The 2020 COVID-19 pandemic led to a worldwide increase in puppy-buying, the so-called 'Pandemic Puppy' phenomenon.

The Pandemic Puppies research programme has documented changes in how and why people purchased puppies during the peak 2020 phase of the pandemic compared to pre-pandemic 2019 purchases, documenting concerning changes that threaten dog welfare e.g., puppies being bought without owners seeing their mum, away from where they were bred.

However a big question is whether those changes returned to their pre-pandemic baseline in the later phase of the Pandemic (2021) or had persisted as a 'new normal' for UK puppy purchasing.

This study aimed to explore pre-purchase and purchase motivations and behaviours of puppy owners who purchased a puppy in 2021 compared to the 2020 phase of the COVID-19 pandemic (peak-pandemic) and 2019 (pre-pandemic).

Puppy buying behaviour in 2021 compared to previous years (2019 %, 2020 %, 2021 %)

- Returned to pre-pandemic baseline
  - Puppy seen with their mother (86%, 75%, 85%)
  - Deposit put down before seeing the puppy (9%, 17%, 11%)

- Improved, but had not yet returned to pre-pandemic baseline
  - Puppy viewed pre-purchase over live video calls or via video recordings/photos rather than in-person (31%, 52%, 40%)
  - Puppy viewed in-person before purchase (81%, 60%, 70%)
  - Puppy collected from inside breeder’s property (85%, 51%, 67%)

- Exacerbated or newly worsened from peak-pandemic
  - Owners seeking a breed/crossbreed based on health (45%, 48%, 38%)
  - Rise in puppy prices (Price over £2000-£2999: 1.8%, 24%, 26%)

Concerning trend in 2021: Puppies sold with a passport

- Concerningly, there was a year on year increase in puppies sold with passports from 2019 to 2021
  - 2019: 1 in 24 (4.1%)
  - 2020: 1 in 14 (7.1%)
  - 2021: Over 1 in 10 (10.4%)

An increasing number of puppies sold with a passport were under the minimum legal age (15 weeks) to be imported to the UK. These puppies are likely to have been illegally imported from the EU for commercial sale.

Many owners may be unaware of the welfare and public health implications of importing puppies to the UK, including puppies being bred in poor (but unseen) conditions, transported for long distances without their mother, and exposed to infectious diseases that can be transmitted to other dogs and people.

Legal restrictions to puppy importation are urgently required to protect puppy welfare.

For more information visit www.rvc.ac.uk/vetcompass/research-projects-and-opportunities/projects/rvc-pandemic-puppies-survey

CLICK TO READ FULL PAPER