

Depopulation

(Updated July 2026)

Definition:

Depopulation: the rapid destruction of a population of animals regardless of health status (typically including both diseased and healthy individuals) in response to urgent circumstances.

Statement:

The Association of Shelter Veterinarians believes depopulation of shelter animals should be employed only under extraordinary circumstances when morbidity, mortality, infectivity, injury, or risk of zoonotic disease is uncommonly severe.¹ Examples might include a massive community-wide emergency, bio-terrorism attack, mandate by the court, or nuclear disaster. Depopulation should not be considered unless all other methods to address the situation have been exhausted.⁴ In the rare instances where depopulation is unavoidable, leadership should widely communicate the decision, both within the shelter and to the community at-large.

Depopulation is not an appropriate response to disease outbreaks in shelters because it generally results in the euthanasia of healthy animals and fails to resolve underlying causative factors of the outbreak. Veterinarians with experience in outbreak management, including familiarity with the species affected, should be consulted before deciding to depopulate.^{2,4}

In cases of animal shelter depopulation, euthanasia by injection as outlined in the current AVMA Guidelines for the Euthanasia of Animals (2020)³ is preferable to other methods described in the AVMA Guidelines for Depopulation of Animals (2026)¹

Veterinarians and shelter staff who are exposed to the depopulation process may experience psychological distress; sheltering organizations should take steps to mitigate these effects and provide access to appropriate support services. Factors contributing to the decision to depopulate must also be examined and steps taken to prevent recurrence.

References:

1. AVMA Guidelines for the Depopulation of Animals, 2026 Edition.
[Depopulation Guidelines 2026Complete.pdf](#)
2. Infectious Disease Management in Animal Shelters. Editor(s):L. Miller, S.Janeczko,
1. K.F. Hurley. Apr 2021, John Wiley & Sons, Inc.
2. AVMA Guidelines for the Euthanasia of Animals. 2020 Edition.
3. [Guidelines for the euthanasia of animals | American Veterinary Medical Association](#)
4. Guidelines for Standards of Care in Animal Shelters. 2nd Edition (2022)