

GATEKEEPING PET OWNERSHIP



THE CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR BLACK,
INDIGENOUS, PEOPLE OF COLOR (BIPOC) PET ACQUISITION IN
ATLANTA, MIAMI, MINNEAPOLIS, AND PHILADELPHIA





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**A 3% INCREASE
IN BIPOC
ADOPTIONS
WOULD RESULT
IN 2 MILLION
PETS FINDING
HOMES.**

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BACKGROUND

A limited number of studies have examined Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC) families' experiences with getting pets (Blackwell and colleagues, 2024; Ly and colleagues, 2024). Yet, there is mounting evidence highlighting how BIPOC families are more likely to be denied adoption of a pet from an animal shelter or rescue organization than their white counterparts (Blackwell and colleagues, 2024).

To address this gap, Companions and Animals for Reform and Equity (CARE) set out in 2024 to identify the community-specific needs and priorities related to pet acquisition for BIPOC families in four U.S. cities (Atlanta, GA; Miami, FL; Minneapolis, MN; and Philadelphia, PA), then identify equitable, accessible, and community-led solutions that improve access to pet ownership for all. The findings from this study will inform discussions on how to reduce adoption discrimination within the animal sheltering and rescue industry and will be the foundation of a campaign to make pet ownership accessible to all.

This study was made possible through the generous funding support provided through grants from PetSmart Charities.



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



“Gatekeeping Pet Ownership” explores the challenges and opportunities for Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC) pet acquisition in four U.S. cities (Atlanta, GA; Miami, FL; Minneapolis, MN; and Philadelphia, PA). This report integrates qualitative data from 27 BIPOC focus group participants and quantitative insights from 311 BIPOC survey participants. These BIPOC pet owners demonstrated a strong desire to use ethical and high-quality sources for their pets. Many embody the “rescue mentality” promoted by animal shelters and rescue organizations (“adopt don’t shop”). Yet, these BIPOC pet owners have been mistreated, with impacts including being denied, questioning “whether I was a responsible or suitable pet owner,” and feeling “I am unworthy or undeserving of a pet.” This study provides foundational data and community-led solutions for increasing access to pet ownership for BIPOC families.

KEY FINDINGS

1. REASONS TO GET A PET

The top five reasons to get a pet reported across all the BIPOC survey participants (n = 311) included: companionship (76%), emotional or mental health support (60%), safety or protection (40%), help reduce shelter/rescue overpopulation (23%), and a source of personal responsibility (23%).



2. EXPERIENCES WITH GETTING A PET

BIPOC survey participants who have attempted to get a pet from a shelter/rescue had the highest incidence of **negative experiences** (72%) compared with the other two sources of professional or licensed breeder (55%) and friend, family, or neighbor (23%). Negative experiences included: being “ghosted” or the organization did not respond; being provided misinformation or lied to; experiencing disrespect, shame or embarrassment; or being intimidated or treated with hostility.





3. INCREASING ACCESS TO PET OWNERSHIP

The top three community-led solutions identified by the survey participants were: provide more services/supplies/information to support the health and well-being of pets after adoption/purchase (46%), eliminate processes that make it more difficult to acquire a pet (45%), and be more understanding about a person's financial situation (42%).



METHODS



The research team utilized focus groups and surveys to gather information about pet acquisition and the human-animal bond within BIPOC families in four major U.S. cities (Atlanta, GA; Miami, FL; Minneapolis, MN; Philadelphia, PA).

FOCUS GROUPS

Focus groups were conducted to inform the development of the survey to explore our research questions. The semi-structured focus groups were conducted in-person and virtually (via Zoom) between September 2024 and January 2025. BIPOC pet owners were recruited through word-of-mouth recruitment. Participants were eligible for the study if they were over 18 years old, self-identified as BIPOC, resided in one of the four focus communities (Atlanta, GA or surrounding area; Miami, FL or surrounding area; Minneapolis, MN or surrounding area; Philadelphia, PA or surrounding area), and either currently had a pet, previously had a pet, or would like to have a pet in the future (dog or cat).

A total of 27 BIPOC pet owners participated across 10 focus groups. The number of participants per focus group varied between one to four participants and the focus group duration was an average of 81 minutes (range = 56-108 minutes). Four focus groups took place in-person and six focus groups took place online. Six focus groups contained participants who were all from the same city, and the others had participants from no more than two different cities. Each participant received a \$150 (in-person participants) or \$50 (virtual participants) electronic gift card from the Giftogram platform. Appendix 1 of this report includes a detailed summary of demographic characteristics of the focus group participants.

Recordings of the in-person and online focus groups were transcribed using Otter.ai and Zoom, manually de-identified and verified, and then analyzed inductively using a rapid qualitative analysis approach. Participant quotes from focus groups are included in the results below to provide further context for the survey findings.



SURVEY

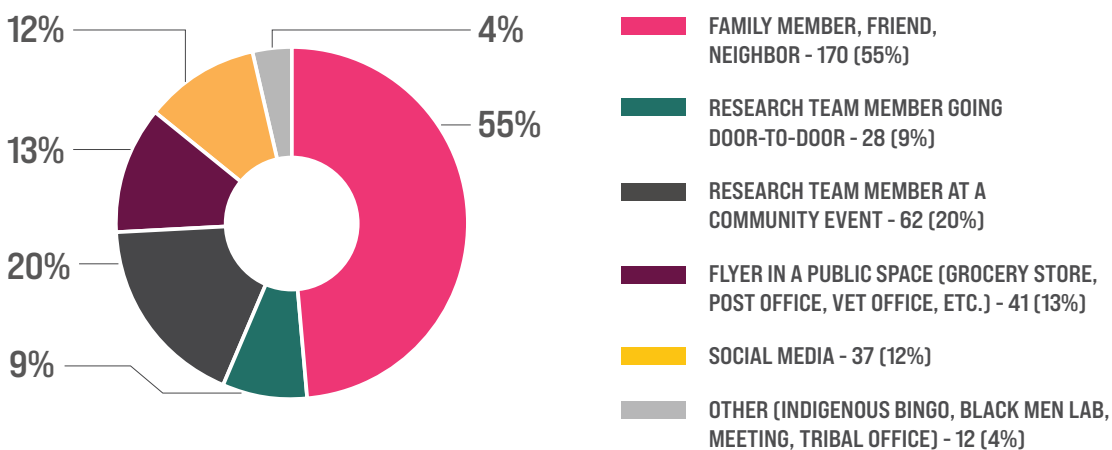
The surveys were conducted from March 3, 2025 through April 14, 2025 with support from 16 community-based research assistants. The research assistants distributed recruitment flyers containing a QR code for the participants to complete on their devices (phones, computers, etc.). The recruitment flyers were distributed door-to-door, posted in community spaces (grocery stores, post offices, tribal government offices, etc.), and at community events. A summary of the responses to how participants heard about the survey is below.

A total of 311 participants completed the survey. The inclusion criteria for the survey included: 18 years of age or older, a current resident of one of the four focus

communities (Atlanta, GA or surrounding area; Miami, FL or surrounding area; Minneapolis, MN or surrounding area; Philadelphia, PA or surrounding area), self-identify as BIPOC, and self-identify as having experienced barriers or challenges when looking to get a new pet (cat or dog). Each participant received a \$20 electronic gift card from the Giftogram platform. Appendix 2 of this report includes a detailed summary of demographic characteristics of the survey participants.

The survey was hosted and securely stored in the SurveyMonkey platform. The survey data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and are presented within the results section below.

HOW PARTICIPANTS HEARD ABOUT THE SURVEY



RESULTS





REASONS TO GET A PET

All BIPOC participants (n = 311) responded with their level of agreement with the statement “I believe all individuals deserve to have a pet, regardless of income, education, cultural background, etc.” 266 BIPOC participants (86%) either strongly agreed or agreed, 35 (11%) neither agreed nor disagreed, and 10 (3%) either disagreed or strongly disagreed.

“It’s becoming a privilege to own a pet, and I think that’s a bad thing.”

– ATLANTA PET OWNER,
FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT

We asked survey participants to share why they wanted to get a pet. The top five reasons to get a pet reported across all the BIPOC participants (n = 311) included: companionship (76%), emotional or mental health support (60%), safety or protection (40%), help reduce shelter/rescue overpopulation (23%), and a source of personal responsibility (23%).

Less prevalent reasons for getting a pet included: encourage me to get more physical activity/exercise (21%), my friend/family needed someone to care for their pet (19%), I wanted to prevent euthanasia of a pet (14%), and to breed/sell puppies or kittens (4%). Some participants (4%) listed “other” reasons that included: “support of my autistic child,” “I didn’t want the cat to go to the wrong home,” “the dog just showed up at my house and stayed here,” and “help with mice.”

These findings diverge from a previous study that found that “companionship” was listed as the primary reason for getting a pet reported by middle and upper socioeconomic status pet owners, with pragmatic reasons like “security” or “adding income” being indicated as important for low socioeconomic status pet owners (Arluke and Rautkis, 2024).

“[I wanted to get a pet from a shelter/rescue] because I want to help the animals that can’t find a home. I originally looked at the breeding option, just so I can get exactly what I wanted. But it’s just... my heart was just like I want to save an animal.”

- PHILADELPHIA PET OWNER, FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT

CHOOSING A SOURCE

Arluke and Rautkis (2024) found that lower socioeconomic status pet owners were more likely to choose to get a pet because they perceived the pet as “in need.” Whereas, middle and upper socioeconomic status pet owners were likely to “espouse the importance of adoption to save homeless animals, but almost all purchased dogs from breeders without checking their local shelter.”

The BIPOC pet owners who participated in the focus groups demonstrated a strong desire to use ethical and high-quality sources for their pets. Many embody the “rescue mentality” promoted by animal shelters and rescue organizations (“adopt don’t shop”).

The top five factors considered when choosing where to get their pet across all the BIPOC participants (n = 311) included: no preferences (35%), affordability or cost (35%), preference for a specific breed (22%), preference for a specific personality or behavior (for example, calm, good with kids, energetic, good protector) (21%), feeling that “spark” when I met the pet (18%), and preference for physical traits (for example, size, coat color, coat length, etc.) (17%). Less prevalent factors for the BIPOC participants when choosing where to get their pet, included: preference for a specific age (15%), spay/neuter, vaccinations, or health certificate included (15%), distance I had to travel to get the pet (14%), the pet came from an individual or organization I trust (13%), minimal wait before I could bring the pet home (12%), minimal paperwork or application process (10%), and fear of or avoiding any possibility of rejection (5%).

SOURCES FOR PETS

The BIPOC survey participants responded to questions about their experiences with the three primary sources for pets: animal shelter/rescue organizations, professional or licensed breeders, and friends, family members, or neighbors.

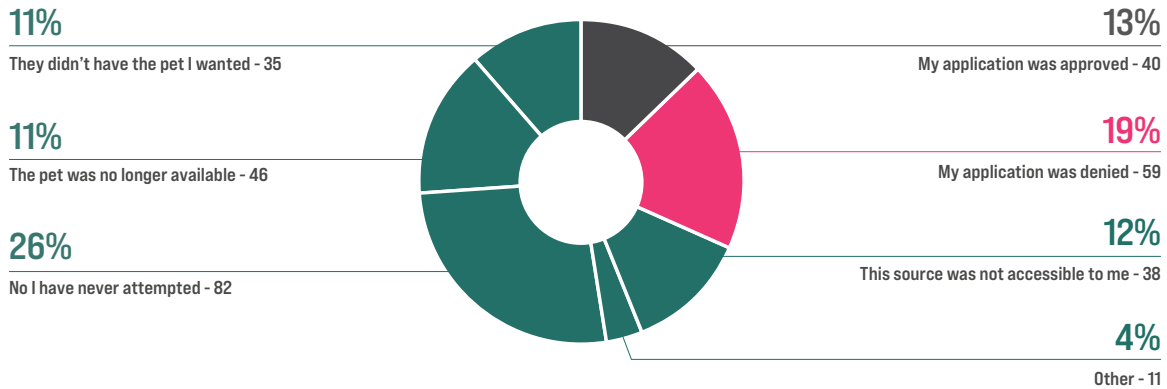
Almost half (48%) of the BIPOC participants (n = 311) have attempted to get a pet from an animal shelter/rescue organization, 33% have attempted to get a pet from a professional or licensed breeder, and 67% have attempted to get a pet from a friend, family member, or neighbor.

Participants who indicated they had attempted to get a pet from a particular source were asked a series of questions regarding their experiences and the outcome of their efforts to get a pet (Table 1).

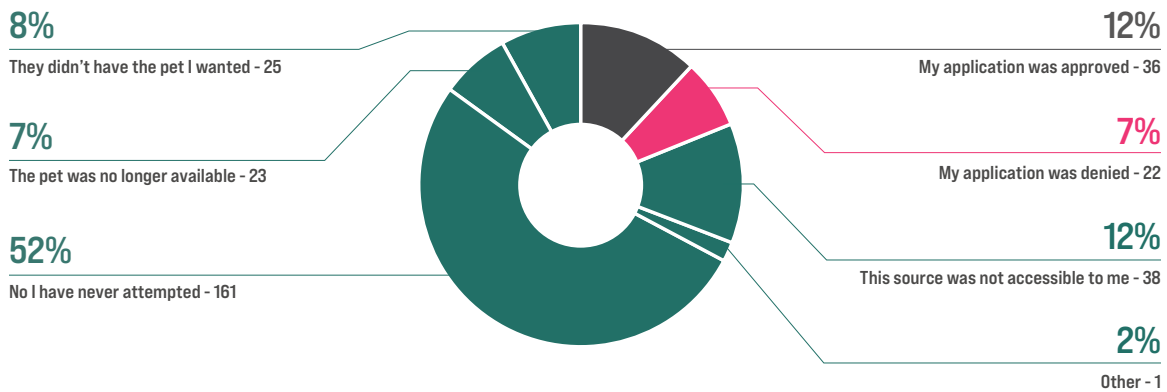
**TABLE 1:
HAVE YOU EVER TRIED TO GET A PET FROM THIS SOURCE?
IF YES, WHAT WAS THE OUTCOME?**



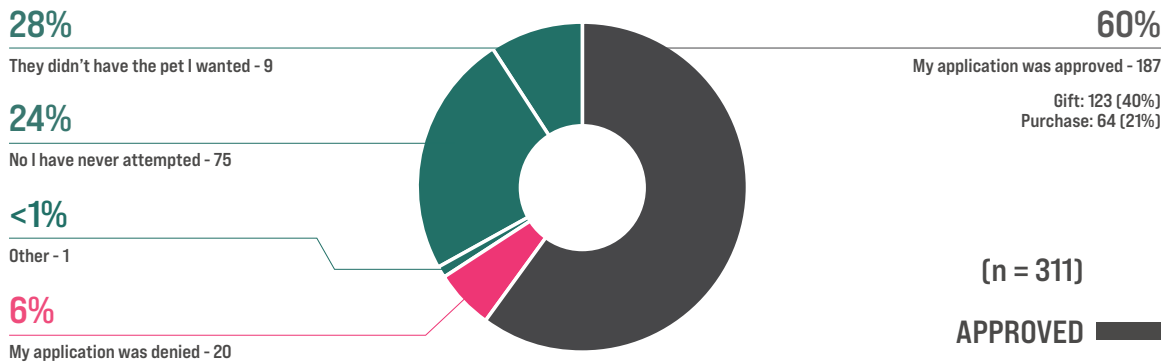
SHELTER OR RESCUE ORGANIZATION



PROFESSIONAL OR LICENSED BREEDER



FRIEND, FAMILY MEMBER, OR NEIGHBOR



(n = 311)

APPROVED
DENIED
NEVER APPLIED

ANIMAL SHELTERS/RESCUE ORGANIZATIONS

The two most common outcomes for BIPOC participants (n = 311) with a shelter/rescue were: I have never attempted to get a pet from this source (26%) and my application was denied (19%) (Table 1).

Each of the families who were denied or have not applied to get a pet from a shelter/rescue represent a crucial potential asset to address current shelter and rescue pet overpopulation issues.

“It’s kind of becoming this thing to adopt dogs now, but they’re becoming very exclusive.”

– ATLANTA PET OWNER, FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT

One of the focus group participants shared their perspective on why most of the people in their neighborhood haven’t attempted to get a pet from a shelter/rescue - because the local shelter/rescue organization doesn’t direct any of their adoption promotions or marketing efforts towards BIPOC communities.

“I feel like a lot of times the outreach [by animal shelters/rescues] is circular. They’re preaching to the choir. They go to the people who have credit cards with no limits specifically for their dogs. And they talk to them about adopt, adopt, adopt, but they don’t come to our neighborhood with that same type of thing, you know?”

– ATLANTA PET OWNER, FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT

A previous study found that lower socioeconomic status individuals might be more likely to consider adopting a pet through an animal shelter/rescue organization but rarely end up getting their pet from this source due to “fear of rejection, concern about costs of adoptions, and discomfort with paperwork and privacy,” (Arluke and Rautkis, 2024).

The BIPOC focus group participants who did not adopt from animal shelters shared their perception of the shelter/rescue adoption process as time consuming (“the process was too hard, I gave up”), costly (“I wanted to adopt but the fee was too high”), or judgemental.

“It is kind of mind boggling. Like y’all have all these dogs in the shelters, but you’re putting people through background checks. Like she [the shelter/rescue adoption staff] asked me so many questions, and she told me, ‘I normally only allow people to get my dogs who are either married or older couples with yards.’”

– ATLANTA PET OWNER, FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT

“I know some of them will go check your background or they’ll check your what type of job you have? Do you live in a house? Do you live in an apartment? Are there kids there? But each of them have their own type of guidelines that they’re looking for to let people adopt or rescue. And sometimes some of them are a little bit more... They kind of want to know everything. They just... It’s a little bit overbearing sometimes.”

– SURVEY PARTICIPANT

Although there is limited research that addresses BIPOC experiences with shelter/rescue organizations, a recent study conducted by University of Tennessee - Knoxville’s Program for Pet Health Equity research team (Blackwell and colleagues, 2024) found that BIPOC pet owners were less likely to adopt from a shelter/rescue than white pet owners in Charlotte, NC, Dallas, TX, Detroit, MI, and Los Angeles, CA. They also identified that dogs in these four cities were adopted out by shelter/rescue organizations into zip codes with higher white populations than the zip codes where the dogs originated from. Blackwell and

colleagues (2024) go on to discuss how the eligibility criteria used for adopting pets “disproportionately impact BIPOC pet owners” because “BIPOC pet owners are less likely to meet adoption requirements, such as home ownership, due to systemic factors that economically marginalize BIPOC families (discriminatory housing policies like redlining and unfair lending practices).”

Another recent study conducted with shelter/rescue organizations across the U.S. suggested that discrimination, implicit biases, mistreatment, or challenges because of cultural differences may be driving the disparities in BIPOC pet adoption from shelter/rescue organizations. Ly and colleagues (2024) discussed how both explicit procedures, such as home checks and background checks, as well as implicit biases (e.g., relying on ‘gut-feeling’ to select adopters) may lead to discrimination against BIPOC families.

PROFESSIONAL OR LICENSED BREEDERS

The two most common outcomes for BIPOC participants (n = 311) with a professional or licensed breeder were: I have never attempted to get a pet from this source (52%) and this source was not accessible (12%) (Table 1).

Focus group participants who had acquired a pet from a professional or licensed breeder described the process of getting a pet as “quick and convenient.”

“It was just like they didn’t ask questions. You know. They were just like, you want a dog. Here’s a dog, and then, of course, they wanted payment. That’s pretty much what it was. It was just a simple transaction, smooth transaction. I felt like, yeah, they treated us good [...] We got our dogs, and we’re happy.”

- MINNEAPOLIS PET OWNER, FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT

The most common ways that BIPOC participants who attempted to get a pet from a breeder (n = 102) heard about the breeder were: 1) general online search (Google,

Facebook, Instagram, etc.) [43%], 2) a family member, neighbor, or friend of mine recommended this breeder (33%), or 3) the breeder is a family member, friend, or neighbor of mine (26%). The least common way that BIPOC participants heard about a breeder was from being listed on an official breeder registry (USDA, AKC, etc.) [17%].

“I did my research, the breeder was highly recommended by many sources. He truly wanted to ensure his dog was going to a good home.”

- SURVEY PARTICIPANT

Several focus group participants who obtained their pet from a professional or licensed breeder or planned to use this source to get their next pet noted that they selected this source to ensure they were able to get the specific breed they preferred.

“I want an American Bulldog, it’s hard to find them at shelters. So I do think eventually I will go to a breeder.”

- PHILADELPHIA PET OWNER, FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT

The focus group participants who got their pet from a professional or licensed breeder expressed a concern that if they obtained a pet from a shelter/rescue, the pet may have medical or behavioral challenges, and they would also have more limited information about the pet’s background. Several of these participants also expressed a lack of trust in shelter/rescue organizations, particularly around if shelter/rescue organizations are avoiding disclosing information about the pet’s background so they can be adopted more quickly.

I don’t want it to have a past experience, past owners. I wanna start from scratch.

- MIAMI PET OWNER, FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT

For participants who considered getting a pet from a professional or licensed breeder, but ultimately selected a different source, cost was the primary reason.

“I tried to get a bred dog. Like that was going to be my first dog.

They wanted \$5,000. I was like uh.”

- PHILADELPHIA PET OWNER,
FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT

“They breed their animals to make money. Some won’t go down on their price. I think they care more about money than the animals.”

- SURVEY PARTICIPANT

FRIENDS, FAMILY MEMBERS, OR NEIGHBORS

The two most common outcomes for the BIPOC participants (n = 311) who obtained a pet from a friend, family member, or neighbor were: I received my pet as a gift (40%) and I have never attempted to get a pet from a friend, family member or neighbor (24%) (Table 1).

Some focus group participants spoke about how getting pets from friends, family members, or neighbors is ‘normal’ in their community and that having a personal or neighborhood connection contributed to the ease of pet acquisition.

“My whole life is always like, I guess ‘backyard breeding’ was so normalized where I’m from.”

- ATLANTA PET OWNER, FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT

Several survey participants shared that they ultimately got their pet from a friend, family member, or neighbor after being denied adoption from a shelter/rescue organization.

“They [the shelter/rescue] treated me poorly and denied me so I had to buy my cat from someone whose cat had kittens.”

- SURVEY PARTICIPANT



It’s important to note that pets acquired through friends, family members, or neighbors by both the focus group and survey participants were not all from litters produced by unaltered cats and dogs but also included adult pets who were “re-homed” through their existing network rather than being surrendered to a local shelter/rescue organization.

“They [family member] wanted to make sure we kept the pet in the family.”

-SURVEY PARTICIPANT

“I was glad the friend saw me as an appropriate rehome option for their pet and I was honored to provide my home to their pet.”

-SURVEY PARTICIPANT

Other studies have found that individuals with lower socioeconomic status were more likely to get a pet from a family member or to foster a pet for a friend or family member, compared to middle and upper socioeconomic status pet owners (Arluke & Rautkis, 2024). Neal and Kremer (2024) found that as pet owner income increases, pet acquisition from a family/friend source decreased while pet acquisition through purchase or adoption/ shelter increased. They suggested that individuals with lower socioeconomic status rely more on informal social networks for pet acquisition versus government/ non-profit administered animal shelters.



EXPERIENCES WITH PET ACQUISITION

To understand BIPOC experiences with getting pets from the three pet source types, BIPOC survey participants responded to questions about how they were treated during their interactions with each source.

OVERALL EXPERIENCE

BIPOC participants who had attempted to get a pet from a shelter/rescue had the highest incidence of negative experiences (72%) compared with the other two sources of breeder (55%) and friend, family, or neighbor (23%) (Table 2).

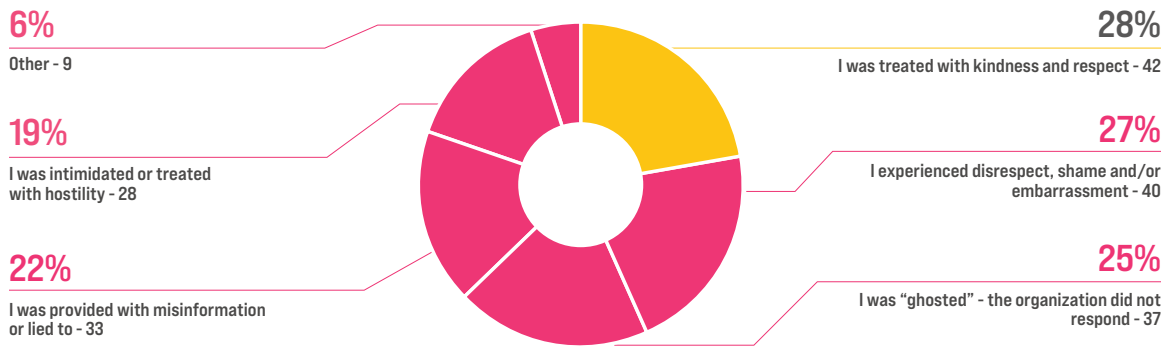
KINDNESS AND RESPECT

BIPOC participants most frequently reported being treated with kindness and respect when acquiring pets from professional or licensed breeders (45%) (n = 102) and friends, family, or neighbors (77%) (n=208) (Table 2).

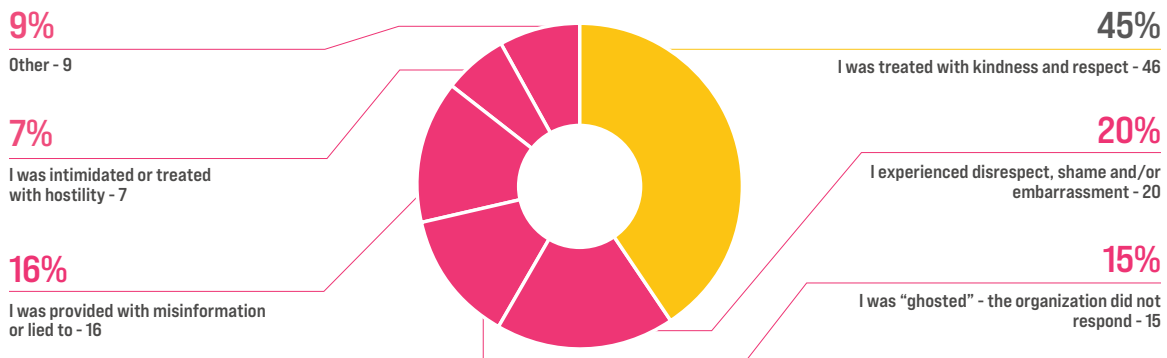
TABLE 2. HOW WERE YOU TREATED DURING YOUR INTERACTION WITH THIS SOURCE FOR PETS?



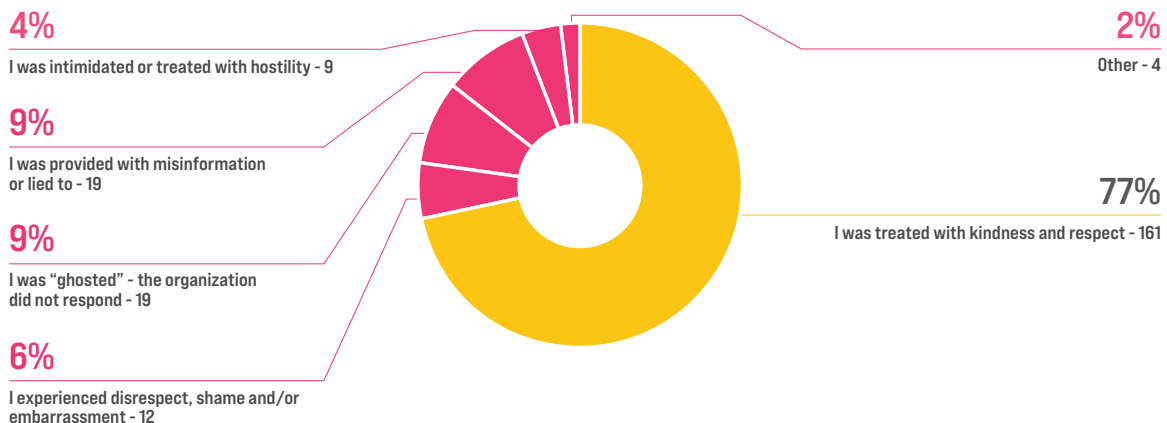
SHELTER OR RESCUE ORGANIZATION



PROFESSIONAL OR LICENSED BREEDER



FRIEND, FAMILY MEMBER, OR NEIGHBOR



INTIMIDATION OR HOSTILITY

When attempting to get a pet from a shelter/rescue, 19% of the BIPOC participants (n = 148) shared they were intimidated or treated with hostility. This is compared to 7% of the BIPOC participants who utilized professional or licensed breeders (n = 102) or 4% of BIPOC participants who utilized friends, family members, or neighbors as their source for getting a pet (n = 208) (Table 2).

“The experience was not what I thought, to be honest, it was not what I expected. Because, like, I went with my mom to get [the dog], and the people at the shelter, I think they thought [the dog] was for me, and they would be like, very standoffish towards me...I walked in and it wasn’t friendly, it wasn’t helpful. And then when I say, Oh, this is my mom’s dog. She’s a doctor. Oh, completely different attitude. One of the first things they [the shelter/rescue adoption staff] said was..., ‘It’s very hard to get a dog from us. We don’t just adopt to anybody. We’d rather keep them here forever.’ And I’m just like, ‘[Wow], I just got here, like, you don’t know nothing about me.. telling me how hard it is to get a dog.’ And so then they started to ask me things like, ‘Well, how are you going to afford this dog?’ And that’s when we got into, ‘Oh, this is going to be my mom’s dog and she’s a doctor.’ And once they realized that [she’s a doctor] it was, ‘Well, let me show you around. What dogs do you want to see?’”

- ATLANTA PET OWNER, FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT

DISRESPECT, SHAME, OR EMBARRASSMENT

When attempting to get a pet from a shelter/rescue, 27% of the BIPOC participants (n = 148) experienced disrespect, shame, and/or embarrassment. This is compared to 20% of the BIPOC participants who utilized professional or licensed breeders (n = 102) or 6% of BIPOC participants who utilized friends, family members, or neighbors as their source for getting a pet (n = 208) (Table 2).

“I want to feel like I’m being evaluated as an individual and not based off of like, what you think meets the perfect candidate in a way that is heavily based on characteristics and not whether or not I will be a good fit for this dog...I think that that would have made me feel a lot more comfortable in my process, and that that would also encourage more people who are a bit afraid of engaging with the process to go ahead and do it, because they are afraid of that shame that can come with it, which is very weird to say that, like there’s shame involved in trying to adopt an animal.”

- ATLANTA PET OWNER, FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT

MISINFORMATION OR LIES

When attempting to get a pet from a shelter/rescue, 22% of the BIPOC participants (n = 148) were provided with misinformation or lied to. This is compared to 16% of the BIPOC participants who utilized professional or licensed breeders (n = 102) or 9% of BIPOC participants who utilized friends, family members, or neighbors as their source for getting a pet (n = 208) (Table 2). The focus group participants shared that the misinformation or lies were related to information about the availability of a specific pet for adoption and the health or behavior status of the pet they adopted.

“[A]t the time, during the pandemic, I don’t know if it was because of like what people were going through that they weren’t on top of it. But it just seemed like there was a lack of communication, basically like... ‘Oh, we’ll get back to you’ or like ‘this dog is on hold’, or ‘somebody’s looking to adopt this dog so just call back’, it was a lot of like stalling and stuff like that. This was like, you know, we wanted a dog right away, so I guess we were trying to rush it. And maybe we weren’t being as patient, but I just felt like it shouldn’t have taken that long... It was probably like 2 months that we had been waiting, and it was taking forever.”

- MINNEAPOLIS PET OWNER, FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT

“I know someone who had a bad experience applying for a pet from a shelter. He said the pet was not healthy [when he adopted the pet from the shelter]. We took the pet to get veterinary care. He did everything possible. But he lost it.”

MIAMI PET OWNER, FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT

“GHOSTED”

When attempting to get a pet from a shelter/rescue, 25% of the BIPOC participants (n = 148) were “ghosted” or the organization did not respond to their communications. This is compared to 14% of the BIPOC participants who utilized professional or licensed breeders (n = 102) or 9% of BIPOC participants who utilized friends, family members, or neighbors as their source for getting a pet (n = 208) (Table 2).

“It was basically a run around and no response. And I kind of just gave up.”

- MINNEAPOLIS PET OWNER, FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT

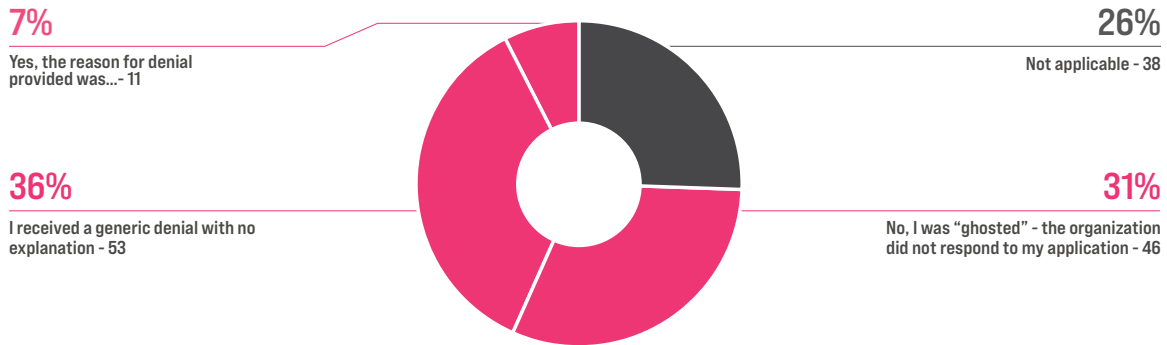
“It felt like the organization was under-staffed and that’s why I was ghosted the first 2 times I went.”

- SURVEY PARTICIPANT

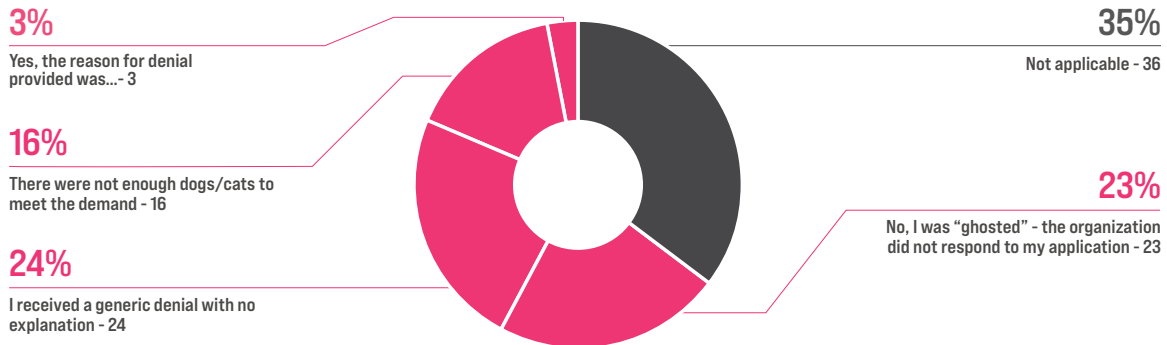
TABLE 3.
DID THIS SOURCE FOR PETS PROVIDE A REASON FOR
YOUR APPLICATION BEING DENIED?



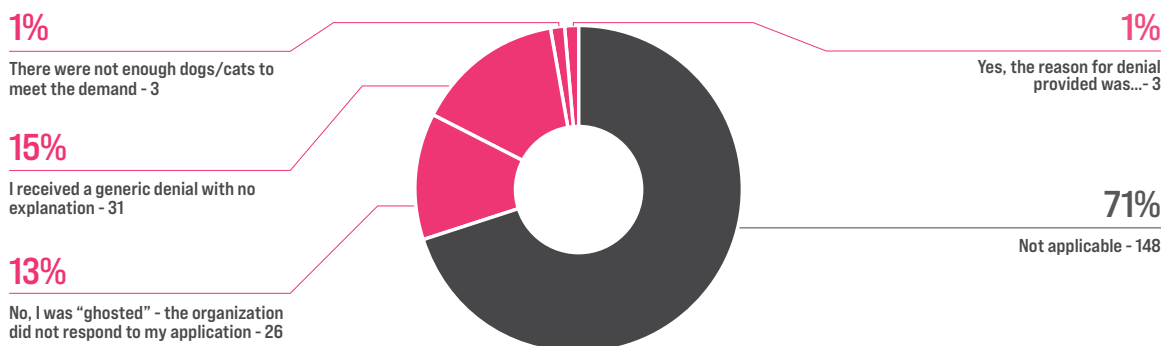
SHELTER OR RESCUE ORGANIZATION (n=148)



PROFESSIONAL OR LICENSED BREEDER (n=102)



FRIEND, FAMILY MEMBER, OR NEIGHBOR (n=208)



REJECTION AND DENIAL

Survey participants were asked if they were provided with a reason if or when their application to adopt/purchase was denied. BIPOC participants who were denied getting a pet from friends, family members, or neighbors most often received a generic denial with no explanation (15%) or they were “ghosted” and the individual did not respond to their application (13%) (Table 3).

Most participants who were denied getting a pet from a breeder received a generic denial with no explanation (24%) or they were “ghosted” and the organization did not respond to their application (23%) (Table 3). If a reason for their denial was provided (3%), the primary reasons stated included: “we did not agree on the price.”

“Literally anything other than the shelter is probably going to be better for this dog, whether it’s backyard, apartment, two parent household, one person household... I would think your goal would be to get them out of the shelter as quickly as possible, but a lot of times it’s not like that.”

- ATLANTA PET OWNER, FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT

Similar to the other two sources, the BIPOC participants who were denied adoption from a shelter/rescue most often received a generic denial with no explanation (36%) or they were “ghosted” and the organization did not respond to their application (31%) (Table 3). If a reason for the denial was provided (7%), the reasons stated included: “I did not live in a house,” “I could not afford the fee,” “they felt that my neighborhood wouldn’t be a good fit,” and “my age.”

Focus group participants elaborated on their experiences with applying to adopt a pet from a shelter/rescue and highlighted the various criteria used to determine which families are approved for adoption.

“I have noticed with other rescues that they do require a lot, like fenced in backyards, that’s one big thing. They asked about space. They asked about the age of children that you have in a household, how many kids you have, any breed restrictions in the area... like all that kind of stuff they do ask. And a lot of times, I do think they miss some really good owners.”

- ATLANTA FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT

UNFAIR TREATMENT

The BIPOC survey participants were asked if they felt they were treated unfairly when adopting or purchasing a pet.

BIPOC participants who went to shelters/rescues reported feeling they were mistreated more often than the other two sources. Just 25 (17%) of the BIPOC participants who got pets from shelters/rescues (n = 148) reported they did not feel they were mistreated, compared to 37 (36%) BIPOC participants who got pets from breeders (n= 102) or 125 (60%) BIPOC participants who got pets from friends, family, or neighbors (n = 208).

“Well, this is a lot of work just to get a dog. I’m trying to give the dog a good home, and you’re asking me for all of this information. Seems personal...we weren’t able to adopt because they were judging us.”

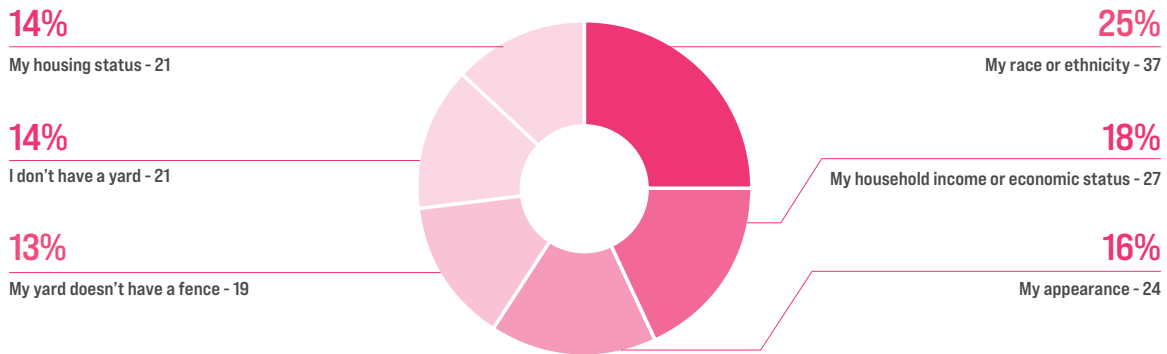
- SURVEY PARTICIPANT

The most frequently indicated characteristics that the participants felt were the basis for their unfair treatment are listed in Table 4.

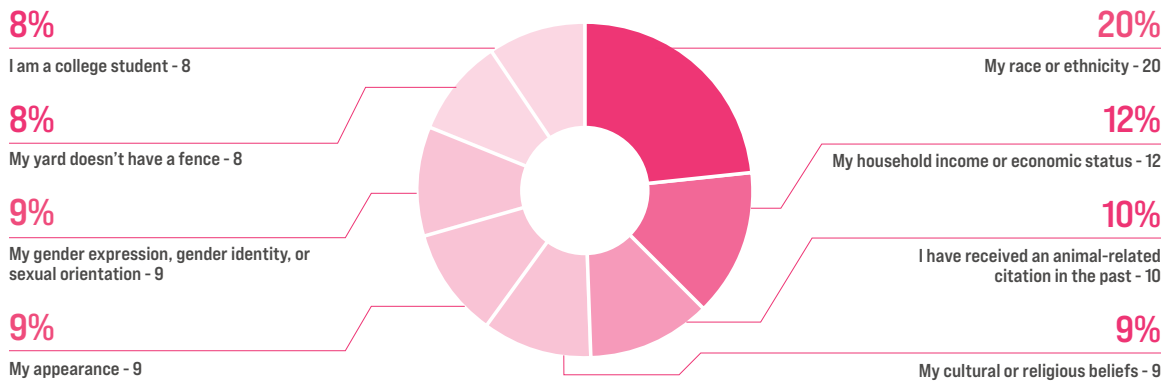
TABLE 4. MOST COMMON CATEGORIES FOR UNFAIR TREATMENT



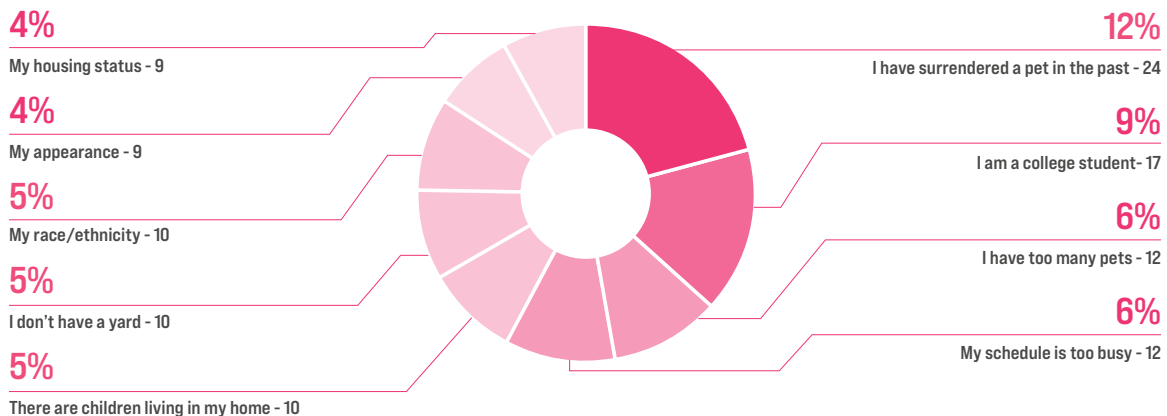
SHELTER OR RESCUE ORGANIZATION (n = 148)



PROFESSIONAL OR LICENSED BREEDER (n = 102)



FRIEND, FAMILY MEMBER, OR NEIGHBOR (n = 208)



The research on BIPOC pet owner experiences with being denied adoption from shelter/rescue organizations is limited, however, a recent study by Blackwell and colleagues [2024] found that BIPOC pet owners in Charlotte, NC, Dallas, TX, Detroit, MI, and Los Angeles, CA were more likely to be denied adoption from shelters/rescues than white pet owners. A study conducted by Ly and colleagues [2024] explored how racial/ethnic bias may influence the decision-making of shelter/rescue staff and found that 39% of shelters/rescues in the U.S. still make adoption decisions based on “intuition” or “gut feeling.”

The BIPOC focus group and survey participants shared their stories of how they believe race/ethnicity was used as a criteria when they attempted to adopt a pet from a shelter/rescue.

“I think I had to send a picture of myself at some point....Every place that I tried to adopt from, they had like, this super lengthy process. This super kind of intrusive process, where they were asking really personal questions. The process did make me feel a little uncomfortable whenever it did come down to like me having to share intimate details about myself, including, like, sending a picture of me to them. I’m like, why?... And I think that was a way to see, like, if you’re white, if you’re Black, like what you were giving. So yeah, I learned that appearance and also kind of like stereotypes... I didn’t know that so many characteristic factors played into whether or not you will be able to adopt until I tried. And that was a long process, like, I want to say I spent months trying to adopt a dog.”

- ATLANTA PET OWNER, FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT



A 2020 study conducted by CARE in partnership with Harvard Project Implicit found that the U.S. animal shelter/rescue industry workforce is 84% white, 86% non-Hispanic, and 84% women. The study participants “self-reported a preference for Black people over white people, Hispanic people over non-Hispanic people, and poor people over rich people,” yet the study found these participants had an “implicit preference for white people over Black people, non-hispanic people over Hispanic people, and rich people over poor people.”

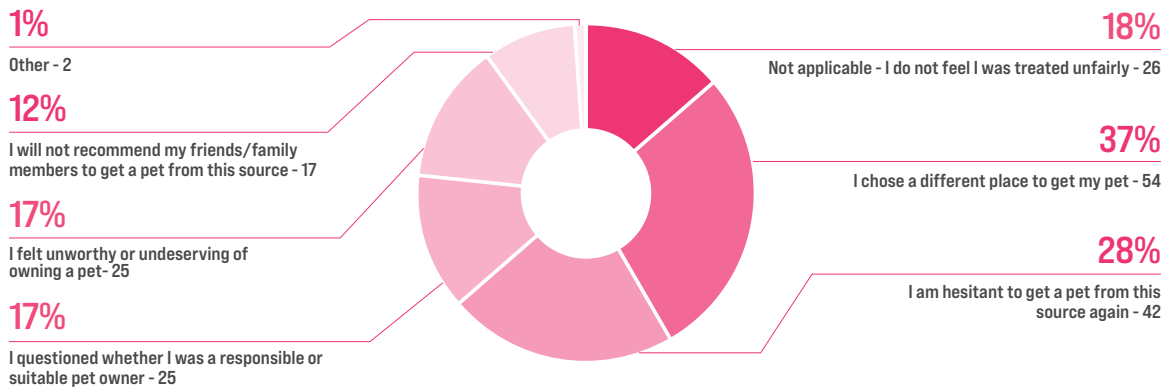
Ironically, BIPOC pet owners represent one of the most promising opportunities for reaching new potential pet adopters and addressing shelter/rescue capacity challenges in the U.S. **It is estimated that just a 3% increase in BIPOC adoptions from shelter/rescue organizations across the U.S. would result in an additional 2 million pets finding homes.**

The BIPOC survey participants (n = 311) were asked to share how any unfair treatment impacted their experience with getting a pet (Table 5). For all sources of pets, the most common impact of unfair treatment was choosing a different place to get a pet and being hesitant to get a pet from this source again. The unfair treatment also resulted in BIPOC pet owners choosing not to recommend that source to friends or family members in the future.

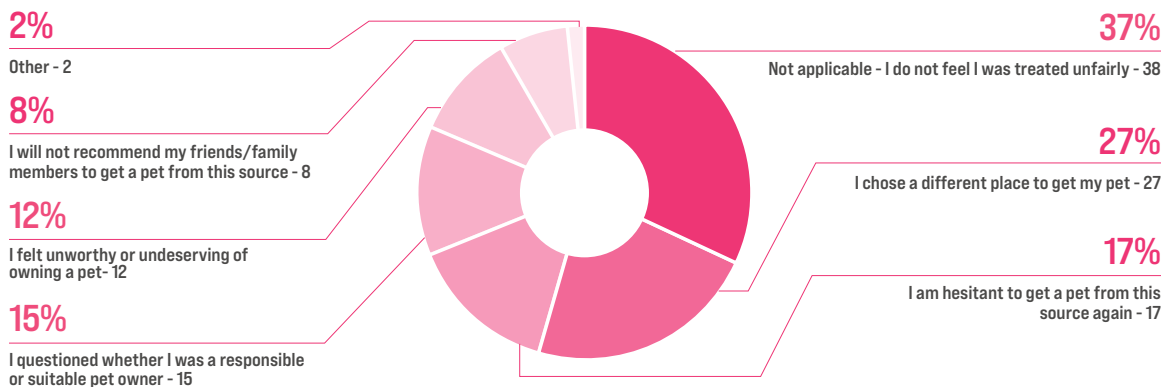
TABLE 5.
IF YOU EXPERIENCED UNFAIR TREATMENT DURING THE
PROCESS OF GETTING A PET FROM THIS SOURCE, WHAT HAS BEEN
THE IMPACT OF YOUR EXPERIENCE? CHECK ALL THAT APPLY.



SHELTER OR RESCUE ORGANIZATION (n = 148)



PROFESSIONAL OR LICENSED BREEDER (n = 102)



FRIEND, FAMILY MEMBER, OR NEIGHBOR (n = 208)

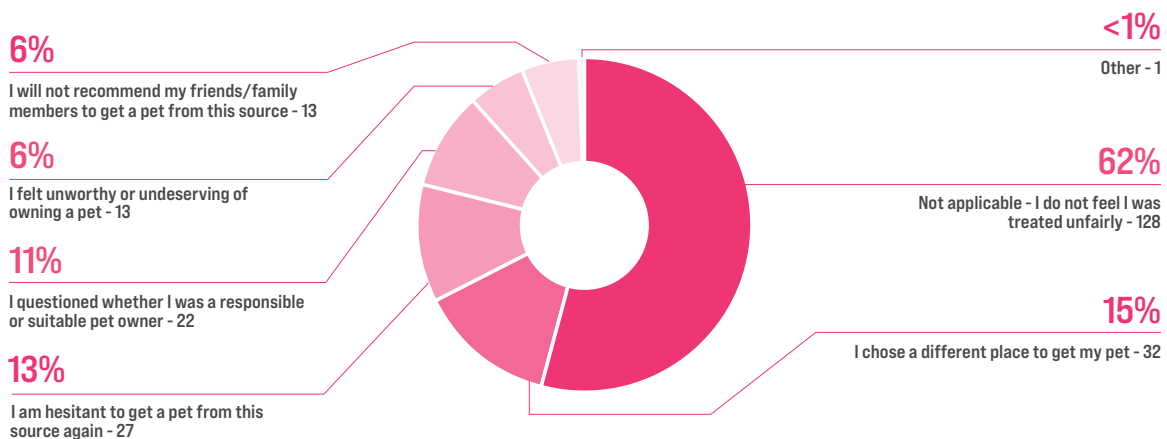
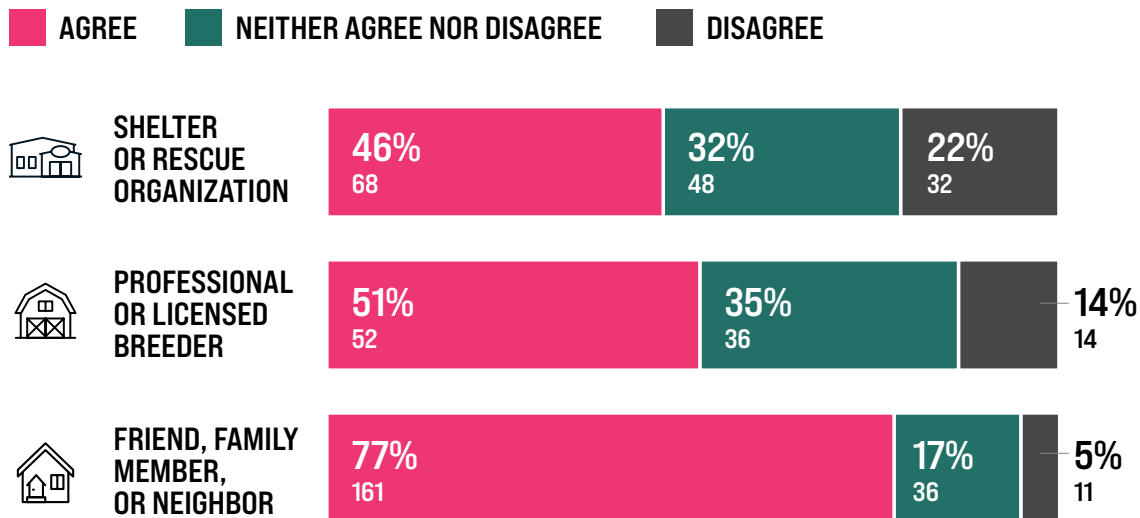


TABLE 6.

PLEASE INDICATE YOUR LEVEL OF AGREEMENT WITH THE FOLLOWING STATEMENT:
I TRUST THIS SOURCE AS A FUTURE SOURCE FOR PETS.



It is essential to underscore the emotional impacts of the mistreatment experienced by BIPOC pet owners, with survey respondents also indicating they “questioned whether I was a responsible or suitable pet owner” and “felt unworthy or undeserving of a pet.” BIPOC families in the U.S. are subjected to stacked experiences of discrimination and systemic harm across most dimensions of society (for example, housing, education, economic opportunity, access to healthcare). These experiences of racism and discrimination have measurable long-term effects on BIPOC individuals’ physical and emotional well-being. Adding a pet to the family should be a joyful and supportive experience that allows the opportunity for BIPOC families to gain access to the profound physical, social, and emotional benefits of the human-animal bond, not one that reinforces the deficit view of BIPOC families as “less than” or “irresponsible.”

TRUSTED SOURCES

After sharing their experiences with the three pet sources, the BIPOC survey participants were asked to share about their levels of trust in each source. A friend, family member, or neighbor was viewed as the most trusted source by survey respondents (77%) [Table 6].



POST- ACQUISITION EXPERIENCES

CHALLENGES

Survey participants (n = 311) shared about challenges they experienced after acquiring their pet. The top three challenges that participants reported were the cost of veterinary care (28%), the cost of pet food (25%), and the cost of grooming (20%).

Other challenges included: Managing my pet's behavior (biting, barking, destroying things, reactivity, separation anxiety, etc.) (15%), lack of general information on pet care (10%), and biases, stereotypes, or other negative attitudes towards my pet (6%).

"I just wish that [behavior training] was more accessible for Black people, more normalized. I remember when I said I was getting [my dog] trained, it was just like a 'bougie thing' that I was doing."

- ATLANTA PET OWNER, FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT

"A part of it was Yin's breed [American bully], but it was Yin's breed plus my race...I feel like neither her nor me have the grace to make mistakes, especially in public... It's been particularly hard now that she's like, I guess, in adolescence. And like I understand. Like, I don't have any, like, actual anger and frustrations towards her. But I think in the moments, it's so anxiety-inducing... I think like how I got her too [from my mom who breeds dogs], just kind of makes me feel like a lot of pressure to just be a good dog owner. And I don't necessarily want to say a 'good' dog owner, but a proactive dog owner, because I feel like I have to overcompensate."

- ATLANTA PET OWNER, FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT

Finding and/or maintaining housing that allowed their pet was a challenge shared by several BIPOC focus group participants. This aligns with the increasing number of research studies documenting the lack of pet inclusive housing in the U.S. (Michelson Found Animals, 2025; Mascitelli and colleagues, 2024)

"I'll say for me it's more when I was moving, because when I was looking for an apartment, a lot of people were not open to cats. Like some places were okay with dogs, but a lot of people just assume cats are automatically going to scratch the walls and spray everywhere... So I'll say that the main challenge I dealt with [my cats] was the moving process. Because I was surprised how many people actually don't prefer cats as a pet when you move in."

- PHILADELPHIA PET OWNER, FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT

RESOURCES USED

The BIPOC survey participants (n = 311) shared which resources they used after they acquired their pets. The top three responses were low cost/free vaccine clinic (39%), low cost/free spay/neuter clinic (35%), and pet food pantry (30%).

108 (35%) of the BIPOC survey participants indicated they did not utilize any services or resources after acquiring their pets.

One of the focus group participants highlighted the potential hesitancy to utilize free or low-cost resources in their community due to the fear of being perceived as anything other than a 'responsible pet owner':

"I do feel like, because the process was very extensive, I felt like I had to be like a very proactive dog owner. I had to, kind of, like... I didn't have much grace to like to make mistakes. Especially because I signed a contract [with the shelter/rescue] that was like, if you do X, Y and Z with the dog, like, you have to give it back. If you do blah, blah, blah, you have to, like, return her... I do think that there was anxiety attached to that. And I don't think non-Black and Brown pet owners typically have to go through this. Like they're just allowed to, or it feels like they're just allowed to, have their pets and fully enjoy their pets without having to worry about if they're being perceived as responsible pet owners."

- ATLANTA PET OWNER, FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT

COMMUNITY-LED SOLUTIONS

The BIPOC survey participants (n = 311) were asked about what pet acquisition sources can do to make getting a pet a more positive and equitable experience.

"We are gonna identify all these issues and come up with, like, actual solutions. Versus just like gatekeeping dogs for a certain group of people. Let's make [pet ownership] accessible."

ATLANTA PET OWNER, FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT

The top three community-led solutions were: provide more services/supplies/information to support the health and well-being of pets after adoption/purchase (46%), eliminate processes that make it more difficult to acquire a pet (45%), and be more understanding about a person's financial situation (42%).

"I want to feel like I'm being evaluated as an individual and not based off of what you think meets the perfect candidate in a way that is heavily based on characteristics and not whether or not I will be a good fit for this dog. I think that that would have made me feel a lot more comfortable in my process. And that would also encourage more people who are a bit afraid of engaging with the process [of adopting from a shelter/rescue] to go ahead and do it. Because they are afraid of that shame that can come with it. It's very weird to say that there's shame involved in trying to adopt an animal."

- ATLANTA PET OWNER, FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT

The survey participants (n = 311) were also asked if there were any services or resources that they needed for post-acquisition pet support, but were unable to find or access. 6% of respondents answered yes and listed the following:



VETERINARIANS IN THE AREA THAT ARE AFFORDABLE



FINANCIAL SUPPORT



BEHAVIOR SERVICES I CAN AFFORD



PET INSURANCE



PET FOOD PANTRY



GETTING MY PET AN IDENTIFYING CHIP



INFORMATION ON WHERE TO GO FOR HELP

Other priority suggestions included: eliminate invasive questions in the application process (33%); provide pet support services and supplies at the same location as human services/supplies (32%); demonstrate empathy and compassion (32%); hire more BIPOC staff members (31%); learn about and respect norms from all cultures (26%); create a safe space for a person to ask questions (26%); improve language services by providing translation, hire bilingual staff, etc. (21%); and attend anti-racism training (19%).

“So all that to say, like, I just wish I had more Black people when I was first raising her. Because I just missed it. Transparently, sometimes not being able to just like... I can’t even talk about stuff or like ask for advice [for my pet] without fear of judgment.”

- ATLANTA PET OWNER, FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT

One of the focus group participants shared their vision for a “collective aid” model for pet support services.

“I would literally...like, sponsor people, if I could pay it forward. If that was an option for these white people to do what I want to be doing... holding it down and stuff. Why don’t we just do something where we can all pull money in for the next class... Like collective aid.”

- ATLANTA PET OWNER, FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT

Finally, the BIPOC survey participants (n = 311) were asked if they have ever considered fostering or providing temporary housing for their local animal shelter/rescue. Most participants (50%) were unaware that a program like this exists. 21% are not interested in fostering or providing temporary housing. Another 21% had applied to be a foster and were denied. And 8% are a current foster for their local animal shelter/rescue. **These data indicate a strong opportunity to recruit BIPOC families for shelter/rescue organizations’ foster or temporary housing programs.**

CARE’s Racial, Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (REDI) course is a self-paced online course available to pet industry professionals to increase their knowledge and understanding of the racism and other forms of discrimination that are present within the pet industry. REDI course graduates have implemented what they learn in the course across a variety of departments of their organization (for example, adoptions, foster care, animal control/field services, marketing). REDI graduates have reported outcomes including increased adoptions and an increased number of foster families (Pet Finder Foundation, 2025).

CONCLUSION





This report highlights the critical need to end discrimination in pet acquisition processes and expand access to pet ownership for all.

BIPOC pet owners reported being mistreated or denied adoption/purchase of a pet, not due to their qualifications to care for a pet, but due to demographic characteristics like their race/ethnicity or housing status.

Each of these BIPOC pet owners who were denied or never applied to adopt from a shelter/rescue represent a crucial potential asset to address the current shelter overpopulation and euthanasia crisis. **If there was just a 3% increase in adoptions from BIPOC families, that would mean two million fewer pets are still in shelters and rescues seeking homes.**

BIPOC families' use of friends, family members, and neighbors as a primary source for obtaining pets may support the shelter/rescue industry by keeping pets out of the system ("self re-homing").

Embodying "community animal care" and increasing the availability of and access to the pet support services that BIPOC pet owners have indicated as priorities, such as

low cost/free vaccines, spay/neuter, and pet food, are proactive solutions that will keep pets with their families rather than entering shelter/rescue organizations' care.

Future research should focus on several key areas to monitor progress towards achieving the goal of making pet ownership accessible to all. A comparative analysis between BIPOC and non-BIPOC pet owners across the various sources for acquiring pets will reveal if these disparities in experiences and outcomes are prevalent. An assessment of how the racial/ethnic diversity of shelter/rescue staff impacts rates of BIPOC adoption denial and BIPOC staff retention is also recommended. Finally, to ensure future research is centered on the community-specific priorities and the lived experiences of those most impacted, a community-based participatory research (CBPR) approach should be used.

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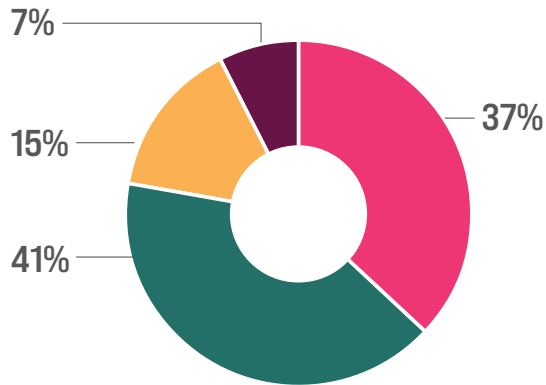
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APPENDIX 1

APPENDIX 1. FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS



CITY/STATE (N = 27)

- PHILADELPHIA, PA OR SURROUNDING AREA - 10 (37%)
- ATLANTA, GA OR SURROUNDING AREA - 11 (41%)
- MIAMI, FL OR SURROUNDING AREA - 4 (15%)
- MINNEAPOLIS, MN OR SURROUNDING AREA - 2 (7%)

Philadelphia, PA (n = 10)		
Zip Code	#	%
19104	1	3.7%
19120	1	3.7%
19121	1	3.7%
19124	2	7.4%
19131	1	3.7%
19136	1	3.7%
19139	1	3.7%
19144	1	3.7%
Did not respond	1	3.7%

Atlanta, GA (n = 11)		
Zip Code	#	%
30083	2	7.4%
30134	1	3.7%
30238	1	3.7%
30311	2	7.4%
30314	1	3.7%
30316	2	7.4%
30318	1	3.7%
30329	1	3.7%

Miami, FL (n = 4)		
Zip Code	#	%
33033	1	3.7%
33142	1	3.7%
33144	1	3.7%
33165	1	3.7%

Minneapolis, MN (n = 2)		
Zip Code	#	%
55421	1	3.7%
Did not respond	1	3.7%

PET OWNERSHIP STATUS

85% CURRENTLY HAVE PETS

I currently have pets	23	85.2%
I plan to have pets in the future	4	14.8%
I have had pets in the past	4	14.8%
Did not respond	2	7.4%

GENDER

52% WOMAN

Woman - 14	14	51.9%
Did not respond - 13	82	48.1%

RACE/ETHNICITY

74% BLACK/AFRICAN AMERICAN

Black/African American	20	74.1%
Hispanic/Latino	6	22.2%
Did not respond	2	7.4%

HOUSING STATUS

56% RENTERS (with units that allow pets)

Temporary Housing (Living with family/friends, hotel/motel)	5	18.5%
Homeowner	4	14.8%
Renter (and my unit allows pets)	15	55.6%
Renter (and my unit does not allow pets)	1	3.7%
Other: Live with partner who owns home	1	3.7%
Did not respond	2	7.4%

AGE

52% 25-34 YEARS

18-24	4	14.8%
25-34	14	51.9%
35-44	4	14.8%
45-54	1	3.7%
55-64	1	3.7%
65-74	1	3.7%
Did not respond	2	7.4%

EDUCATION

37% BACHELOR'S DEGREES

High school diploma	4	14.8%
Some college/associate's degree	4	14.8%
Bachelor's degree	10	37%
Graduate degree	4	14.8%
Professional degree	2	7.4%
Did not respond	2	11.1%

NUMBER OF CATS

52% HAVE NO CATS

One	6	22.2%
Two	4	14.8%
None	14	51.9%
Did not respond	3	11.1%

NUMBER OF DOGS

30% HAVE ONE DOG

One	8	29.6%
Two	5	18.5%
Three	3	11.1%
Four	1	3.7%
Five	1	3.7%
None	6	22.2%
Did not respond	3	11.1%

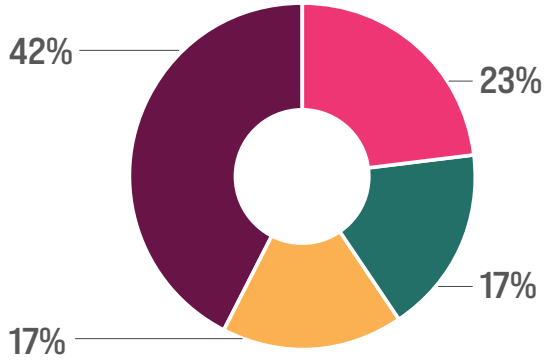
OTHER PETS

SOME HAVE OTHER PETS

2 snakes, 1 tarantula, 2 turtles, wildlife
1 bearded dragon, 2 snakes
1 turtle, 1 bearded dragon
chameleon

APPENDIX 2

APPENDIX 2. SURVEY PARTICIPANT PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS



CITY/STATE (N = 311)

- ATLANTA, GA OR SURROUNDING AREA - 72 (23%)
- PHILADELPHIA, PA OR SURROUNDING AREA - 54 (17%)
- MIAMI, FL OR SURROUNDING AREA - 53 (17%)
- MINNEAPOLIS, MN OR SURROUNDING AREA - 132 (42%)

Philadelphia, PA (n = 54)		
Zip Code	#	%
19146	18	34.6%
19143	11	21.2%
19142	7	13.46%
19153	5	9.6%
19121, 19139, 19151, No answer	2	3.9%
19013, 19134, 13135, 19140, 19145	1	1.9%

Atlanta, GA (n = 72)		
Zip Code	#	%
30318	8	11.1%
30315, 30349	5	6.9%
30236, 30281	4	5.6%
30310, 30311	3	4.2%
30297, 30304, 30305, 30331, 39901	2	2.8%
30033, 30034, 30045, 30060, 30062, 30067, 30082, 30102, 30135, 30144, 30168, 30189, 30213, 30228, 30237, 30238, 30274, 30296, 30303, 30308, 30309, 30312, 30313, 30314, 30322, 30326, 30337, 30340, 30345, 30374	1	1.4%

Miami (n = 53)		
Zip Code	#	%
33056	12	22.6%
33142	12	22.6%
33161	11	20.8%
33168	4	7.6%
33179	3	5.7%
33055	2	3.8%
32908, 33032, 33127, 33136, 33138, 33147, 33166, 33167, 33169	1	1.9%

Minneapolis, MN (n = 132)		
Zip Code	#	%
56601, 56671	14	10.6%
55404, 55411	11	8.3%
56670	9	6.8%
55418	6	4.6%
55412	5	3.8%
55107, 55387, 55406, 55408	4	3.0%
55106, 55303, 56374	3	2.3%
55075, 55104, 55117, 55423, 55430, 55454, 56633	2	1.5%
54301, 55102, 55103, 55105, 55108, 55313, 55316, 55328, 55337, 55364, 55369, 55379, 55401, 55403, 55407, 55413, 55417, 55426, 55429, 55432, 55444, 55601, 55666	1	0.8%



RACE/ETHNICITY

51% BLACK
(Afro-Canadian, African American, Afro-British, etc.)

Black (Afro-Canadian, African American, Afro-British, etc.)	158	50.8%
Indigenous People (e.g., Native American, Alaska Native, First Nation, Mayan, Inuit, Aboriginal, Native Hawaiian, Maori, etc.)	118	37.9%
Caribbean (Cuban, Dominican, Jamaican)	33	10.6%
South American/Central American/Mexican (e.g., Hispanic/Latino/Chicano/a/x)	26	8.4%
White	8	2.6%
African (Kenyan, Nigerian, Zambian, etc.)	24	7.7%
East Asian (Chinese, Japanese, Korean)	4	1.3%
Arab (Palestinian, Algerian, Egyptian, etc.)	3	1.0%
West Asian/Middle Eastern (e.g., Iranian, Afghan, Lebanese)	3	1.0%
South Asian (e.g., Indian, Pakistani, Sri Lankan, etc.)	2	0.6%
Jewish (for persons who identify ethnically as Jewish)	2	0.6%
Unknown (for individuals who have been disappeared or adopted and don't know their racial and ethnic heritage)	2	0.6%
Southeast Asian (e.g., Vietnamese, Cambodian, Filipino, etc.)	1	0.3%
Pacific Islander (Polynesian, Samoan, Tahitian)	1	0.3%
Prefer not to answer	1	0.3%
Other (please describe)	1	0.3%
Black White Japanese		

AGE

AVERAGE: 33 YEARS

MINIMUM AGE: 18 YEARS | MAXIMUM AGE: 74 YEARS

18-24 years	117	37.6%
25-34 years	80	25.7%
35-44 years	48	15.4%
45-54 years	35	11.3%
55-64 years	23	7.4%
65+ years	8	2.6%

HOUSEHOLD INCOME

35% UNDER \$15,000

Under \$15,000	110	35.4%
Between \$15,000 and \$29,999	82	26.4%
Between \$30,000 and \$49,999	49	15.8%
Between \$50,000 and \$74,999	34	10.9%
Between \$75,000 and \$99,999	6	1.9%
Between \$100,000 and \$150,000	5	1.6%
Over \$150,000	3	1.0%
Prefer not to answer	22	7.1%

LANGUAGE

97% ENGLISH SPEAKERS

English	300	96.5%
Spanish	31	10.0%
Other (please describe)	11	3.5%
- Creole		
- Haitian Creole		
- Gijwe		
- French/Creole		
- Afrikaans		
Mandarin	3	1.0%
Farsi	2	0.6%
Prefer not to answer	1	0.3%

TRANSPORTATION

55% PERSONAL CAR

Personal Car	172	55.3%
Public Transit – Bus	50	16.1%
Uber/Lyft/Taxi	29	9.3%
Shared Car	23	7.4%
Walking	15	4.8%
Public Transit – Train	8	2.6%
Prefer not to answer	8	2.6%
Bicycle or other non-motorized form of transportation	4	1.3%
Other (please describe)	2	0.7%
- Friends and family		
- No license		

HOUSING

38% RENTERS (with units that allow pets)

Renter (and my unit allows pets)	117	37.6%
Living with family/friends	82	26.4%
Homeowner	45	14.5%
Renter (and my unit does not allow pets)	22	7.1%
Temporary Housing hotel/motel	16	5.1%
Prefer not to answer	12	3.9%
Currently Unhoused (tent, car, other)	12	3.9%
Emergency Housing (shelter)	3	1.0%
Other (please describe)	2	0.6%
- Housing programs pay for my rent		
- Homeless		

EDUCATION

40% COMPLETED HIGH SCHOOL

Have not completed high school	30	9.7%
Completed high school/no college	123	39.6%
Some college/associate's degree	105	33.8%
Bachelor's degree	26	8.4%
Greater than bachelor's degree	13	4.2%
Prefer not to answer	14	4.5%

SURRENDER OR RE-HOME

Have you ever had to make the difficult decision to surrender or re-home your pet?

No, I have never had to surrender or re-home a pet	195	62.70%
Yes, I have re-homed a pet to a friend, family, or someone else in my community	73	23.47%
Yes, I have surrendered a pet to a shelter/rescue organization	40	12.86%
Other (please specify)	3	0.96%

