day and stressful for the animals.⁸

High Reproductive Rates, Difficult to Sterilize

Small mammals have high reproductive rates. It is challenging to determine their sex, resulting in consumers inadvertently purchasing male/female pairs who will soon produce dozens of babies. Guinea pigs can produce up to five litters annually, with as many as 10 babies per litter.⁹ Even if families want to sterilize their companion, it's often expensive and requires experienced veterinarians.

References

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- 2 Liz Cabrera Holtz. [The Terrible Truth About Where Petco and PetSmart Get Their Animals](#). World Animal Protection, May 13, 2024.
- 3 Brianna Grant. [Small animals come with big obstacles for shelters](#). Humane Pro.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Sarah Maslin Nir. [The great guinea pig giveaway has begun](#). The New York Times, October 1, 2022.
- 6 Olivia Bobrowsky. [It's a small world after all](#). Animal Sheltering magazine, Winter 2019-2020.
- 7 The Humane Society of the United States. [Is a Guinea Pig the Right Pet For You?; Adorable wheelchair-bound guinea pig needs your help](#). ABC 6 Action News, March 4, 2016; Leigh-Ann Londt. [Hamster's eye removed after being improperly handled and squeezed tightly](#). Cape Town Etc, September 26, 2021.
- 8 Gatterman, R. et al. [Golden hamsters are nocturnal in captivity but diurnal in nature](#). Biology Letters. 2008; 4(3): 253-255.
- 9 Int. 04 Public Hearing, New York City Council Health Committee, December 14, 2022 ([Written testimony of Dr. Eileen Jefferson](#)).
- 10 Dakota Antelman. [MSPCA to waive adoption fees for mice after more than 500 mice surrendered from Mass. Home](#). News 7 Boston, September 6, 2023.
- 11 Kathleen Conti. [Cambridge bans retail sales of commercially bred pets](#). The Boston Globe, August 8, 2017; District of Columbia Municipal Regulations ([25-J DCMR 300 et seq.](#)); [Arlington, Massachusetts bylaw amendment, pet sale restrictions, retail pet sales](#).

Shelters commonly receive many animals simultaneously, such as a dozen hamsters or 20 rats. In 2023, the MSPCA in Massachusetts received more than 500 mice from a single home.¹⁰

"Feeder Animals"

Some small mammals sold in stores aren't destined to be companions. They're bred to be eaten alive. The "feeder rodent industry" refers to breeding small mammals, primarily mice and Norway rats, to be sold as food for reptiles.

Precedent

- Washington DC, Cambridge, MA, and Arlington, MA, banned the sale of almost all animals, including mammals.¹¹
- At least 13 additional cities have banned the sale of mammals (Brookline, MA) or other mammal species such as guinea pigs (New York City, Boston, Allentown, PA, Forks Township, PA).

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