

More pets relinquished to shelters due to housing insecurity

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Housing policies may be becoming more pet inclusive, but housing insecurity is getting worse, finds a new study that examined the housing issues that led to owners turning their pets over to an animal shelter.

"Over the duration of the study, instances of animals entering shelters due to loss of housing rose, while those due to pet restrictions and landlord conflicts declined," said the study's lead author Jennifer Applebaum, Ph.D., an assistant professor in the Department of Environmental and Global Health in the University of Florida College of Public Health and Health Professions who [studies the human-animal bond](#) and the effects of social inequalities on human and companion animal health.

"The proportion of pit bull-type dogs among all breeds that were housing-relinquished declined over time, as did the average weight and age of animals upon intake," Applebaum said. "Taken together, our results suggest that the culture around pet-inclusive housing may be improving while broader [housing insecurity](#) is worsening."

According to the study, which appears in the journal [Frontiers in Veterinary Medicine](#), housing issues represent 14% of intakes to animal shelters.

The study team analyzed 2019–2023 data from Human-Animal Support Services, a nonprofit organization that works to keep pets with their owners through community and animal shelter initiatives. The data included 28,000 housing-related relinquishment records from 21 U.S. shelters Human-Animal Support Services is working with on progressive initiatives.

The study data spans before, during, and after the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic, when a number of factors affected pet adoption and housing, including stay-at-home orders, a federal eviction moratorium, and shelter policy changes to limit in-person contact.

Following an increase in pet adoptions early in the pandemic, recent media reports have described shelter trends of lower pet adoption rates

and increased pet relinquishments.

Additional highlights from the team's findings include:

- Housing-related reasons for relinquishing pets broke down as unspecified (54%), pet-related restrictions (27%), landlord issues (8%), housing loss (5%), and unhoused owners (5%). The large proportion of unspecified housing issues may be attributable to a number of factors, including limitations on staff time, owners not providing detailed information, or variations in data collection across shelters. This is an area for further research, Applebaum said, particularly where enhanced knowledge of the likely multifaceted reasons for relinquishment may lead to actionable policy change.
- Large (average weight 75 pounds) and small (average weight 12 pounds) dogs comprised the highest proportions of housing-related intakes in terms of size and species. "It was previously thought that small dogs were less vulnerable to housing-related restrictions due to common size cut-offs, but this does not appear to be the case in this dataset," Applebaum said.
- Pit bull-type dogs accounted for 12% of shelter intakes related to housing restrictions and 27% related to landlord issues.
- Cats comprised 37% of pets relinquished due to housing issues.
- Ninety-five percent of animals taken to the shelter due to housing issues left the shelter alive with outcomes including adoption (76%), transfer to another [shelter](#) or rescue (12%), return to their owner (3%), foster placement (3%) or return to the wild (1%).
- Euthanasia was more common for dogs than cats. Animals relinquished because the owner was unhoused were more likely

to not have a live outcome.

"Although it's unclear from the data what percentage of owners would have wanted to keep their pet, research suggests that tenants who have to choose between their pet or a place to live face devastating choices and that housing-related relinquishment is one of the most-cited reasons for needing to give up a pet," Applebaum said.

"Since we know most pet owners consider their pets family, this may indicate that more people want to reunite with their pets than were able to in this study."

The study findings reiterate the importance of efforts to remove breed, weight, and size restrictions in rental housing policies, said Applebaum, whose previous research on pet fees in Texas rental housing has been cited in legislative bills in several states to introduce pet-friendly housing policies.

Policymakers should also address the affordability and arbitrary nature of some existing rental pet policies, Applebaum said. Cat owners, for example, may be subject to pet fees that subsidize amenities like housing unit dog parks and pet washing as well as waste stations they are unlikely to use.

"The issues we discuss in this paper are systemic; that is, they are not an isolated or one-off problem," Applebaum said. "We need better housing policy that is more inclusive, less discriminatory and more accessible."

More information: Jennifer W. Applebaum et al, Housing-related companion animal relinquishment across 21 animal shelters in the United States from 2019–2023, *Frontiers in Veterinary Science* (2024). [DOI: 10.3389/fvets.2024.1430388](https://doi.org/10.3389/fvets.2024.1430388)

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