## **Research, Media, Changing Minds, and Changing Policy: Story of a Local Ordinance** By Lenny Jason

Let me describe what has become known as the "Dog pooper" study. A representative from an Alderman's office told me that the problem that generated the most citizen complaints in the 1970s was uncollected dog feces, and I and several of my students then launched a research effort to try to make a difference. We initially counted all fresh dog feces within an 8 by 5 block area. The fact that 1147 droppings were counted within this area suggested that dog litter was a serious and prevalent problem within this community. Next, they selected a 121 m long block within this area and recorded the following variables for 5 h daily: the number of dogs, the number of dogs who defecated, and the number of dog defecations picked up by their owners. In addition, all defecations were picked up and weighed each morning.

During the baseline phase, few dog owners were observed to pick up after their dogs and over 19 pounds of dog defecations were deposited in the target block. We found that when anti-litter signs were posted during the second phase, relatively few changes occurred on the criterion measures. However, during the next phase, when all dog owners were given instructions and a demonstration concerning how to use a plastic bag to pick-up dog feces, 82% of the dog owners proceeded to pick up after their dogs.

These findings indicate that the prompting intervention, which applied instructions and modeling, effectively motivated dog owners to dispose of their dog's waste properly. A 25-month follow-up indicated that there was an 89% reduction in dog litter at the intervention site. After Jason's testimony at hearing the Chicago Alderman Oberman sponsored, which was televised on the news for television stations, the Chicago Daily News (July 12, 1977) wrote the following: "In what surely must be the most bizarre academic studies in the nation..." They subsequently calculated from our work that 382,000 pounds of dog excrement was deposited on city streets daily. When Jason wrote to Ellen Warren about some inaccuracies in this story, she replied that "the story generated great readership interest." This was followed by an editorial in the Sun Times that said the following: We're not sure what contribution this study makes to the discipline of psychology, but if it persuades the city council to pass a stronger ordinance to discipline dog owners, it will have been more than worth the effort...the city could always fund the professor's research project. The pursuit of knowledge aside, it did manage to clean up on neighborhood.

The study had hit a nerve and there was even a photo opinion asking residents: Should owners clean up after their dogs? A cartoon in the Chicago Daily News of July 22, 1977 (page 11) had a dog with a diaper on him with the title: Solution to a problem. Jason also got lots of fan mail including one that said: "This is a lost cause. The only solution is to hire out of work people who can clean the parks and parkways. Even the police in one district began dispensing plastic bags to dog owners.

Following the completion of this study, several community groups contacted Jason for advice in setting up their own dog litter interventions. Jason and his team's next study involved a 9-month collaborative relationship between a team of DePaul researchers and a community group which expressed interest in ameliorating the dog litter problem in their neighborhood. The community group identified the target problem and contributed resources and people for the intervention, whereas the community psychologists helped plan the intervention and evaluated the efficacy of the anti-dog-litter project.

Finding suggested that residents who participated in the program continued exerting pressure on dog owners to pick up after their dog even after the formal intervention ended. Teaching skills to indigenous change agents might be an effective way to maintain gains in behavioral programs following the termination of an intervention. In summary, the dog intervention studies documented effective approaches

for combating the inveterate problem of dog waste in urban areas. In terms of bringing about more substantial, enduring reductions in community dog droppings, training community residents to implement procedures seems to represent the most promising approach. To the extent that a community has a rich network of supportive personnel, the capacity to cope with environmental irritants is enhanced.

At the study's end, a Chicago alderman asked Jason to present the above data at City Hall in order to support a proposed ordinance which would require dog owners to have in their possession a pooper scooper when walking dogs. This was one of my more interesting public policy presentations. This ordinance was passed by the City Council, making Chicago one of the first cities in the country to pass a pooper scooper ordinance. The alderman to whom Jason had originally provided the data mentioned to him that his study, which received considerable media exposure, had helped change the politicians' perception of this problem writing to me: "In the past, this problem has often been scoffed at and not taken seriously. Your comments regarding the dog defecation problem altered that perception greatly." The legislators were willing, for the first time, to seriously consider enacting legislation to help alleviate the dog litter problem. Chicago's ordinance became a model for other similar ordinances in towns around the country.

Jason, C. A., Zolik, E. S., & Matese, F. J. (1979). Prompting dog owners to pick up dog droppings. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 7(3), 339-351.