



2021 ANIMAL SHELTER STATISTICS

With three-year pandemic-era comparisons





INTRODUCTION

Humane Canada, the federation of SPCAs and humane societies, brings together the largest community of animal welfare organizations in Canada, including 42 humane societies and SPCAs that operate animal shelters. These organizations take on the role of facilitating the return of lost companion animals to their homes and caring for and rehoming unwanted animals. In addition, they may offer veterinary services to members of their community, including spay-neuter services, and often serve as the first point of contact for the public seeking expertise or expressing concerns. Increasingly, humane societies and SPCAs raise awareness and provide public education regarding animal welfare issues broadly. Their engagement with and support of community members is becoming more and more vital to providing the best outcomes for companion animals and their families as well as promoting the human-animal bond.

This report presents the results of Humane Canada's national animal shelter survey for 2021, comparing statistics to past years to illustrate the trends in companion animal issues in Canada. In particular, we have included three-year comparisons to explore the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on shelters as well as on the animals and families they support.

Humane Canada has been collecting data about shelter animals from humane societies and SPCAs across the country for three decades. Since there are no compiled statistics elsewhere that include data from all animal shelters in Canada, this collection provides the best available picture of the trends in Canada.

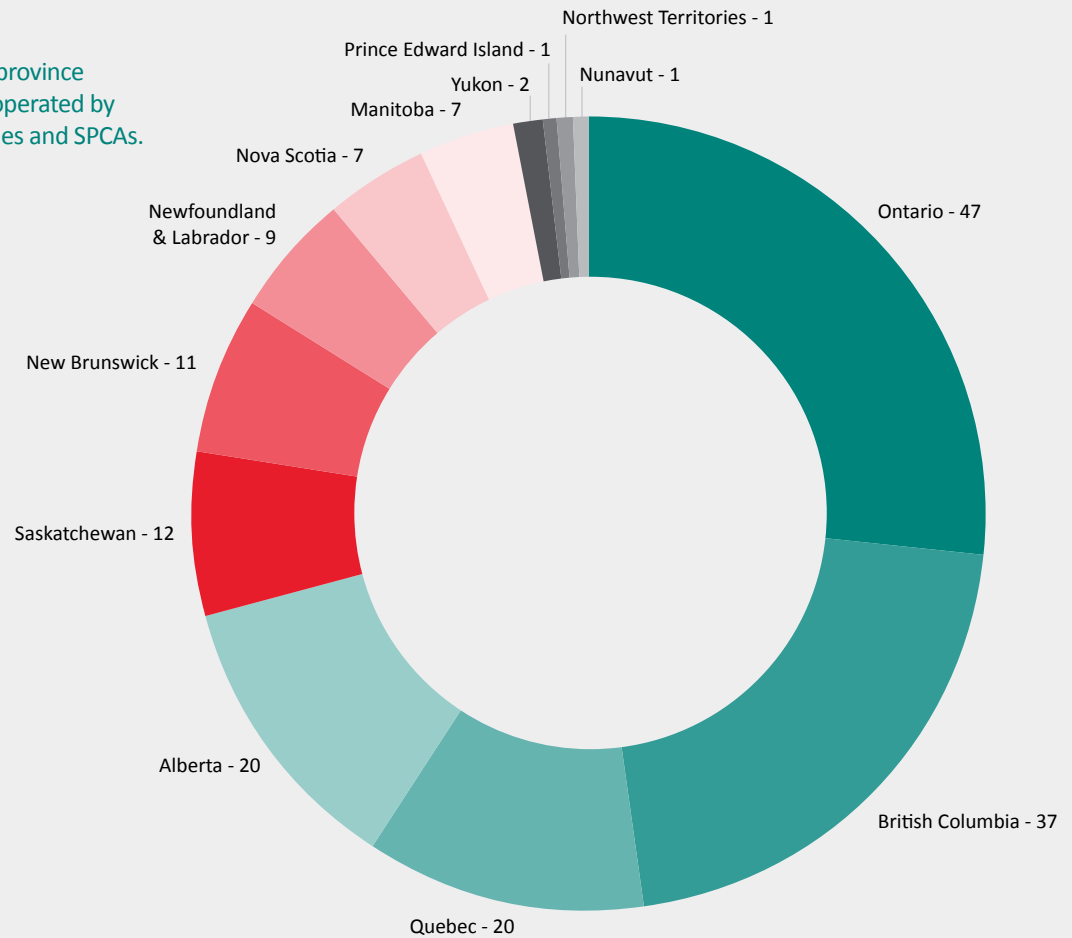
Figure 1. Distribution by province and territory of shelters operated by Canadian humane societies and SPCAs.

Total number of humane society and SPCA shelters in Canada:

175

Number of survey respondents in 2021:

92



THE DATA SET

To collect the 2021 data, Humane Canada conducted a survey between April and July 2022. Requests to complete the survey were sent to all Canadian humane societies and SPCAs, which collectively operate 175 animal shelters (Figure 1). At least one organization in each province and two territories responded. Data was received for 92 locations. The survey had a slightly higher response rate than in previous years, with data being received for 53% of Humane Society or SPCA-operated shelters in Canada (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Total number of dogs and cats taken in by responding shelters in the last three years.

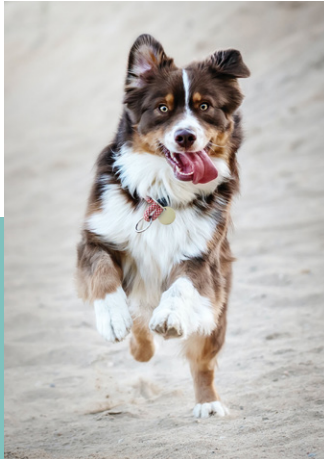
Year	Response rate	Dogs taken in	Dog outcomes	Cats taken in	Cat outcomes
2021	53%	20 974	20 705	60 677	60 096
2020	48%	20 239	20 809	58 793	60 580
2019	48%	27 945	23 999	78 462	62 548



In this report we have included specific comparisons of the annual data collected over the last three years. It is important to note that there was some variation in the shelters that responded to the 2019, 2020 and 2021 surveys. Three quarters of respondents submitted data in all three years.

Throughout the report, the term “shelter” is used to refer to humane societies and SPCAs operating facilities for transitional housing of homeless animals. While the term may more generally encompass other establishments that also shelter homeless animals, such as private shelters, rescue and foster groups, as well as municipal animal shelters, these establishments were not included in the Humane Canada survey. Therefore, the data represents only a fraction of homeless companion animals in Canada. That said, the animal data from humane societies and SPCAs tends to mirror data from a broader segment of animal organizations supporting homeless animals, indicating that Humane Canada’s annual statistics are a good barometer of the state of the sheltering system across Canada.



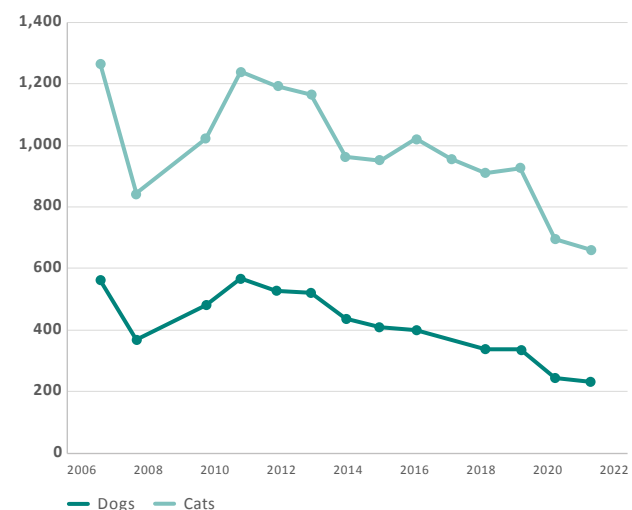


KEY TRENDS REGARDING INTAKE

In 2021, Canadian shelters took in more than 60,000 cats and 21,000 dogs. In addition, reporting organizations admitted into care almost 13,000 animals of other species, including domestic companion animals, exotic animals and wildlife. The remainder of the report will describe the results for cats and dogs, for which data is most consistent across organizations.

To address the different number of organizations that have responded to the survey over the years, we compare the average number of animals taken in per facility from year to year (Figure 3). Shelter intake of cats and dogs has been trending downward for the last ten years. The average number of cats and dogs taken in per shelter was once again at the lowest level ever reported, as was also the case in 2020. It is interesting to note that even as pandemic restrictions lifted through 2021, shelters continued to take in fewer animals, suggesting that practices to keep animals outside of shelter facilities were being maintained. Such practices include favouring foster homes to keep animals out of a central shelter facility, empowering community members to directly reunite stray animals with their families, and supporting families to find solutions to care for and prevent relinquishment of their companion animals.

Figure 3. Average intake per reporting organization.

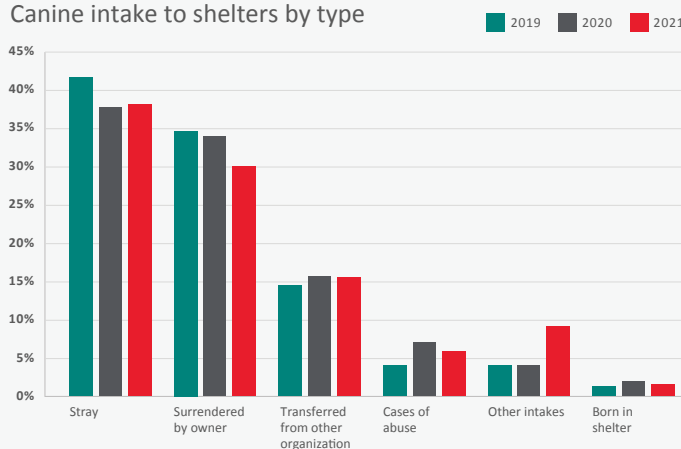




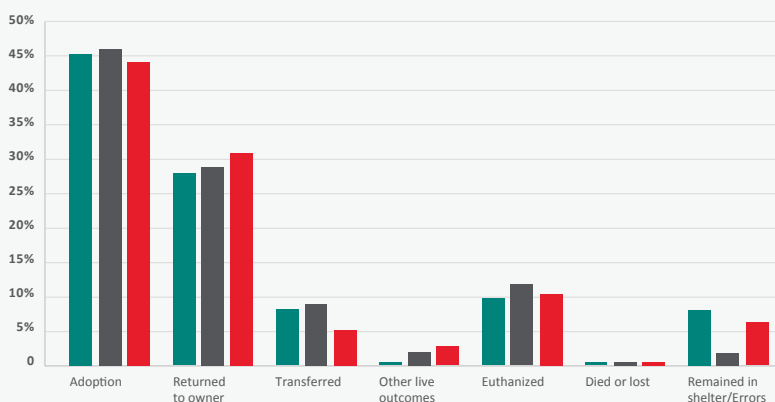
Animals enter shelters through various sources. Figure 4 shows these sources as a percentage of total intake. The relative proportion of the major intake categories has been consistent over the years. A focus on the fine differences across the last three years shows that intakes of cats and dogs in 2021 were similar or slightly lower than in 2020, with the exception of the “Other Intakes” category. Many animals included by responding shelters under “Other Intakes” and “Other Live Outcomes” are owned animals benefiting from services such as emergency boarding and low-cost veterinary services. Some shelters also include in this category free-roaming cats who are trapped, neutered, provided with medical care and returned to their managed colonies (TNR). Therefore, an increase in the “Other Intakes” and “Other Live Outcomes” categories indicates more support in 2021 for owned animals and their families and for community cats, rather than homeless animals definitively admitted to the shelter.

Figure 4. Intake and Outcomes in 2019, 2020 and 2021.

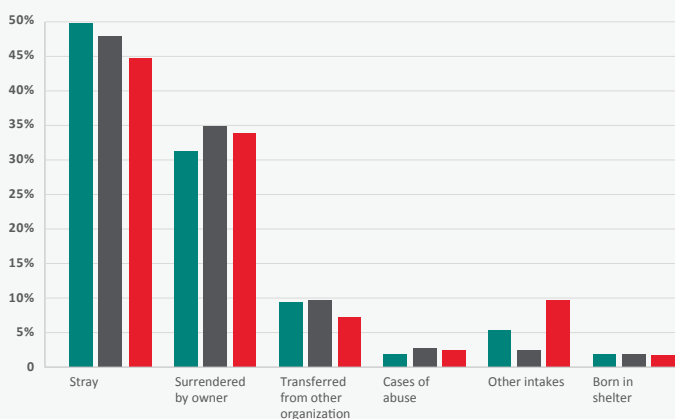
Canine intake to shelters by type



Canine outcome by type



Feline intake to shelters by type



Feline outcome by type

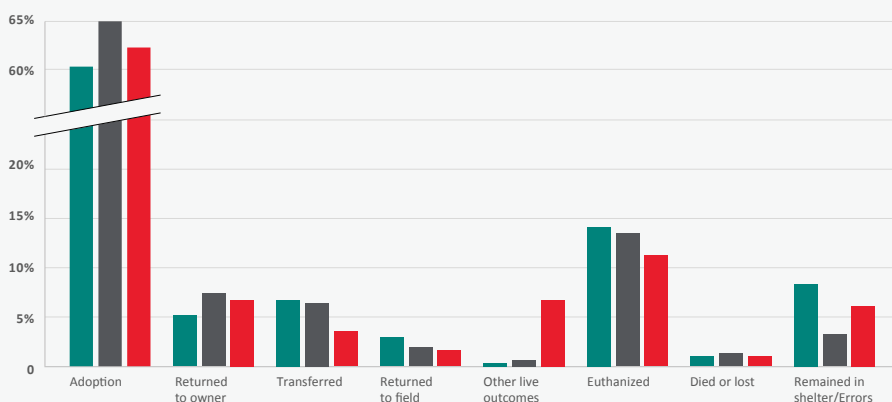
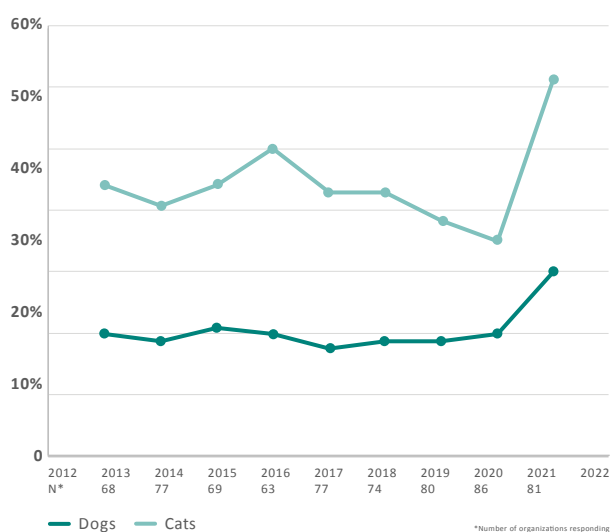


Figure 5 shows the proportion of cats and dogs taken in to shelters who were juvenile for the years 2013 to 2021. Over this period, more organizations have been reporting this data. There was a marked increase in the juvenile proportion, from 17% in 2020 to 26% in 2021 for canines, and from 30% in 2020 to 53% in 2021 for felines. To reiterate, *more than half of felines taken in to responding shelters in 2021 were juvenile*. A detailed look within each intake category reveals that this high representation of juveniles is particularly in the owner-relinquished and transfer categories for both cats and dogs, as well as in the stray category for cats. The increase in juveniles admitted to shelters may be because some community spay/neuter programs could not operate in 2020 due to pandemic restrictions, resulting in more reproduction, particularly amongst free-roaming cats. As well, perhaps owners had greater challenges in caring for puppies and kittens in 2021, for example, due to economic challenges or no longer having time at home in lockdown.

An increasing number of organizations have been able to report how many dogs and cats were surrendered due to their owners not being able to afford veterinary care, with almost three quarters of respondents providing this data for 2021. Animals whose owners cited not being able to afford medical care made up more than 15% of owner-relinquished animals at reporting shelters. *This demonstrates that a significant fraction of families are surrendering their animals due to economic reasons, and more support in this area is needed to keep families together.* Some responding organizations noted that they were not able to accept all animals, though they received many inquiries about this issue. Three organizations operate financial assistance programs that include emergency funding to support pet owners being able keep and provide veterinary care for their animals. One large urban shelter stated that *half of the owner-surrendered dogs and cats were relinquished because their owners were not able to afford veterinary care!*



Figure 5. Percentage of animals taken in who were juvenile.



OUTCOMES

The different categories of outcomes for cats and dogs relative to the total shelter population are presented in Figure 4. As with the intake categories, the relative proportions remain similar to what has been observed in recent years, apart from “Other Live Outcomes”. As noted above in the section on Intakes, the proportional increase of “Other Intakes” and “Other Live Outcomes” in 2021 may indicate more support being offered for owned animals and their families, as well as community cats.

Adoption

Adoption is the largest category of outcome, with 44% of admitted dogs and 62% of admitted cats having been placed in a new home in 2021. This is similar to the proportion reported in previous years (Figure 6), though slightly lower than the historic high seen in 2020.

Reclaimed by Owner

The percent of stray animals reclaimed remained high in 2021 and, for dogs, was the highest ever recorded, at 85%. The reclaim rate for felines was second only to what was observed in 2020, with 16% of stray cats being reclaimed in 2021 (Figure 7).

Return to Field

As a component of managing feline intake, many shelters apply the best practice of allowing healthy, unidentified outdoor cats to be returned to their home location if they are thriving, rather than admitting them for long stretches to a shelter that risks becoming overcrowded and unhealthy for the entire population in care. These organizations implement programs to sterilize and provide any needed medical care to such cats brought to them and then “return them to the field”. Fewer cats were returned to the field in 2021 than in either of the previous two years (Figure 4), which may be due to the decrease in services that could be offered during the pandemic for community cats who are not in managed colonies and possibly an impact of the veterinary shortage being experienced.



Figure 6. Percent adopted relative to total intake.

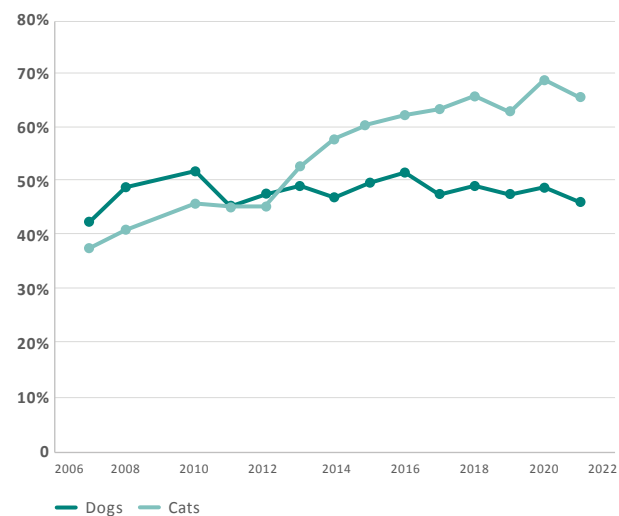
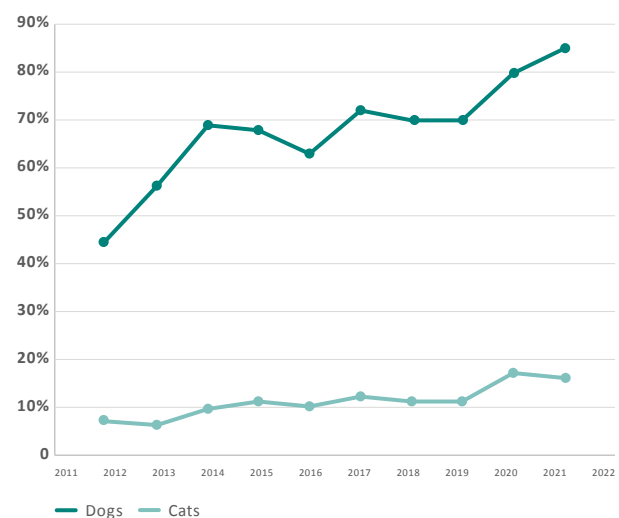


Figure 7. Percent stray who were reclaimed.





Euthanasia

The proportion of dogs and cats taken in who were euthanized is at a historic low. Indeed, the euthanasia rate for cats in 2021 was the lowest ever reported by Humane Canada, at 11%. This is almost the same euthanasia rate as for dogs, which was at 10% in 2021 (Figure 8).

Shelter capacity in use

The percent of a shelter's capacity in use, that is to say occupied by animals in the organization's care, is a key indicator of how swiftly animals can flow through the shelter and move into new homes. When a shelter is under-capacity, its effectiveness in saving the lives of homeless animals is improved. The median reported percent of shelter capacity in use in 2021 was 50% (Figure 9). This is somewhat of a rebound from an all-time low of 37% in 2020 during the midst of pandemic restrictions, when shelters were emptied. Shelter capacity in 2021 nevertheless remained lower than pre-pandemic levels in 2019. A number of organizations noted in their comments that they were under-capacity through 2021, with most of the animals in foster care. In 2022, a surge in shelter capacity was reported by shelters across the country, in particular due to supporting dogs who needed to remain in care longer to address serious behavioural and medical issues.^{1,2}

Figure 8. Percent euthanized relative to total intake.

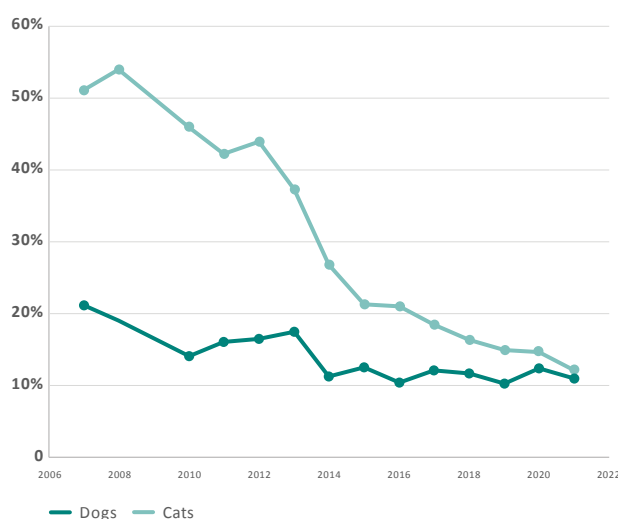
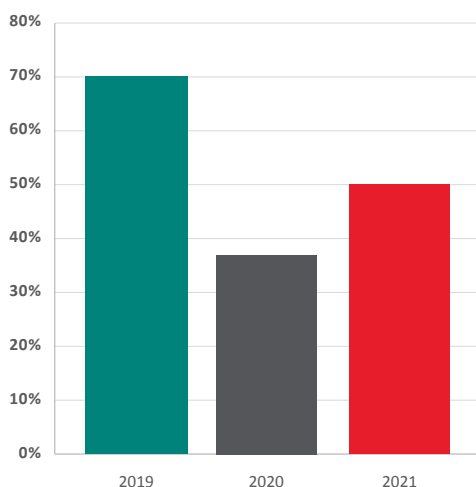


Figure 9. Median percent shelter capacity in use.



- 1 (2022, July 20) Animals [sic] shelters across Canada see a surge in pet surrenders. Global News. <https://globalnews.ca/video/9003426/animals-shelters-across-canada-see-a-surge-in-pet-surrenders>
- 2 Lavery, I (2022, November 13) A 'perfect storm' has more Canadians surrendering pets. Here's how to help. Global News. <https://globalnews.ca/news/9275196/surrendered-pets-canada>



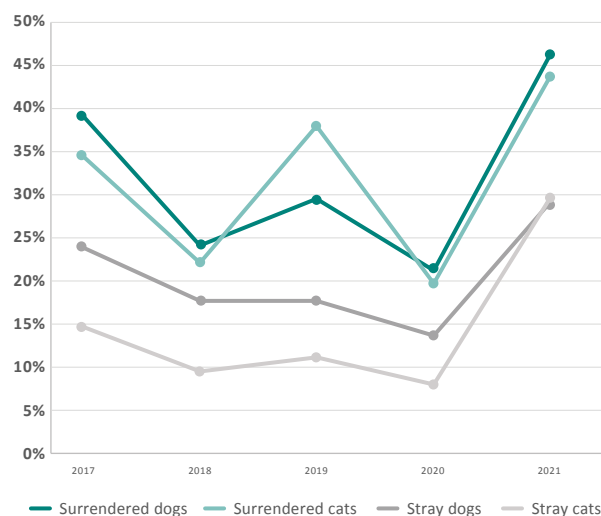
Transfers

In order to increase the likelihood of adoption and reduce the time animals spend in care, many humane society and SPCA shelters transfer animals to other facilities or partnering organizations in areas where there is higher demand for a certain breed or species. While transfers in to shelters remained relatively stable for dogs and fell slightly for cats, for both species, transfers out from humane society and SPCA facilities decreased (Figure 4). This may be because shelters were not at capacity in 2021 and needed to rely less on partnering organizations to help rehome animals.

Animals remaining in the shelter

In 2020, fewer animals remained in the shelter than in 2019, as pandemic restrictions to reduce human-to-human contact required moving animals from facilities to foster homes and fewer animals came in. While intake didn't increase significantly, more animals remained in the shelter in 2021 (Figure 4), consistent with shelters reporting that dogs and cats in their care needed more medical and behavioural attention prior to being able to be rehomed.

Figure 10. Dogs and cats already sterilized at the time of intake.





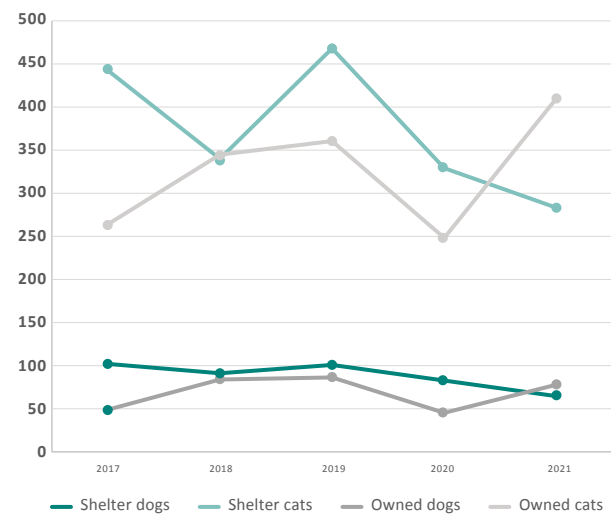
Spay/Neuter

More than two thirds of responding organizations are typically able to report the number of animals who have already been sterilized at the time they are taken into the shelter. Interestingly, in 2021 shelters admitted a large percentage of cats and dogs who were already spayed or neutered at the time of their intake: almost a third of cats and dogs who came in as strays and almost half of those surrendered by their owners (Figure 10). These are the highest rates yet reported.

It is unclear how these observations relate to the high juvenile intake at shelters described above. It is possible some litters were produced prior to animals being sterilized or that the demand for puppies and kittens decreased in 2021, subsequent to the spike in the early days of the pandemic. As well, there may have been fewer spay and neuter surgeries taking place in 2020, with delays in these procedures due to pandemic closures and longer wait times for vet appointments.

The average number of sterilizations of animals in care performed per facility was lower in 2020 and 2021, compared to pre-pandemic levels, presumably because of the smaller number of animals in shelter during this time (Figure 11). With regard to spay and neuter procedures by humane societies and SPCAs for owned animals, which is a community service offered by many organizations to reduce the risk of unwanted litters, the average number performed per shelter rebounded in 2021, after a decline the previous year when pandemic restrictions were in place.

Figure 11. Average number of sterilizations performed per organization.



CONCLUSION

The results of Humane Canada's shelter survey for 2021 and a comparison to those from previous years have some revealed interesting observations and trends:

- Sadly, there was a significant increase in 2021 of young animals being admitted to shelters, with over half of all felines taken in as juveniles.
- On average, 15% of owner-relinquished animals were surrendered due to their owners not being able to afford veterinary care. One large urban shelter reported that half of owners cited the cost of veterinary cost as the reason for relinquishing their pets.
- The number of animals taken in to shelters in 2021 is comparable to the historically low levels seen in 2020. Shelters may be supporting more owned animals and their families, as well as community cats in managed colonies.
- Favourable trends continued in 2021, with historic high rates of adoption, historic low rates of euthanasia, and historic high rates of stray animals being returned to their owners. The improvement in live outcomes, particularly for cats, is likely because reduced intake and lower in-shelter population during the pandemic meant organizations were not struggling with being overcapacity in 2021. Median capacity in use was reported at 50% in 2021. Though higher than the value in 2020, it appears to be a beneficial level for optimizing care.

More animals remained in the shelter than in previous years, a fact that is likely explained by comments from individual shelters that a greater number of younger animals were surrendered with behavioural and medical issues.

In addition to the picture painted by the numbers and trends over recent years, individual respondents shared comments about the significant impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on their shelter in 2021. These included notes about:

- an increase in the number of owner-surrenders due to economic challenges and the cost of veterinary care;
- an increase in relinquishment as a result of changes in housing and challenges being able to find pet-friendly accommodations;
- more people fleeing violent situations required support services;
- a higher case load for animal protection officers.

While these are some of the challenges animal welfare organizations must contend with in the post-pandemic world, the bright side is that organizations who sought new ways to support their communities during early days of the pandemic in 2020 appear to be maintaining these approaches. The innovative community-centred animal services model emphasizes keeping human and non-human family members together and promoting the human-animal bond. It has the potential to radically improve outcomes and more holistically support humans and animals in potentially vulnerable situations. As 2022 has shown signs of increased challenges for animal care organizations, now more than ever is the time to adopt these and other innovative approaches. To learn more, please see [Humane Canada's Community-Supported Animal Sheltering Policy Platform](https://humanecanada.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Community-Supported-Sheltering-Policy-Platform-FINAL.pdf).³

³ Humane Canada (2020) Community-Supported Animal Sheltering Policy Platform
<https://humanecanada.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Community-Supported-Sheltering-Policy-Platform-FINAL.pdf>

ABOUT HUMANE CANADA

Humane Canada is the national federation of SPCAs and humane societies. As Canada's voice for animal welfare, we drive positive, progressive change to end animal cruelty, improve animal protection and promote the humane treatment of all animals. We work to advance the welfare of Canada's animals with the federal government, policy makers, industry and the public, driving sector-wide initiatives to put in place evidence-based, innovative practices and national standards. Humane Canada facilitates a community of like-minded organizations to work strategically toward collective goals that improve the lives of animals and address the root causes of issues that individual humane societies and SPCAs face on a daily basis. We advocate for legislative improvements to protect animals; advance and strengthen animal cruelty case law through the National Centre for the Prosecution of Animal Cruelty; conduct research on issues of national importance to provide a foundation for policy development; and convene the annual Summit for Animals, which brings together stakeholders with an interest in animal welfare from across the spectrum, including international, national and regional animal welfare organizations, academic researchers, government, enforcement personnel, the veterinary community and industry.

To learn more, go to www.humanecanada.ca.





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