



**Humane  
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Society of the United States and  
Humane Society International



# **An advocate's guide to fighting community cat feeding bans**





# Background

Community cats, also known as stray or feral cats, are unowned, domesticated cats who live outdoors. Some cats may have been born in the wild, while others were abandoned or lost and adapted to an outdoor lifestyle. With an estimated 30 to 40 million community cats living in the United States, overpopulation and its consequences are of growing concern in several areas throughout the country.

Community cat feeding bans are implemented or proposed to be implemented by local governments with the intention of addressing issues related to stray and feral cats, such as nuisance complaints related to noise and territory marking. However, closer examination reveals that such bans often fall short in achieving their goals, jeopardize the welfare of the cats and lead to unintended consequences that warrant reconsideration.

Implementing and enforcing community cat feeding bans has also proven to be a challenge. Some community members may continue to feed cats despite the ban, either out of compassion for the cats or because they are unaware of the ban. Often, people will resort to dropping large amounts of food on the ground and quickly leaving as to not get caught. This not only defeats the purpose of the ban, but also exacerbates the challenges associated with community cats while making them harder to monitor and address.

A multifaceted approach that addresses the root cause of community cat overpopulation and nuisance issues—uncontrolled breeding—is essential, rather than relying solely on restrictive community cat feeding bans.

## Community cats in wildlife feeding bans

Wildlife feeding bans can be an effective tool for discouraging the feeding of wildlife, which is a root cause of many conflicts between people and wildlife. Discussions surrounding wildlife feeding bans have also prompted considerations for including community cats within the purview of such regulations. As a result, growing debate has revolved around whether these cats should be classified as wildlife and subsequently subjected to these bans. Community cats, despite living outdoors, are domesticated animals who often rely on supplementary feeding from compassionate individuals. Including community cats in wildlife feeding bans may jeopardize their well-being and lead to increased suffering and malnutrition. Recognizing the distinction between community cats and wild animals is crucial in crafting effective and humane policies, ensuring that community cats receive appropriate care and consideration while addressing concerns related to wildlife.

## Common complaints

### Overpopulation

Community cat feeding bans alone fail to address overpopulation issues because they primarily focus on symptom management rather than tackling the root cause of the problem, which is uncontrolled breeding. Cats can and will continue to reproduce even when their food is restricted. They are also skilled at adapting to changing environments, and when faced with a lack of food in one area, they will simply relocate to another. Instead of reducing the population, community cat feeding bans displace the cats to new areas where they continue to thrive and reproduce. As a result, their overall numbers remain largely unaffected by these bans.



## Public health

Community cats pose human health concerns as they may carry various diseases such as rabies, toxoplasmosis and cat scratch disease. Additionally, their presence can lead to an increase in parasites such as fleas and ticks, which can affect both humans and animals in the area.<sup>1</sup> Community cats are resilient and may roam to human-populated areas where food is more available, such as garbage cans and outdoor dining areas. This can create situations where cats and humans come into closer and more frequent contact, therefore raising further concerns about potential conflicts or the transmission of diseases.



## Impact on wildlife

Community cat feeding bans may be implemented with the intention of reducing wildlife predation by cats, but these measures often exacerbate the issue instead. When cats are deprived of a reliable food source, their hunting instincts intensify as they seek alternatives. This heightened predatory behavior poses a greater threat to wildlife, as hungry cats are driven to hunt more frequently and aggressively. In one 2011 research study on cats in Chile, adequately fed cats were almost five times less likely to prey on wildlife in comparison to their underfed counterparts.<sup>2</sup>

## Noise and territory marking

Yowling, fighting and territory marking are natural behaviors of intact (unneutered or unspayed) cats driven by hormonal instincts related to mating and establishing territory. Community cat feeding bans do not address these underlying instincts, and cats will continue to exhibit these behaviors even if they are not being fed by humans. As cats grow hungrier, they are compelled to roam further in search of food. This increased roaming often brings them closer to human-populated areas, heightening their visibility and subsequently escalating complaints from residents.

**Want to learn more about community cats? Visit our [Outdoor cats FAQ page](#).**





# Alternatives

## Trap-neuter-return (TNR) programs

TNR programs are more humane and effective than feeding bans for managing community cat populations. These programs address the root cause of community cat overpopulation and nuisance behaviors—uncontrolled breeding.

By trapping, neutering/spaying, ear-tipping (to identify the cat as neutered/spayed), vaccinating and returning cats to their original locations, TNR prevents further reproduction and helps to stabilize and eventually reduce community cat populations.

### Additional benefits of TNR programs:

- They allow for shelters and animal control agencies to be directly involved in population management efforts for community cats.
- Cats are vaccinated against various diseases and provided with basic medical care. This helps prevent the spread of infectious diseases within the cat population and reduces the risk of transmission to humans and other animals.
- Neutering/spaying leads to a reduction in nuisance behaviors associated with mating instincts and territorial disputes, improving the overall quality of life for both the cats and the community.<sup>3</sup>

## Encourage responsible feeding practices

Responsible community cat feeding practices play a crucial role in mitigating the attraction of pests and wildlife.

Recommended practices include:

- Establishing designated feeding stations to ensure that the feeding process is clean and managed.
- Leaving controlled food portions to avoid overfeeding.
- Promptly removing any uneaten food, as it may attract unwanted animals or become spoiled and pose health risks to both community cats and other animals in the area.
- Placing feeding stations in strategic locations, away from sensitive wildlife habitats, to help concentrate cat activity in controlled areas and reduce wildlife predation.
- Having a consistent feeding schedule to help create a routine for the cats, increasing the likelihood of all food being consumed during designated times and not becoming a potential food source for pests and wildlife.
- Be sure to check your area's existing sanitation codes, as they are often adequate to address feeding sites that are causing issues.
- For additional tips, see our [Community cat feeding guidelines](#).



## Community education

Community education plays a pivotal role in reducing community cat populations and ensuring the well-being of both cats and the community. Through targeted educational initiatives:

- Individuals can gain insights into the root causes of overpopulation and the importance of population management.
- Humane methods of population control, such as TNR, can be encouraged, rather than resorting to measures such as euthanasia.
- Misconceptions surrounding community cats can be dispelled while promoting a compassionate perspective.
- A sense of responsibility and awareness can be fostered among residents, increasing their support and active participation.
- Collaboration can be promoted between local governments, animal welfare organizations, veterinarians and community members.

**For more information on effective strategies, see [Managing community cats: a guide for municipal leaders](#).**

## Public policy and education

By understanding the specific reasons and the policy behind proposed and existing feeding bans for community cats, you can more easily address community concerns and help enact policies that work for cats, wildlife and residents alike. Often,

government officials are not aware of proven tactics to resolve common community cat complaints, such as TNR programs and keeping feeding areas sanitary. Instead, many simply turn to community cat feeding bans, which do not truly address the source of the issue. Other times, cats and other domestic animals may be included in feeding bans aimed at humanely managing human-wildlife conflicts. While these laws can help



keep wildlife safe, when also applied to cats, they can interfere with more effective management tactics such as TNR. Education is just one of many strategies that have helped advocates in various cities fight against the inclusion of community cats in feeding bans.

**Looking for more ways to get involved? Visit our [How individuals can help community cats page](#).**

## Strategy examples

### Hilliard, Ohio

When Hilliard proposed a feral cat feeding ban in 2019, animal advocates from within the city and surrounding communities flooded Hilliard's city council meeting to convince the council to withdraw the legislation. Public comments outlined how the legislation is inhumane, and many suggested the introduction of TNR programs to combat complaints related to community cats. Advocates also utilized news stations and numerous TNR groups on social media to gather support from across the country, which led to a flood of phone calls and emails to council members. As a result, the city council withdrew the proposed legislation.

### Dublin, Ohio

In response to the growing deer population in Dublin, the city passed an ordinance that banned the feeding of any wildlife. Their list of wild animal species included feral cats, which immediately caught the attention of local advocates. This is not the first instance where feral cats have been misclassified as wildlife, and by utilizing a few strategic tactics, advocates were successful in removing feral cats from the ordinance. Emails were sent to the Dublin City Council, warning the members of the negative press that occurred in Hilliard, Ohio, when a feral cat feeding ban was proposed and encouraging them to avoid a similar event. Additionally, conflicts in existing codes were highlighted to the council, which left the city open to lawsuits. Advocates also offered to assist with modernizing city codes. After a review by the city council, feral cats were removed from the ordinance.

### Babylon Village, New York

After receiving multiple complaints about leftover cat food attracting wildlife around Southards Pond Park, Babylon Village proposed a feral cat feeding or harboring ban in February 2024. Animal advocates throughout Long Island took immediate action, including posting on social media to urge others to attend the village public hearing and oppose the ban. More than 150 people attended the hearing, a majority of the crowd being animal advocates who pushed for TNR implementation as a humane solution. The mayor and board of trustees ended up postponing their decision on the ban, and advocates were able to meet with the mayor shortly after to dive deeper into the issue and further discuss alternatives.



## Resources

1. Humane World for Animals: [Managing Community Cats](#)
2. Humane World for Animals: [Cats and wildlife](#)
3. National Feline Research Council: [Feral cat feeding bans: The reasoning, risks, and results](#)
4. National Feline Research Council: [Wildlife impacts of free-roaming cats: Estimates vs. evidence](#)

## References

1. Cornell Feline Health Center. (Mar 2017). Zoonotic Disease: What Can I Catch from My Cat? Retrieved from [vet.cornell.edu/departments-centers-and-institutes/cornell-feline-health-center/health-information/feline-health-topics/zoonotic-disease-what-can-i-catch-my-cat](http://vet.cornell.edu/departments-centers-and-institutes/cornell-feline-health-center/health-information/feline-health-topics/zoonotic-disease-what-can-i-catch-my-cat)
2. Silva-Rodríguez, E.A., & Sieving, K.E. (Aug 2011). Influence of Care of Domestic Carnivores on Their Predation on Vertebrates. *Conservation Biology*, 25(4), 808–815. doi: 10.1111/j.1523-1739.2011.01690.x
3. Best Friends Animal Society. How TNR Reduces Nuisance Complaints About Cats. Retrieved from [bestfriends.org/pet-care-resources/how-tnr-reduces-nuisance-complaints-about-cats](http://bestfriends.org/pet-care-resources/how-tnr-reduces-nuisance-complaints-about-cats)



## About us

**Together, we tackle the root causes of animal cruelty to create permanent change.**

With millions of supporters and work happening in over 50 countries, Humane World for Animals—formerly called the Humane Society of the United States—addresses the most deeply entrenched forms of animal cruelty and suffering. As the leading voice in the animal protection space, we work to end the cruelest practices, care for animals in crisis and build a stronger animal protection movement.

Driving toward the greatest global impact, we aim to achieve the vision behind our name: a more humane world.

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