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Household Leftovers Beyond the Bin: Companion Animal Feeding Practices and Food Waste Prevention Among Hungarian Dog Owners

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Abstract

The role of companion animal feeding in household food waste management is rarely examined from a waste hierarchy perspective. In Hungary, 18.45 % of total household food waste was channelled to animal feeding, with avoidable waste more likely to be valorised this way than unavoidable waste (Szabó-Bódi et al., 2018). A definitional boundary complicates this picture: under food law, any food intended for human consumption not ultimately consumed by a human constitutes food waste (Regulation (EC) No 178/2002), including food deliberately purchased for pets, meaning part of what appears as prevention may more accurately be redistribution (Papargyropoulou et al., 2014). An online questionnaire administered between November 2024 and March 2025 yielded data on 540 dogs from 409 Hungarian households. Three categories of human food in the canine diet were assessed: portions shared from the owner's plate were most prevalent, featuring in 72.59 % of diets, followed by household leftovers (68.52 %) and food purchased specifically for the dog (63.52 %); however, across all three categories, feeding was typically infrequent and in small amounts. Primary motivations were treat-giving (44.50 %), perceived health benefits (39.1 %), and treating the dog as a family member (25.30 %); avoiding food waste was cited by only 11.90 %. When asked what would have happened to the food otherwise, 58.30 % said it would have been discarded and 46.30 % would have eaten it themselves, a distinction rarely captured in food waste surveys. Leftover feeding was significantly more common amongst older owners ($p=0.007$), rural residents ($p<0.001$), and owners of outdoor or mixed-housed dogs ($p<0.001$), with larger dogs receiving leftovers more frequently ($p=0.04$). No significant association was found between leftover feeding and self-reported body condition score, though a tendency for overweight dogs to receive more leftovers warrants investigation with objective measurements. Current guidelines recommend non-complete foods not exceed 10 % of daily energy intake (Cline et al., 2021); assessed per category, most dogs remained below this threshold individually, though cumulative effects could not be determined. Sharing food with pets is a recognised risk factor for nutritional imbalances and excess energy intake (Laflamme, 2012; Nielson et al., 2023), and raw meat feeding carries microbiological hazards, with dogs able to shed zoonotic pathogens and antimicrobial-resistant bacteria posing risk to YOPI (young, elderly, pregnant, and immunocompromised individuals) groups (Nüesch-Inderbinen et al., 2019). Any policy promoting food surplus as companion animal feed must address animal health, welfare, and zoonotic risk alongside environmental benefits (Kasza et al., 2019), with veterinary guidance and targeted education essential for a truly sustainable approach.

Keywords: companion animal feeding, food waste hierarchy, leftover feeding, zoonotic risk, consumer behaviour

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