Factors associated with acquiring a puppy under eight weeks of age and without viewing the mother

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Introduction
Many owners obtain their dogs as puppies. Although puppy acquisition decisions may have an impact on the health and behaviour of the dogs, limited research exists on the factors that influence how and from where puppies are acquired.

It is commonly recommended by welfare organisations and veterinary bodies that puppies should not leave maternal care until at least eight weeks (56 days) of age, and that, when acquiring a puppy, it should be viewed with its mother. However, these recommendations are not always adhered to. This study aimed to report the number of puppies within a cohort of dogs that were acquired under eight weeks of age and/or without seeing the mother and to explore factors associated with the acquisition of puppies against the current advice.

Approach
This analysis used data obtained from the first three mandatory self-administered questionnaires that were issued to puppy owners upon registration to ‘Generation Pup’ – an ongoing longitudinal study of canine health, behaviour and welfare in the UK and Ireland. Data were collected between May 2016 and February 2019, and all surveys were issued to owners before their puppies reached 16 weeks of age.

Associations between owner and puppy demographic characteristics, household characteristics, the owner’s previous experience of dog ownership and factors around puppy acquisition were explored using univariable and multivariable logistic regression models.

Results
A total of 1844 puppies were eligible for inclusion in the analysis. Of these, 25 per cent were acquired before the age of eight weeks, and 8.1 per cent were acquired without the mother being seen. A very small percentage of puppies (1.6 per cent) were acquired under eight weeks of age and without the owner seeing the mother. As the number of dogs in the household increased, the odds of a puppy being acquired under eight weeks of age increased. Owners who visited their puppy at least once before acquisition and owners who intended their puppy to be a working dog were more likely to obtain puppies under eight weeks of age. Puppies were also significantly more likely to be acquired under eight weeks of age if they were of unknown breed composition, compared with purebred puppies and those that were a known crossbreed.

Owners who visited their puppy at least once before acquisition and owners who collected their puppy from the breeder’s home were less likely to obtain a puppy without viewing the mother. Puppies that were Kennel Club registered also had decreased odds of being acquired without the mother being seen. Owners who did not view the puppy’s father also had increased odds of acquiring the puppy without viewing the mother.

Interpretation
This study shows that prospective owners may potentially be more aware of recommendations to view the mother than the minimum acquisition age recommendations.

Owners who visited their puppy at least once before acquisition were more likely to obtain the puppy under eight weeks of age. One explanation for this is that owners who visited their puppy before acquisition felt, on seeing the puppy, that it was old enough to be taken home even though it was not yet eight weeks of age. Owners with other dogs in the household were also more likely to acquire a puppy under eight weeks of age. It is speculated that such owners may have felt more able to care for a puppy under eight weeks of age due to their experiences with their other dogs.

However, the results of this study should be interpreted cautiously as they are likely to be subject to selection bias. The Generation Pup participants may have more interest in animal welfare than the general public (as evidenced by them joining a study aiming to improve canine welfare) and so may be more likely to follow the puppy acquisition recommendations.

Significance of findings
This study has identified potential characteristics of owners who are more likely to acquire a puppy against current acquisition recommendations. Targeting these specific owners with educational campaigns could help decrease the proportion of puppies acquired in this way in the future.