

Literature review: Housing

Key findings

Given our commitment to data-informed decision-making and connections to thousands of shelters across the country, it's hardly surprising that this deep dive into the "housing issues" literature mostly confirmed what we already know. Nevertheless, it's useful to compile and examine the available evidence, as this should increase our level of confidence in future work (e.g., advocating for more pet-inclusive housing). Below, in no particular order, are the key findings that emerged from this literature review.

1. The latest data suggests that "housing issues" (admittedly, a broad category) are the most common reason owners surrender their dogs, and the second most common reason owners surrender their cats.¹ This general pattern has been observed for nearly 30 years now.^{2,3}
2. Obviously, housing issues can't be cleanly separated from economic issues. Various economic pressures (e.g., pandemic-related job losses, inflation) increase the likelihood that pet owners will need to relinquish their animals. These pressures are, not surprisingly, felt most acutely by those with fewer resources to begin with (as noted below). On the other hand, our analysis of 24PetWatch data from 2009 suggests that the 2008 housing collapse had little effect on the "housing issues" share of owner-surrendered pets.¹
3. Research studies have highlighted the many challenges faced by pet owners who rent (e.g., lack of pet-inclusive housing, pet deposits and fees). A recent report⁴ noted that 72% of pet owners have had difficulties finding pet-inclusive rental housing, only a modest improvement over the 82% reported nearly 20 years earlier.⁵ And pet fees and limited rental options have a disproportionate effect on pet owners in historically marginalized communities.^{6,7}

How this relates to our work

Best Friends is among the many organizations calling for more pet-inclusive housing, including the Michelson Found Animals Foundation and the Human Animal Bond Research Institute, via their collaborative Pet-Inclusive Housing Initiative,⁴ HSUS,⁸ and Catholic Charities.⁹ We generally support legislation that would expand pet-inclusive public housing options, such as the bills already passed in several states (e.g., Illinois,¹⁰ California,¹¹) and those being proposed in others (e.g., Maine,¹² Florida¹³).

Background

The focus of this literature review is on how various housing issues might affect shelter lifesaving. A conceptual framework (Fig. 1) illustrates key factors and suggests related research questions. The *policy* category, for example, includes both public and private components, each of which suggests its own set of research questions (e.g., regarding breed-specific legislation and pet fees for rental properties).

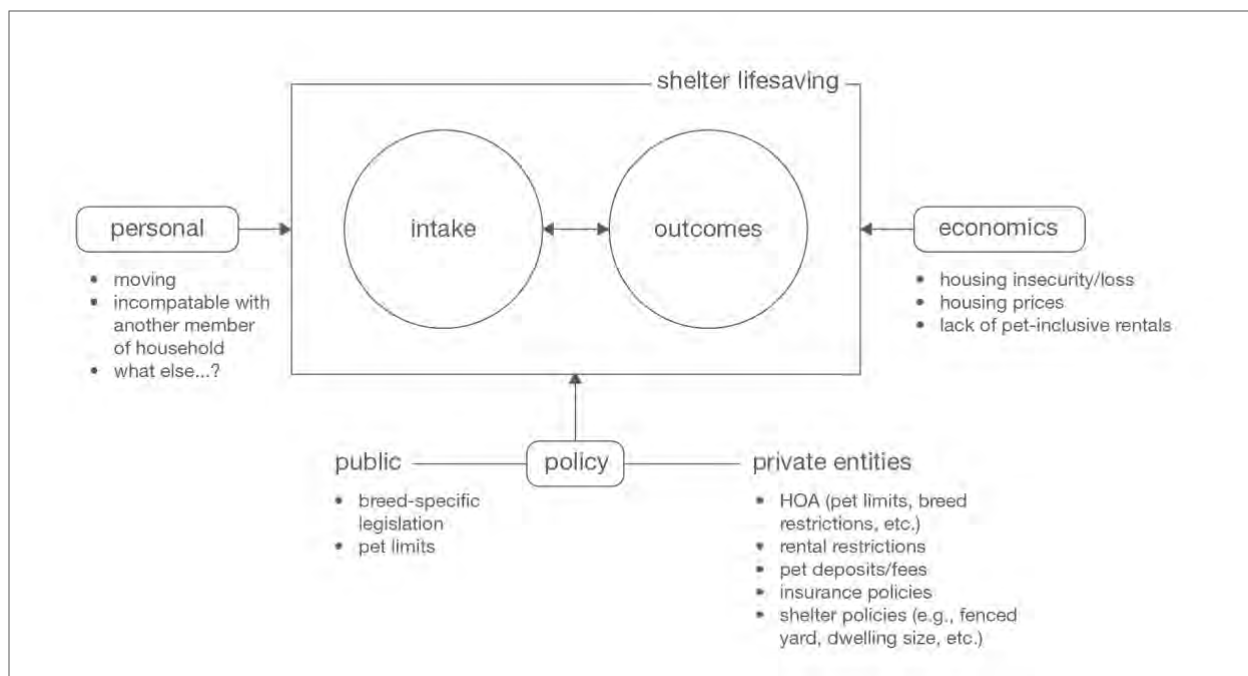


Figure 1. Conceptual framework for housing literature review.

It's impossible for a literature review to be truly comprehensive—there's always another article or report that could be included. However, the search for additional materials will tend to reach a point of diminishing returns. In addition, the scope of the review is determined to some extent by deadlines. In our case, there's an obvious urgency: insights gained from a review of relevant literature have the potential to improve lifesaving. For this reason, the goal here is to be "just comprehensive enough."

"Housing issues"

Since at least the mid-1980s, researchers have examined the reasons people surrender their pets. A 2014 review of 84 published studies investigating the underlying reasons found that 45 of the articles (53.6%) examined "moving, rental, or housing issues," second only to "aggressive companion-animal behaviors" at 58.3%.¹⁴ Making apples-to-apples comparisons is difficult in part because different studies typically use different categories for analysis. In a study from the mid-1980s,² for example, researchers found that "lifestyle changes, including moving and divorce, accounted for approximately 27% of relinquishment, while behavioral problems accounted for 26.4% of dogs surrendered."¹⁵ Adding to the difficulty of direct comparisons is the fact that some surveys allow respondents to list more than one reason for relinquishment.³

In perhaps the first large-scale study of its kind, conducted during 1995–1996, researchers from the National Council on Pet Population Study and Policy used data gathered from interviews with 3,772 owners across 12 U.S. shelters (who had relinquished a total of 3,676 dogs and 1,409 cats) to better understand the reasons people relinquish their pets. They found that "human housing issues" accounted for 29.1% of owner-surrendered dogs (#1 reason) and 26.5% of owner-surrendered cats (#2 reason).³

In 2012, the American Humane Association reported similar findings: 29% of people who gave up their dogs, and 21% of those who gave up their cats, did so because their landlord or place of residence would not allow the animals.¹⁶ However, our analysis of 24PetWatch data suggests that during the period Mar–Sep 2009 ($n = 233,359$), housing accounted for just 14.1% of owner-surrendered pets, less than half the rate reported by the AHA.¹ (Again, one reason for the apparent discrepancy could be different classifications.) The 2021 Pet-Inclusive Housing Report, a joint effort of the Michelson Found Animals Foundation and the Human Animal Bond Research Institute, presents very similar findings: "14% of pet owners have surrendered their pet as a result of their housing situation."⁴ In any case, the more recent findings agree with those from other studies in terms of rankings, suggesting that housing issues continue

to be a leading cause of pet relinquishment. Aggregating 24PetWatch data from the period Jan 2018–Sep 2020 ($n = 1,092,416$) reveals a similar rate overall, with housing accounting for 13.7% of owner-surrendered pets.*

A deeper dive: emerging research questions

A secondary benefit of literature reviews are the research questions that emerge from a better understanding of the evidence. These may or may not be directly related to the topic at hand (and may or may not be of sufficient urgency to warrant investigation). Among the questions revealed over the course of the present literature review are the following (listed in no particular order).

1. Pet-related rental restrictions are most likely to affect owners of large dogs. To what extent might housing insecurity (in the broadest sense) be contributing to our current “big dog” crisis?
2. A 2021 study provided compelling evidence that relinquished pets are moving from less affluent communities (often communities of color) to more affluent (and less diverse) communities.¹⁷ Are they also moving from rental properties to owned properties? And which animals are making this move? Are small dogs quickly adopted “uptown,” for example, while larger dogs languish in the shelter, to be either adopted into their community of origin or euthanized? (It’s possible that data collected as part of the 2021 study holds some important clues.)

What the research tells us: Housing economics

Unprecedented increases in rents, a lack of pet-inclusive rental properties—along with higher prices across the board, due to inflation—are making it increasingly difficult for pet-owning renters to keep their pets. This is especially true for less affluent pet owners and those in historically marginalized communities. The following is a snapshot of some of the relevant research.

- Data compiled by the U.S. Census Bureau shows that roughly one third of Americans are renters.¹⁸ And according to the AVMA, 39% of renters own dogs and 29% own cats.¹⁹
- A January 2022 *Washington Post* story reported that rents across the country rose 14% over the previous year, with some cities seeing increases of 35% (Newark, New York) or even 40% (Austin).²⁰ In September 2022, Reuters reported a lower figure: 10%.²¹ Regardless of which is more accurate (and it’s possible that they’re both accurate, but perhaps represent different time frames), both figures are far higher than the more typical increase in median household rent (documented via the U.S. Census Bureau’s annual American Community Survey) of 2–3%, or even the 5% increase observed between 2018 and 2019. And professionally managed units saw even greater increases.²¹
- A 2021 report from Pew Research highlights the increasing pressures being placed on renters. For example, “of the nearly 44.1 million renter households in 2019, more than 45% paid rent equal to 30% or more of their gross household income (30% being a common rule of thumb for how much of a person’s gross income should be spent on housing).”²² Although the rate was lower than in 2013, when “nearly half (49.7%) of renter households were paying 30% or more in rent,” the fact that more than four of every 10 renter households pay 30% or more of their income in rent illustrates how widespread this issue is. And, as Pew points out, the pressure is distributed unequally: “Nationwide, about 58% of households headed by Black or African American adults rent their homes, as do nearly 52% of Hispanic- or Latino-led households... By contrast, roughly a quarter of households led by non-Hispanic White adults (27.9%) are rentals, as are just under 40% of Asian-led households.”²²
- Economic pressures are almost certainly exacerbated by the limited supply of pet-inclusive rentals. The 2021 MFA/HABRI report notes that nearly three quarters (72%) of survey respondents reported

*One question raised by these results: *If the most common reason cited for owner relinquishment makes up less than 15% of the overall pool of possible reasons, how many reasons were included in the pool?* Perhaps the answer lies in the approach taken by a previous study in which 71 discrete reasons for relinquishment were “condensed into 12 broad classes.” “Housing issues” included “landlord,” “moving,” “inadequate facilities,” “parent won’t allow,” “inadequate fencing,” and “zoning regulations.”³

that “pet-friendly housing is hard to find.”⁴ Adding to all of this are the challenges associated with pet deposits and/or pet fees that disproportionately affect less affluent residents and historically marginalized communities (as noted in the **Housing policies** section).

- A Forbes Advisor survey of 2,000 dog and cat owners, conducted in late 2022, found that 3% of respondents had given up their pets during the previous year, with many respondents citing various components of housing economics (e.g., rising rent, a lack of pet-inclusive rentals, and pet fees) as the reason.²³ Nearly half of respondents (42%) reported that a vet bill of \$999 would cause them to go into debt. Although this aspect of the survey does not consider housing directly, one can easily imagine the implications: *If a relatively modest vet bill causes you to go into debt, how secure is your housing situation?*
- Researchers comparing the locations of home foreclosures and of owner-surrendered dogs in Turlock, CA, “an area that led the nation in foreclosures” in 2008 as a result of the housing crisis, found that, although the foreclosure and owner-surrender datasets had only one address in common (i.e., a dog surrendered to the shelter came from a home that had been foreclosed on), the data revealed a more general relationship between foreclosure hotspots and owner-surrender hotspots in the city of Turlock.²⁴ This might suggest that many of the of the relinquishments were from people renting in the area (and therefore not subject to foreclosure, per se).

What the research tells us: Housing policies

Housing policies can take the form of public policy (e.g., breed-specific legislation, or BSL, local pet limits) or policies established by private entities (e.g., breed or size restrictions for rental properties or insurance policyholders). Such policies can negatively affect shelter lifesaving in two ways: (1) by increasing the likelihood of owners relinquishing their pets, and (2) limiting the pool of potential adopters. Unfortunately, there seems to be no research examining the impact of easing/removing restrictive policies on owner surrenders or adoptions (e.g., any measurable change in owner-surrendered pit bulls following the repeal of BSL at the local level). There is, however, a considerable body of research into the impact of restrictive housing policies on owner relinquishment rates. The following is a snapshot of some of the relevant research.

- In 2002, a researcher interviewed “57 caregivers who relinquished animal companions to a shelter in the midwestern United States,” finding that 24 of them (42.1%) “cited landlord conditions (no pets, size/weight limits, pet deposit).”²⁵ At least some of the responses provided suggest that perhaps these people acquired their pet(s) despite restrictions *already in place* (e.g., “In most of these cases ($n = 14$), pets were forbidden in the apartment complex, apartment, or house.”).
- A 2012 American Humane Association survey found that, of those respondents who’d given up their animals, “the most common reason cited was that the landlord or place of residence did not allow dogs or cats. This was true for 29% of dog owners and 21% of cat owners.”¹⁶ Interestingly, although this survey inquired about barriers to pet acquisition, housing issues were not included among the top reasons (cost, lifestyle, cleanup, and “grief over the loss of a beloved pet”).
- The MFA/HABRI report notes that “14% of pet owners have surrendered their pet as a result of their housing situation.” Among the reasons cited are several referring to policies put in place by the property owner/manager: “afraid of being evicted (22%), pet violated building rules (18%), pet got too big and no longer fit within restrictions (10%), got another pet that did not fall within restrictions (7%).”⁴
- A 2003 survey of landlords across 14 U.S. cities found that “Only 9% of housing allowed companion animals without any significant limitations on size or type. Cats were allowed in 52.6% of rental housing, making cats the easiest type of animal to obtain housing for. Large dogs were the most difficult, with only 11% of housing allowing these animals.”⁵

- The MFA/HABRI report provides a list of reasons typically cited by property owners and managers for pet-related restrictions. These include potential property damage, risks to people, pets, and property presumed to be associated with “larger animals and certain pet breeds,” “the desire to uphold a positive reputation of their residential communities,” and “the responsibility to sustain the health and safety of the entire rental housing community.”⁴
- A recent study of “pet-friendly’ rental housing” across Texas’ 20 most populous cities found that “less expensive pet-friendly listings were more likely to have pet fees charged on top of rent than [were] rental units that were more expensive.”⁶ These researchers also examined “pet fee burden” (defined as the ratio of pet fee to median household income for a given census tract), finding that “low-income communities and communities of color were more likely than higher income and predominantly White communities to pay disproportionately higher fees to keep pets in their homes.”⁶
- A study using “266 rental listings from Craigslist and Zillow over a two-week period in Forsyth County, North Carolina” found that racial disparities in the availability of pet-inclusive housing were even greater than class disparities. “Even lower-income predominately White neighborhoods in our sample,” explained the researchers, “featured clusters of pet-friendly rental properties” while this was not the case in predominately Black neighborhoods.⁷ “For neighborhoods with African Americans as the largest group, only 48.1% of rental listings in the sample allowed at least one dog, and only 46.8% of rental listings allowed at least one cat. Conversely, the majority of properties in predominantly White neighborhoods allowed dogs (76.4%) and cats (72.4%).”⁷
- Similar to the study cited above, a smaller study of pet-restrictive apartment rentals in Los Angeles found that “landlord-imposed pet restrictions disproportionately impact two groups: low-income renters and renters with socially-maligned breeds of dogs.”²⁶ In addition, others have argued that, despite the “mixed picture regarding the effect of pets on human health and well-being,”²⁷ the stresses associated with the fear of having to relinquish one’s pet—especially among those with relatively few resources—“may cause feelings of stress and powerlessness in ways that can negatively impact their health.”²⁸
- The MFA/HABRI report notes, “Those looking for housing prioritize pet friendliness over other amenities and those already in pet-friendly housing stay an average of 21% longer.”⁴ More impressive findings were reported in a study published in 2005. Using data obtained by landlords, the authors found that pet owners were found to stay 53% longer than tenants in units where pets were prohibited (23 months, on average, compared to 15 months). Data obtained by tenants (which the authors argue was probably more reliable) showed an increase of 156% (46 months, on average, compared to 18 months).⁵ The authors point out that tenants keeping pets in violation of policies prohibiting pets generally stayed no longer than those who had no pets. In other words, longer stays among pet owners were observed only when owners rented properties allowing pets.

What the research tells us: Personal housing situations

Although moving as a reason for relinquishing pets is sometimes included with other “housing issues,” as noted above, is has also been the focus of some research. The following is a snapshot of some of the relevant research.

- Results of the mid-1990s survey from the National Council on Pet Population Study and Policy show moving to be the most common reason owners surrender their dogs, accounting for 7% of the total, and the second most common reason owners surrender their cats, accounting for 8% of the total.³
- Another study, in which a researcher interviewed 67 people who had relinquished their pets, found that 57 of them (85.1%) cited moving as a reason, with 40 of them (70.1%) citing no additional reason(s).²⁵ It’s important to put this into perspective, however: only 98 people (4.4% of admissions during the 3-month data collection period) “cited moving as the reason for relinquishing canines or felines to the shelter.”²⁵

- Still another study (for which even the abstract is unavailable online)²⁹ found “moving to be the main reason for relinquishment of cats and the third most common reason for relinquishment of dogs” among 130 people who surrendered their pets.²⁵
- Based on “over 300 hours of ethnographic research at a humane society” where they volunteered, one researcher found moving to be the most common reason cited for relinquishing a pet.³⁰ They also found that the reasons given for relinquishing a pet are often complicated (more than an intake form often allows) and the reason(s) provided might not reveal important contributing factors (e.g., a cat being relinquished because the owner was moving was also waking them up early and shedding). In some cases, moving was simply the last straw—and as a result, the owners had done little to seek out pet-inclusive options. This stands in stark contrast to the findings of the previously mentioned study in which 67 pet owners were interviewed. Not only did 40 of these owners (70.1%) cite no additional reason(s) for relinquishment beyond moving, but the research team “encountered few who seemed callous or thoughtless and a number who genuinely grieved their action or missed their pets.”²⁵
- A more recent study examining the reasons for cats being returned to a shelter within four years of adoption found that housing issues were responsible for just 7.44% of cats returned (the primary reason being behavior).³¹ Although these results are obviously not directly comparable to the others cited here (since the sample was limited to cats adopted from, and subsequently returned to, the same shelter), it might be an interesting point of reference.

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