

Affinity Foundation Study into the abandonment, loss and adoption of pets in Spain in 2016: Interpretation of results.



FOUNDATION
— 1987 —

By:

Dr. Jaume Fatjó

Head of the Chair Affinity Foundation Affinity Animals & Health

Paula Calvo

Researcher at the Affinity Foundation Animals & Health Chair



Chair
Affinity Foundation
Animals and Health

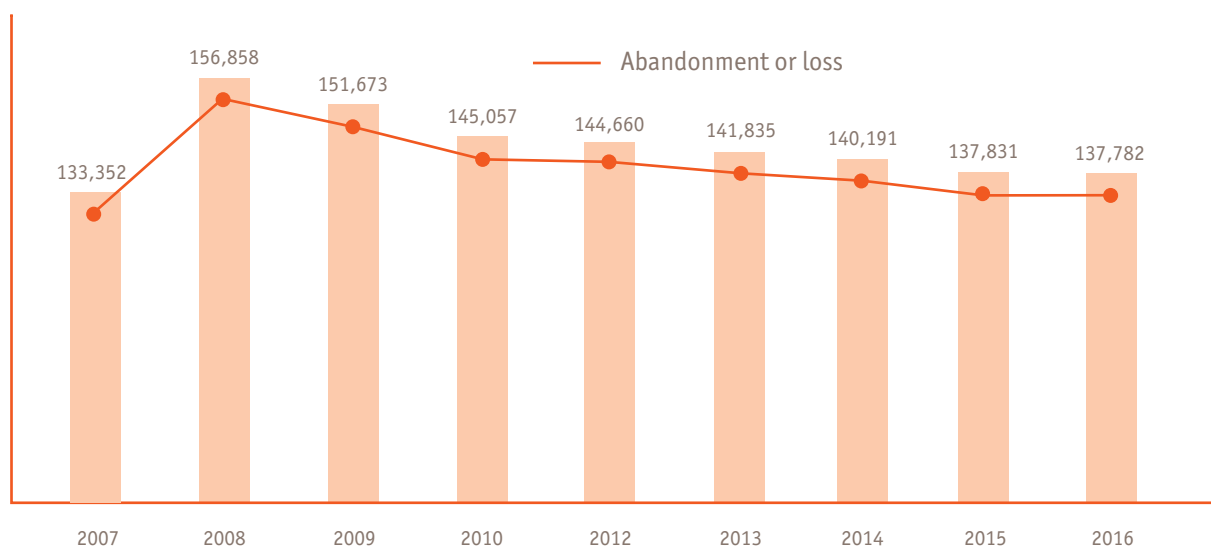
Outline of results:

- Abandonment is once again the number one small animal welfare problem in Spain.
- The number of animals taken in by animal shelters is comparable to that recorded in 2015.
- Unwanted litters are the top reason for handing over cats and dogs to pet shelters.
- Abandoned puppies and kittens are more likely to be adopted than adults.

How many cats and dogs were taken in by animal shelters in 2016?

- Key facts and figures:
 - In 2016, 138,782 cats and dogs were taken in.
 - 104,447 dogs.
 - 33,335 cats.
- The estimated rate of abandonment and/or loss is 22 dogs and 7 cats per 10,000 inhabitants.
- 1.7% of the 6,100,000 dogs and 1% of the 3,600,000 cats estimated to live in Spain* thus suffer abandonment or loss.

Figure 1 Evolution in number of animals taken in by animal shelters each year



* Source: Affinity Pet Care.

Figure 2 Trend in number of dogs taken in by animal shelters each year

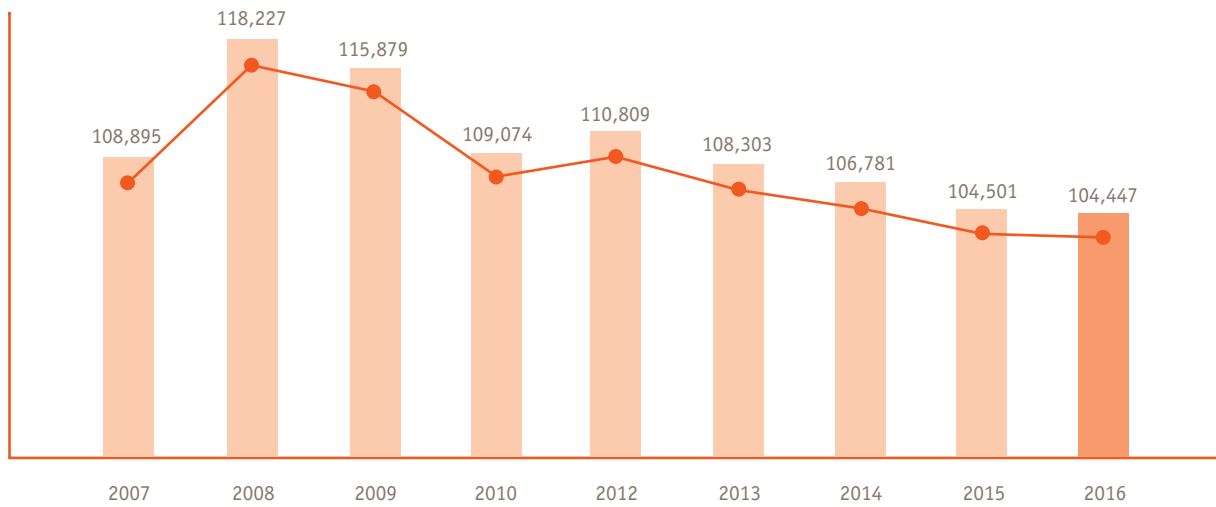
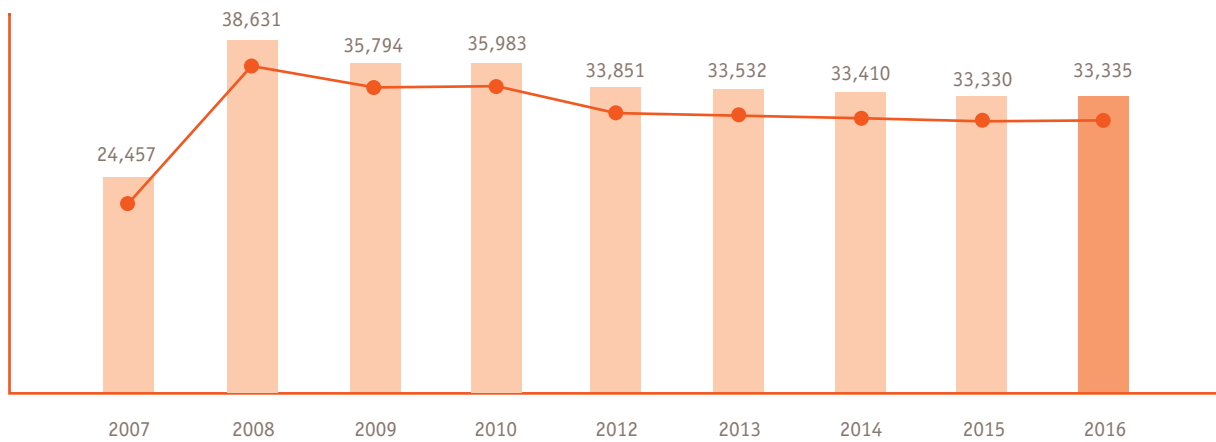


Figure 3 Trend in number of cats taken in by shelters each year



Our interpretation:

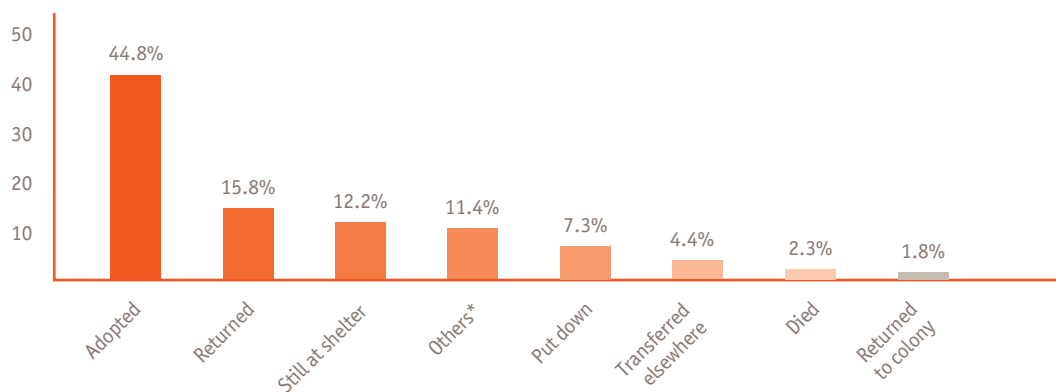
- The abandonment of cats and dogs is the biggest welfare problem for pets in Spain¹.
- In recent years a gradual, though slight, reduction has been observed in the number of dogs and cats taken in by animal shelters, but that trend seems to have come to a standstill this year. (Figures 1, 2 and 3).

Abandonment is one of the biggest pet welfare problems.

How many pets are really abandoned?

- Key facts and figures:
 - 15.8% of the dogs and cats taken in by animal shelters were returned to their owners (Figure 4). After a gradual increase in recent years this figure has dropped back to 2013 levels (Figure 5). As indicated below, there are substantial differences between the figures for dogs and cats.
 - 20.6% of the dogs taken in by animal shelters were returned to their owners (Figure 6). This figure has dropped more than five points on last year (Figure 7).
 - Only 3.6% of the cats taken in by animal shelters were returned to their owners (Figure 8). This is very similar to the figures observed over the last three years (Figure 9).
 - 29.7% of the dogs and 2.3% of the cats taken in by shelters were properly identified (microchipped) (Figure 10).

Figure 4 Final outcomes for animals taken in by animal shelters



* This includes thefts, losses and unspecified cases.

Figure 5 Trend in numbers of animals taken in by shelters which are recovered by owners

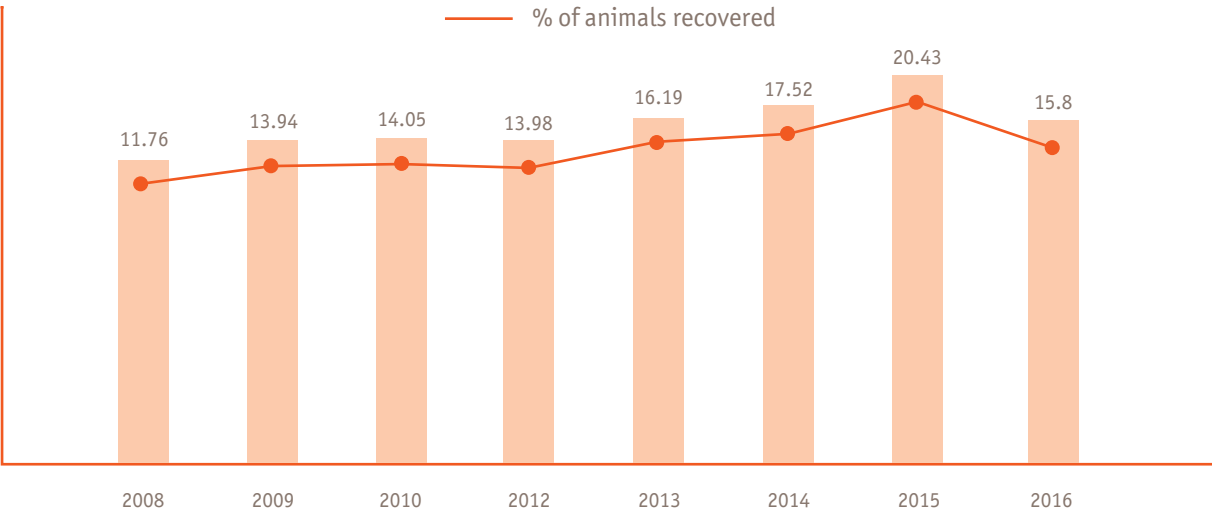


Figure 6 Final outcomes for dogs taken in by animal shelters

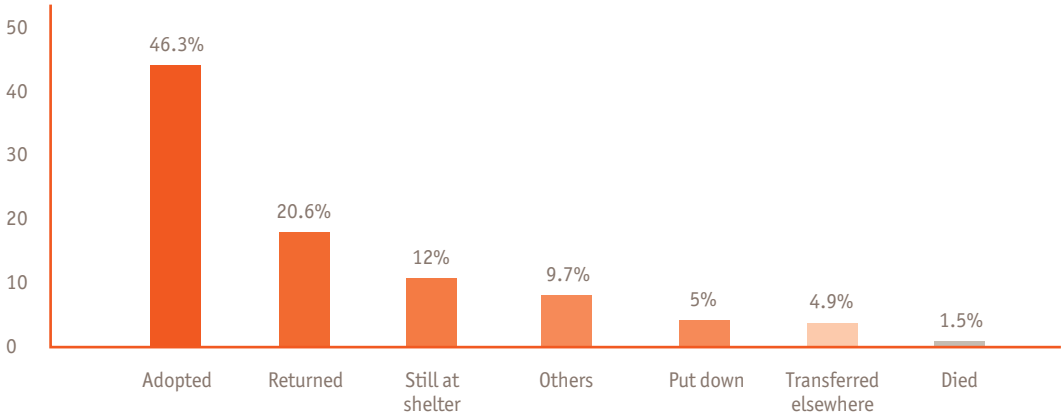


Figure 7 Trend in proportion of dogs taken in by animal shelters recovered by their owners

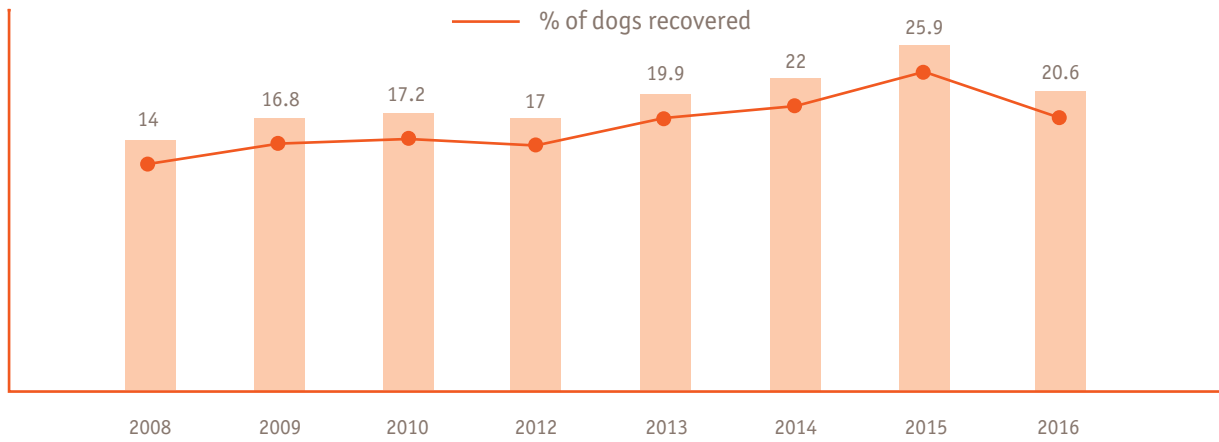


Figure 8 Outcomes for cats taken in by animal shelters

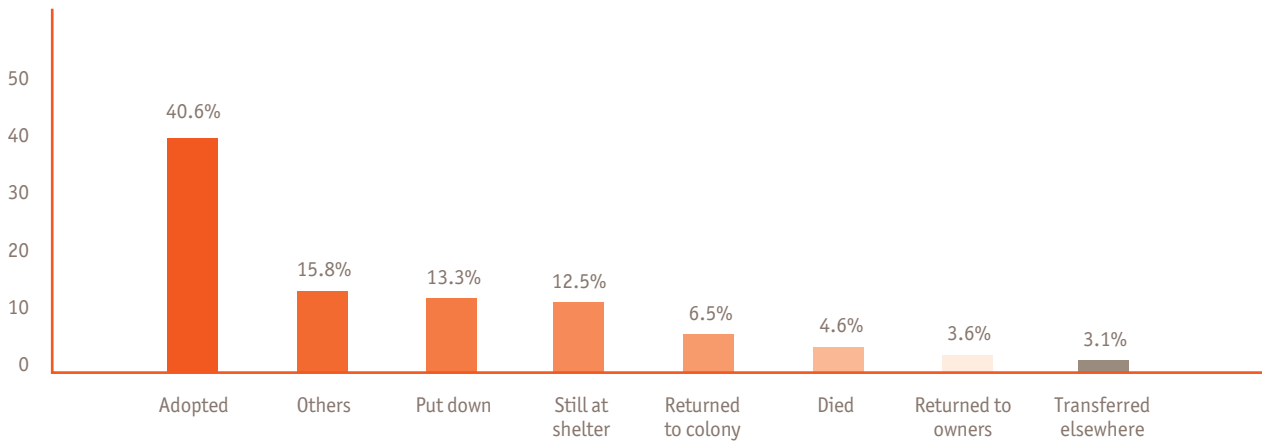


Figure 9 Trend in proportion of cats taken in by animal shelters recovered by their owners

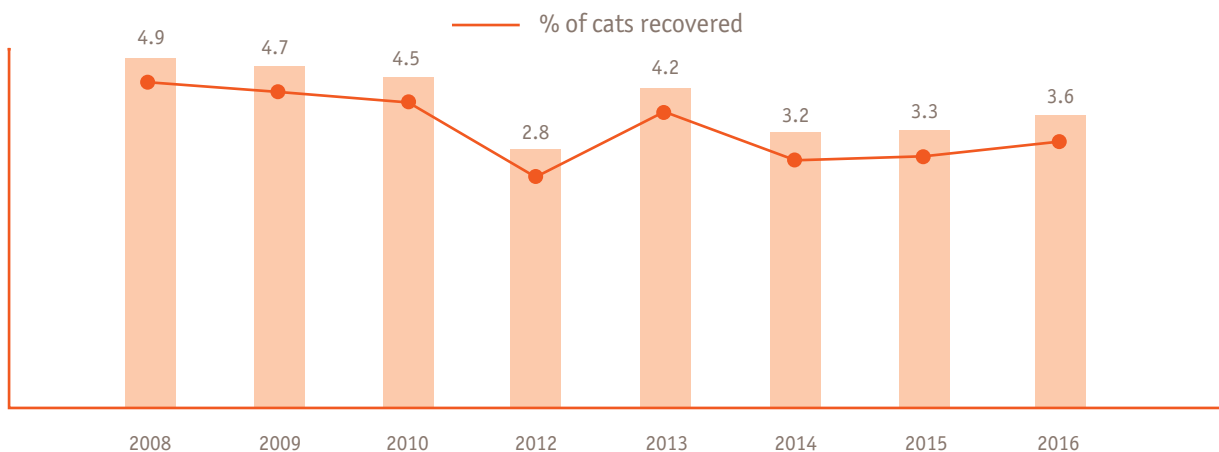
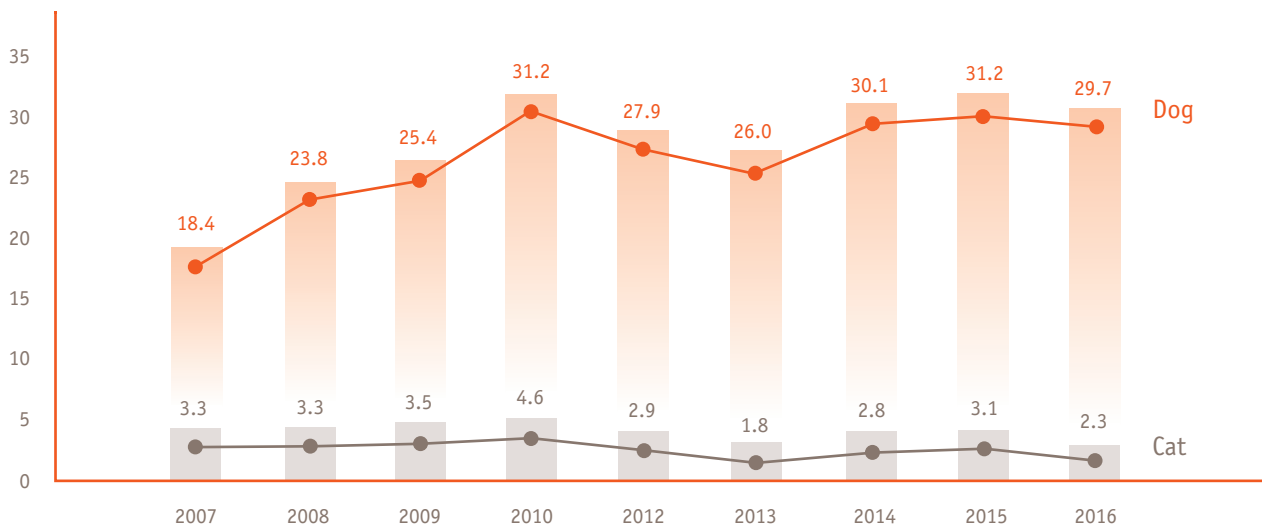


Figure 10 Proportion of cats and dogs taken in by shelters which are properly identified. The trend for the past two years is observed to be reversed



Our interpretation:

- A large proportion of the pets taken in by shelters are not actually abandoned but more likely lost.
- The key factor in recovering lost animals is whether the owners can be located, and for that it is essential that animals be properly identified (microchipped)².
- An alarming drop in the number of identified animals is detected in regard to the upward trend observed in the past two years. It will be necessary to wait until next year's study to confirm or rule out the possibility of a slowdown in the increase of properly identified animals taken in by animal shelters.
- Be this as it may, the figures are far lower than the total number of animals identified in Spain, which estimates by Affinity put at 85% of dogs and 34% of cats. Proper identification of pets is one of the main indicators of responsible ownership, so our data indicate that abandonment is at least partly attributable to a failure to fulfil the duties and commitments entailed by owning a pet.
- The percentage of animals returned to owners is markedly lower for cats than for dogs. This could be due on the one hand to a lower proportion of cats than dogs being properly identified, and on the other hand to the arrival at shelters of large numbers of cats born as strays.

Identification by microchipping is confirmed as one of the main strategies for combating abandonment and permitting the recovery of lost animals.

Is it true that more animals are abandoned in summer?

- Key facts and figures:
 - If the year is split into three four-month periods, the total intake of cats and dogs by shelters breaks down as 31.8%, 35.6% and 32.6% (Figure 11). Month-by-month figures are also shown (Figure 12). Once again, there are marked differences between cats and dogs.
 - The proportion of dogs taken in by shelters in each period was 33.2%, 33.5% and 33.3% respectively (Figure 13). Month-by-month data are also shown (Figure 14).
 - The proportion of cats taken in by shelters in each period was 27.4%, 42.1% and 30.5% respectively (Figure 15). Month-by-month data are also shown (Figure 16).

Figure 11 Breakdown by 4-month periods of the number of animals taken in by animal shelters in 2016

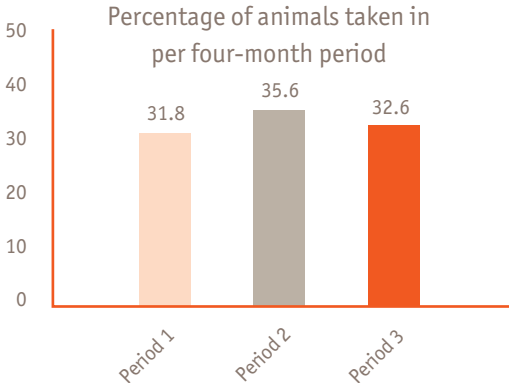


Figure 12 Breakdown by 4-month periods of the number of animals taken in by animal shelters in 2016

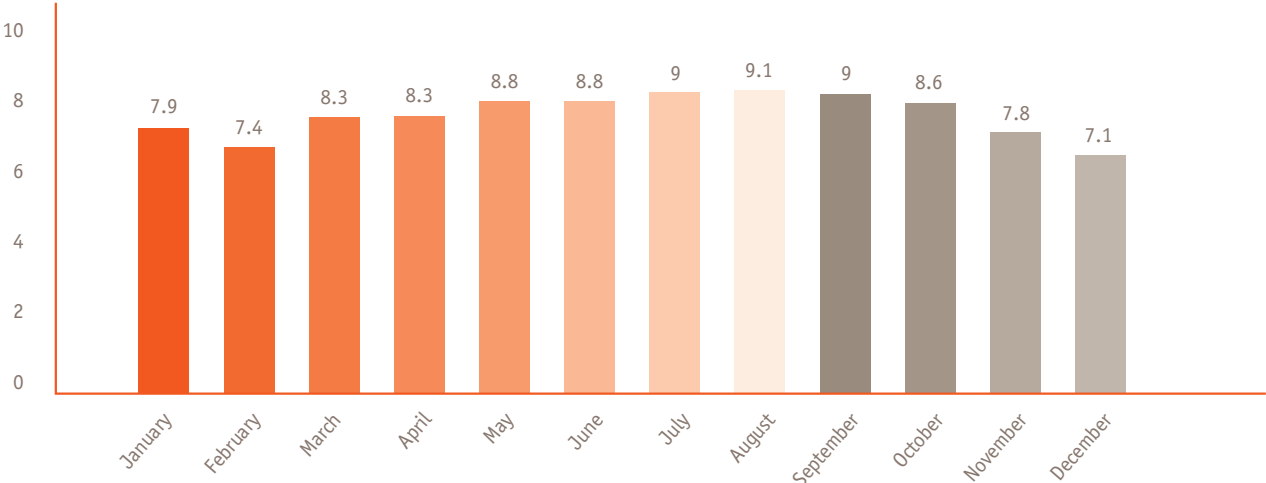


Figure 13 Breakdown by 4-month periods of the number of dogs taken in by animal shelters

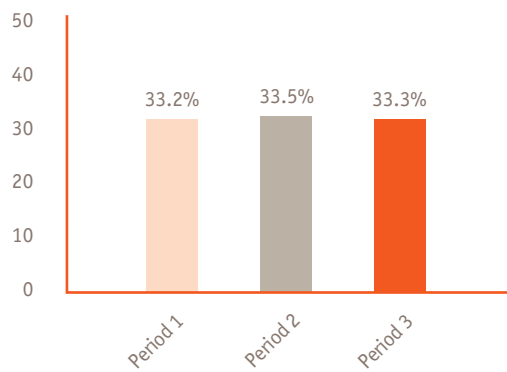


Figure 14 Breakdown month-by-month of the number of dogs taken in by animal shelters

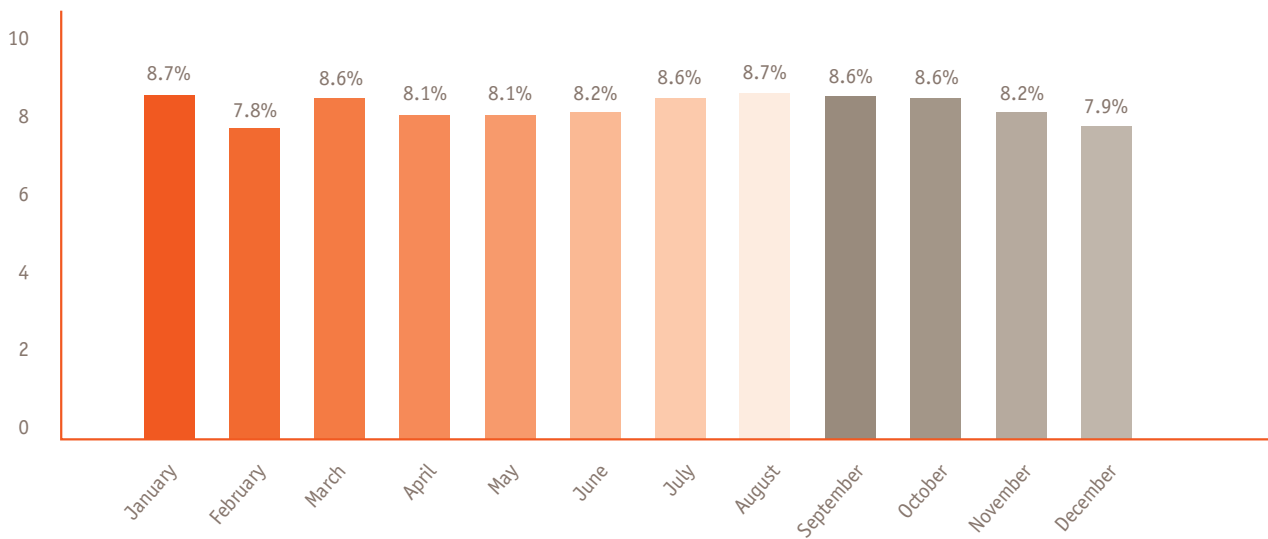


Figure 15 Breakdown by 4-month periods of the number of cats taken in by animal shelters

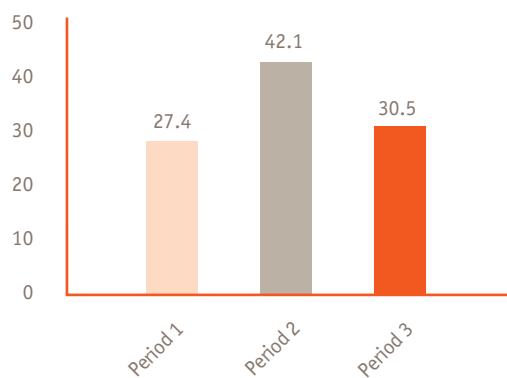
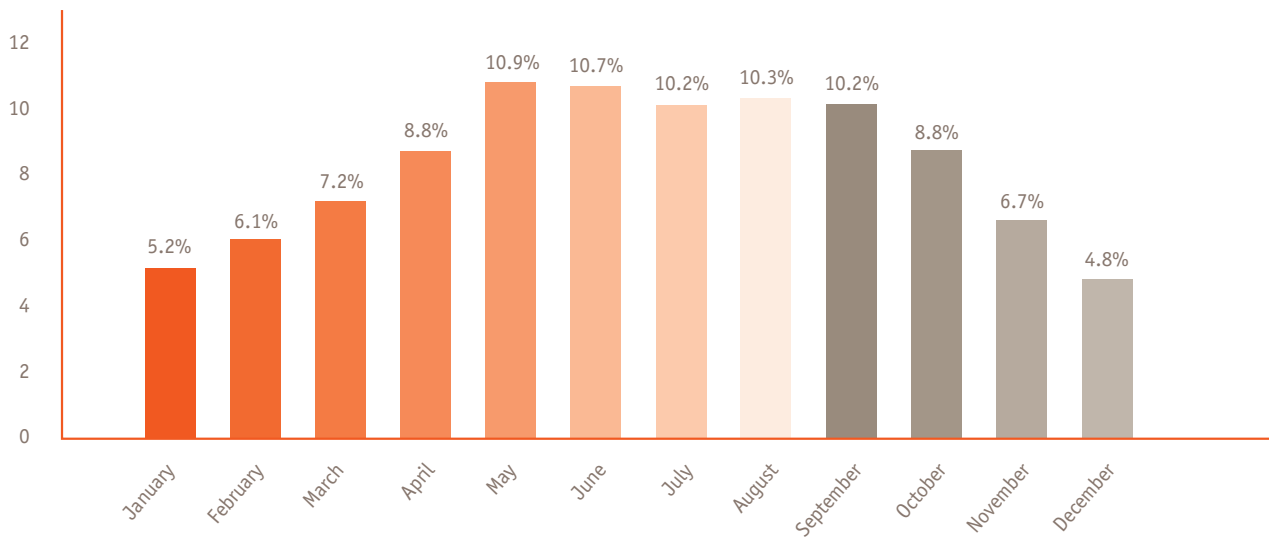


Figure 16 Breakdown month-by-month of the number of cats taken in by animal shelters



Our interpretation:

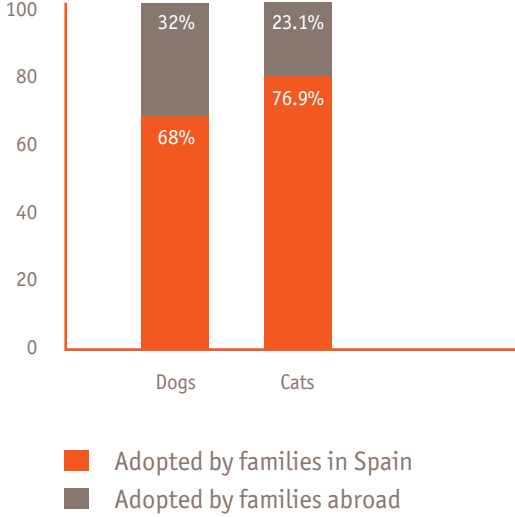
- Contrary to the popular belief that dogs in particular are abandoned mainly before summer holidays, animals are actually abandoned all year round. To understand the slight increase in abandonment and loss in the middle months of the year, it is necessary to look at dogs and cats separately.
- The number of dogs taken in by shelters and welfare associations is spread very evenly over the whole year, but the number of cats is much higher in the second four-month period. This can be explained by the fact that for cats breeding is seasonal, and the birth of unwanted litters is one of the main reasons for pet abandonment. Studies indicate that most litters of kittens are unwanted by their owners³. These data underline the importance of neutering in keeping pets from being abandoned.

Neutering is a fundamental strategy in keeping pets from being abandoned.

What happens to cats and dogs taken in by animal shelters?

- Key facts and figures:
 - As indicated above, 15.8% of all the animals taken in by shelters are returned to their owners (Figure 4).
 - 44.8% are adopted and 12% remain at the shelter (Figure 4).
 - 7.3% of animals taken in by shelters are put down (Figure 4).
- What happens to dogs?
 - As indicated above, 20.6% of dogs are returned to their owners (Figure 6).
 - 46.3% are adopted (Figure 6), 68% of them by families in Spain and 32% by families abroad (Figure 17).
 - 12% remain in shelters awaiting adoption and 5% are put down (Figure 6).
- What happens to cats?
 - As indicated above, 3.6% of cats are returned to their owners (Figure 8).
 - 40.6% are adopted, 76.9% of them by families in Spain and 23.1% by families abroad (Figure 17).
 - 12.5% remain in shelters and 13.3% are put down (Figure 8).

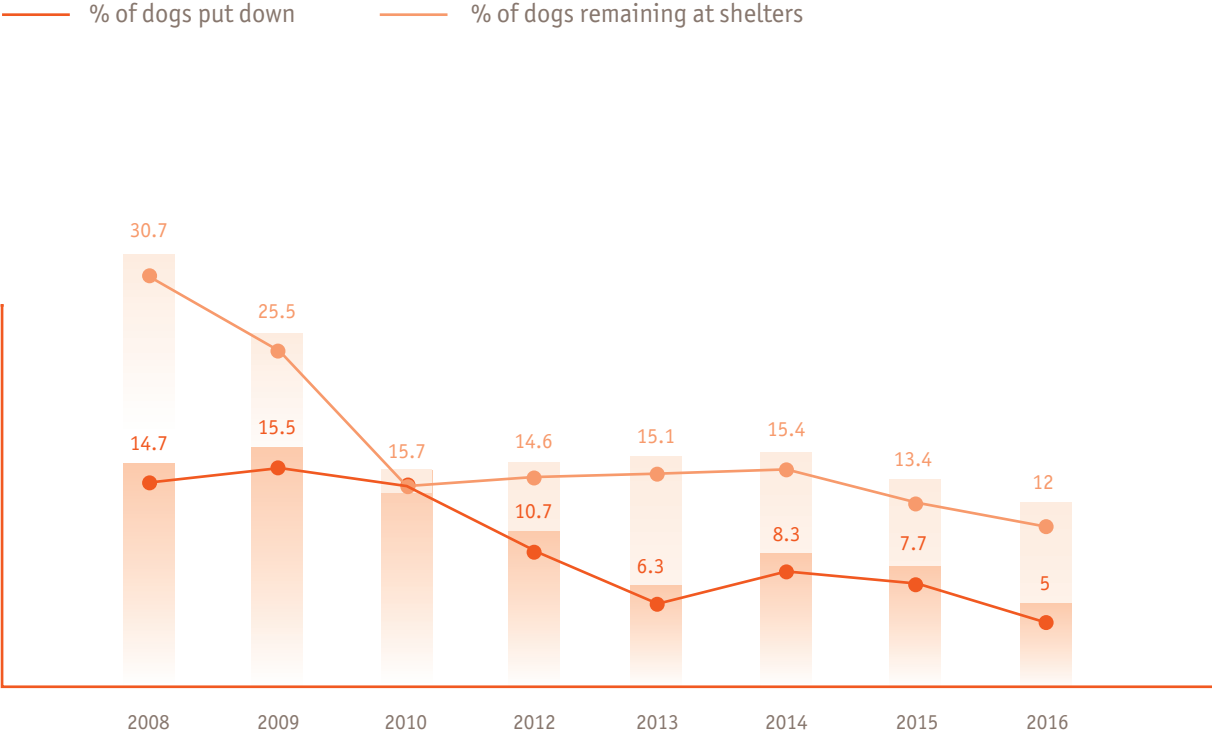
Figure 17 Final outcomes for adoptions of cats and dogs at shelters and humane societies in Spain



Our interpretation:

- Promoting adoption is one of the most effective basic strategies for reducing the number of animals abandoned.
- Some of the cats and dogs taken in by shelters are adopted by families abroad. This reveals that there is a shortfall of pet adoptions in Spain: not only are there fewer adoptions than animals abandoned but part of those adoptions are made abroad.
- Pets which are not adopted are destined to spend the rest of their lives in a shelter or, in many cases, to be put down. It is important to stress here that there has been a downward trend in both the percentage of dogs put down and the percentage that remain in shelters in recent years (Figure 18).

Figure 18 Trend in the proportions of dogs which are put down, which remain at shelters and which are adopted



Adoption is fundamental in reducing the number of dogs and cats abandoned.

What is the profile of abandoned dogs and cats?

- Key facts and figures:
 - 18.8 % of the animals taken in by animal shelters are pure breed, while the rest are mixed-breed (Figure 19).
 - A breakdown of data by species reveals that 21.8% of the dogs and 9.4% of the cats taken in by animal shelters are pure-breed, while the rest are mixed-breed (Figure 19).
 - Almost half of all dogs abandoned our medium-sized (Figure 20).
 - Most dogs and cats arrive at shelters as adults, though a number of puppies/kittens and senior animals are also taken in (Figure 21).

Figure 19 Profile of animals taken in by shelters based on breed

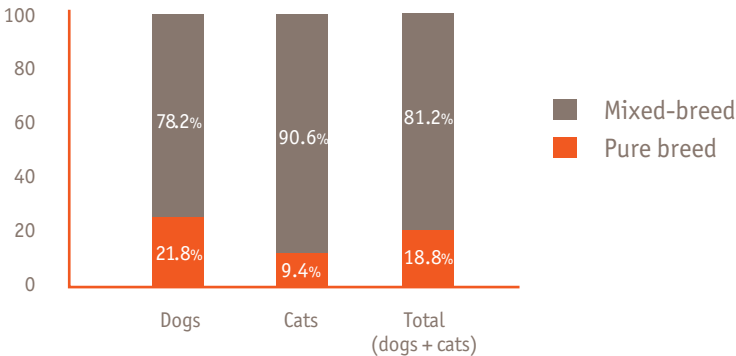


Figure 20 Size of dogs taken in by animal shelters

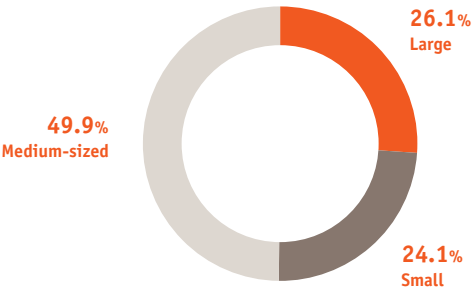
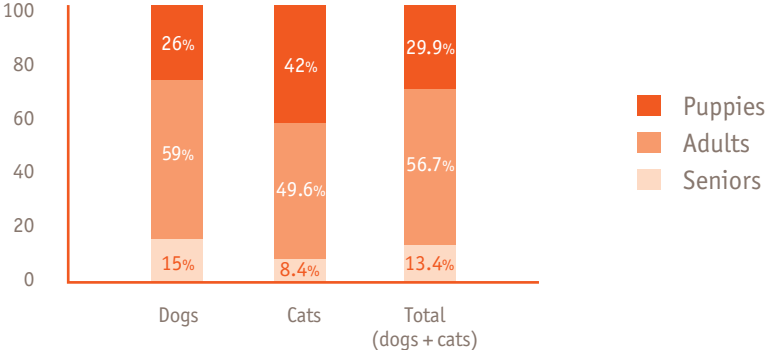


Figure 21 Age-range of animals taken in by shelters



Our interpretation:

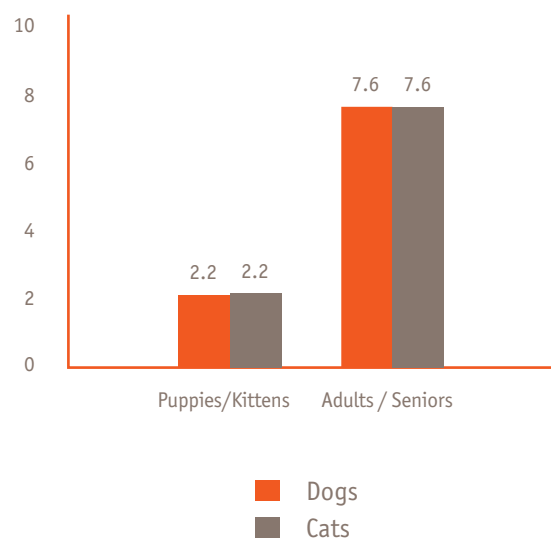
- Abandonment affects dogs and cats of all types and is not restricted to particular age groups or breeds.
- The proportion of medium-sized and large dogs taken in by shelters exceeds the proportion of the general dog population for which they account. This suggests that small dogs may be abandoned and lost less often than larger ones. As shown below, behavioural problems seem to be one of the main reasons for abandoning pets, and the impact of such problems is usually greater in larger dogs. In the case of lost dogs, a size bias may be introduced by factors such as walking time and, above all, the tendency to let dogs run loose.

Dogs and cats taken in by shelters belong to all types and age groups.

Is it true that puppies and kittens are more likely to be adopted?

- Key facts and figures:
 - Puppies and kittens spend far less time in shelters than older cats and dogs (Figure 22).

Figure 22 Average stay in shelters of animals by age group (months)



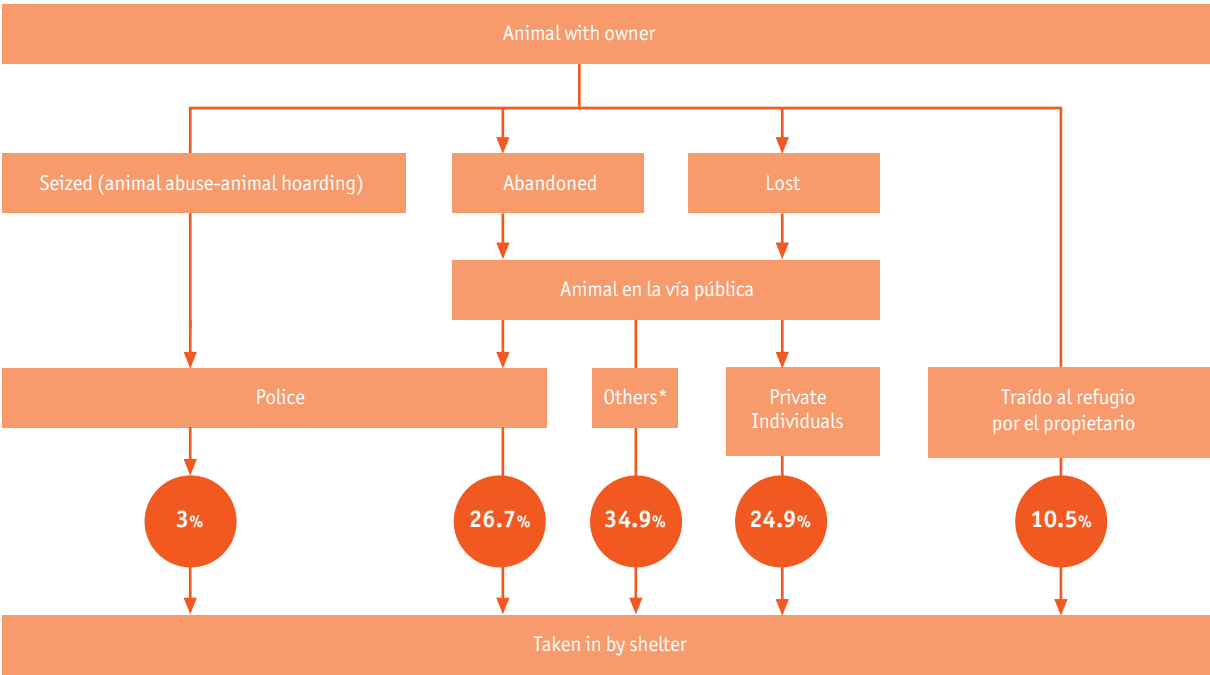
Our interpretation:

- The less time spent by puppies and kittens at shelters can be largely explained by the fact that many adopters find younger animals more appealing.
- The mistaken idea persists that adult animals will not be able to integrate into new families, or can no longer be effectively trained. It is therefore important to set up information campaigns for adopters informing them of the ease and even the advantages that taking in an adult dog or cat can entail.

Why do some people abandon their pets?

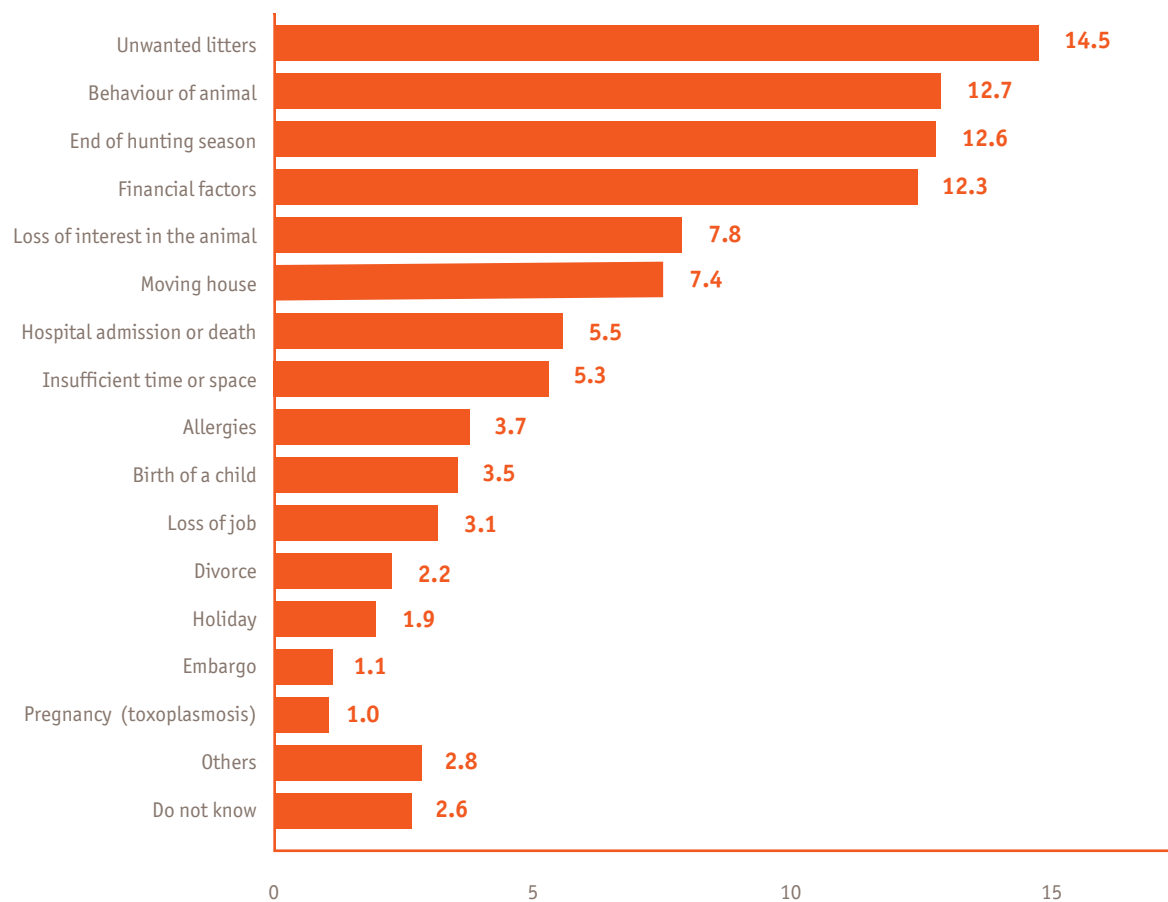
- Key facts and figures:
 - 64.6% of the animals taken in by shelters were either picked up by the shelter itself or brought in by the police (in cases of mistreatment or animal hoarding). 24.9% are brought in by private individuals who have found them, and only 10.5% are relinquished to shelters by the person abandoning them (Figure 23).
 - The top five reasons given by owners who hand over their pets to shelters are unwanted litters (14.5%), the behaviour of the animal (12.7%), the end of the hunting season (12.6%), financial factors (12.3%) and loss of interest in the animal (7.8%) (Figure 24).

Figure 23 Provenance of animals taken in by shelters



* "Others" includes companies handling and collecting stray dogs and cats, animals left by the door of the shelter, etc.

Figure 24 Reasons for abandoning pets



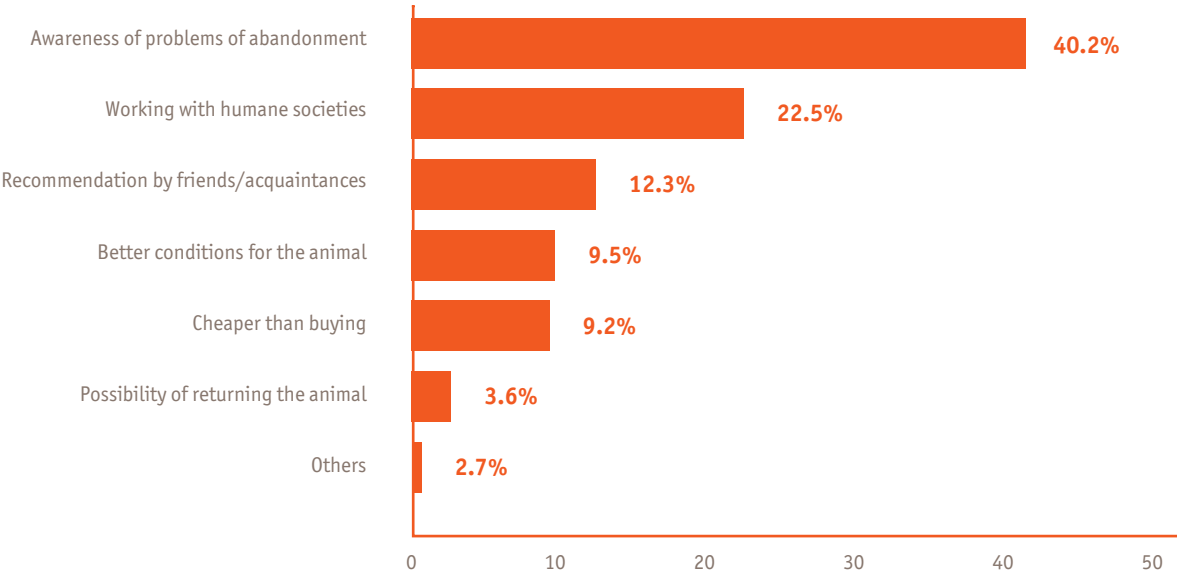
Our interpretation:

- As found in the 2015 study, financial factors have ceased to be the main reason why pets are taken to animal shelters.
- Unwanted litters are the main reason for abandonment. It is important to remember the role of neutering pets as a strategy for reducing the number of animals abandoned.
- Unwanted litters seem to be playing an increasing role as a reason for abandonment compared to behavioural problems.
- It is important to stress that the information available on the reasons for abandonment comes mostly from people who personally take their pets to an animal shelter. However, as indicated, most of the animals taken in by shelters are found on the streets or brought in by persons other than their owners. This means that the specific reasons for the abandonment of many pets in Spain are not yet known.

Why do people decide to adopt a dog or cat from an animal shelter?

- Key facts and figures:
 - The top three reasons given for adoption are awareness of the problem of abandonment (40.2%), a desire to work with an animal shelter or a humane society (22.5%) and recommendations by friends or acquaintances (12.3%) (Figure 25).

Figure 25 Reasons given for adopting a pet



Our interpretation:

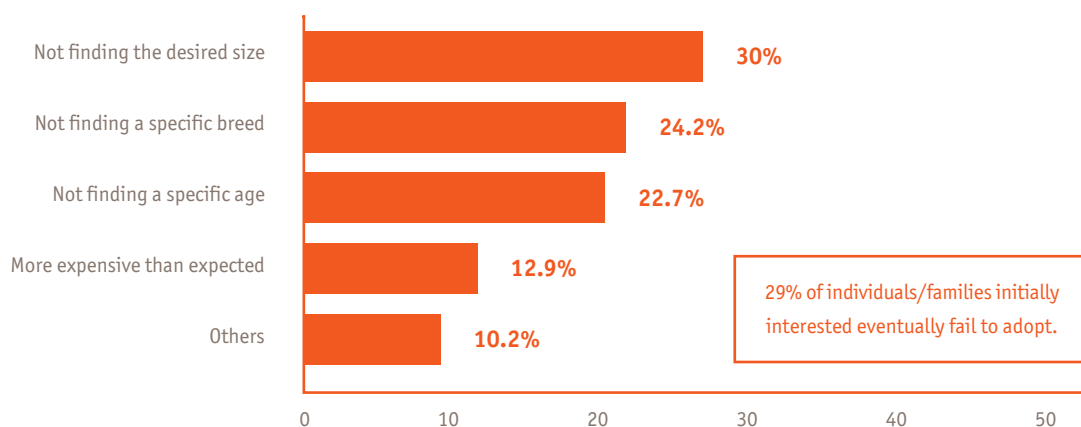
- These results differ only very slightly from those obtained in the 2015 study.
- Adoption is a win-win option for acquiring a pet: it benefits the family, the animal shelter and, of course, the dog or cat itself.
- By adopting an animal many people not only incorporate a new family member but also support a major social cause: defending animal welfare.

Adoption is fundamental in reducing the number of dogs and cats abandoned.

Why do some people interested in adopting a pet eventually not do so?

- Key facts and figures:
 - 29% of people who initially express an interest in adopting a dog or cat eventually decide not to do so.
 - The top three reasons for not following through on adoptions are failure to find an animal of the desired size (30%), breed (24.2%) or age (22.7%) (Figure 26).
 - 12.9% of potential adopters state that they drop out because the cost of adoption is higher than they expected (Figure 26).

Figure 26 Reasons why people initially interested in adopting a pet eventually fail to do so



Our interpretation:

- For many people the general appearance and specifically the breed of dogs and cats continue to be important factors in deciding whether to adopt one. However, breeding certainly does not guarantee good behaviour. The decision to adopt a pet must be the endpoint of an in-depth reflection on what impact the pet will have on quality-of-life in the household. In this regard, a study conducted by the Affinity Foundation conducted in Spain in 2015 reveals that the needs of the animal and the lifestyle of the owner are only taken into account when choosing a pet in 21% of cases.
- Approximately one out of eight potential adopters believes that adopting is expensive. However, the average cost of adoption in Spain is actually low, especially when one takes into account how much it costs the shelter to care for animals responsibly (e.g. feeding them while they are at the shelter, providing veterinary care, properly identifying them, etc.).
- Overall, these findings indicate a need for efforts to educate people about the benefits of pet adoption. It is also important to publicise the major financial cost for shelters of caring for homeless animals and remind people that the hard work done day by day by animal welfare associations and shelters is largely based on disinterested collaboration by members and volunteers.
- All parties directly and indirectly involved in animal welfare, including welfare associations, vets and the public administration, should take part in these educational efforts.

Why do some adopters return pets to shelters?

- Key facts and figures:
 - 7.7% of the adoptions carried out in 2016 failed. A considerable increase (25%) has been detected in failed adoptions compared to 2015. It will not be possible to confirm this trend until data from future years become available.
 - The main reason (33%) given for returning a pet to a shelter after adopting it is the behaviour of the animal (Figure 27).
 - A considerable proportion of returns take place within one month as from adoption, and most of them within three months (Figure 28).

Figure 27 Reasons for failure of adoption

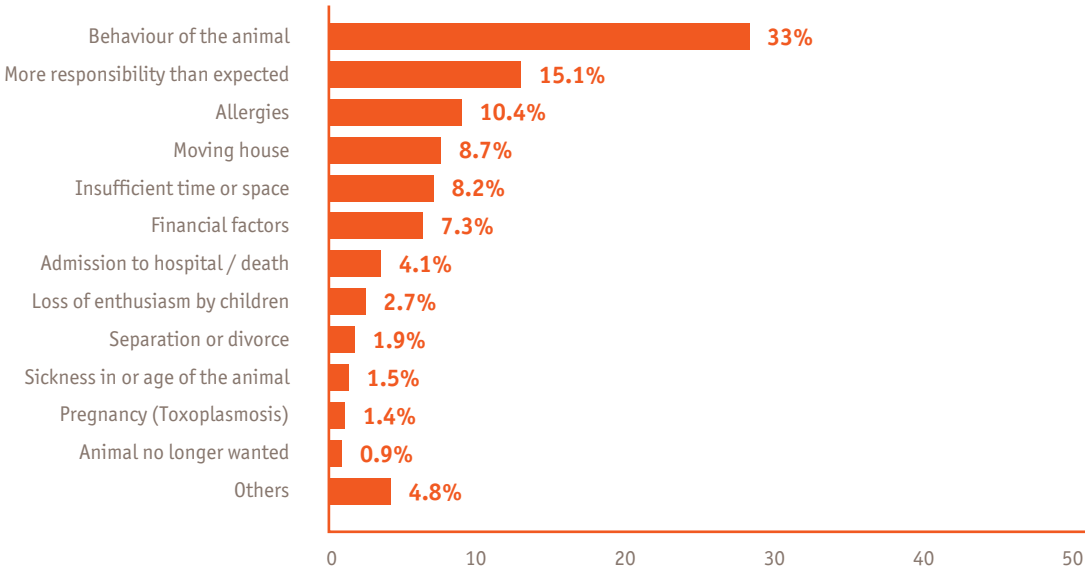
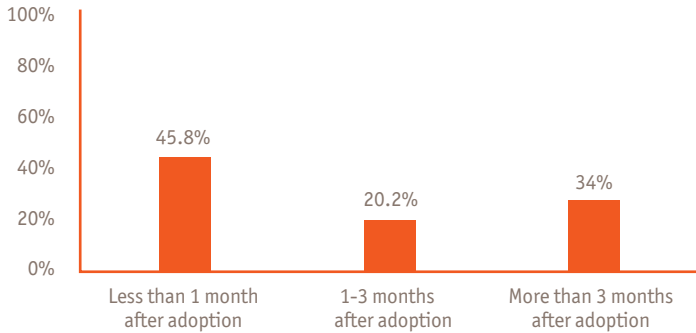


Figure 28 Breakdown of animals returned to shelters by time as from adoption



Our interpretation:

- Adopters of dogs and cats should be provided with information to help the pet adapt to its new environment. As indicated above, this includes reminding them that many behavioural problems can be effectively prevented.

What role do animal shelters and humane societies play in caring for stray and feral cats?

- Key facts and figures:
 - 44.3% of the associations that took part in his study regularly manage cat colonies.
 - The average number of cat colonies handled by each organisation is 28.5, with an average of 14.8 cats per colony.

Our interpretation:

- Managing cat colonies is one of the most important tasks handled by animal welfare associations, though it is not always recognised as such. A study conducted in Barcelona by the Chair Affinity Foundation Animals & Health at the Autonomous University of Barcelona indicates that most people are unaware that monitored cat colonies exist, but react favourably to the idea⁴. This finding is particularly interesting in view of the fact that 704 monitored cat colonies were counted in Barcelona in 2016.

Main conclusions:

- Abandonment continues to be a major animal welfare problem in Spain. The numbers of animals taken in by shelters in 2016 are comparable to those recorded in the 2015 study. The slight downward trend observed in recent years has stalled somewhat.
- Neutering, identification and adoption are the three main short and middle term strategies for preventing or at least minimising the impact of pet abandonment. Neutering and identification form part of a broader concept of responsible ownership which extends to the duties and responsibilities of all pet owners. Thus, the engagement of the public is essential in preventing pet abandonment, because the effective application of all three of these strategies (which have shown themselves to be essential in combating the problem of abandonment) depends on it.
- Over and above simple awareness of the need to adopt, the public should be educated concerning the benefits and also the duties that come with adopting a pet, and how doing so can influence their lifestyles.

References:

1. Fatjó J, Bowen J, García E, Calvo P, Rueda S, Amblás S, Lanza JF (2015) Epidemiology of Dog and Cat Abandonment in Spain (2008–2013). *Animals*, 5 (2), 426–441; doi:10.3390/ani5020364
2. García E, Calvo P, Moradell M, Pérez M, Fatjó J (2010) Dog abandonment: an analysis of data for 1 year from 30 cities in the area of Barcelona. *European College of Veterinary Behavioural Medicine Annual Congress*, Hamburg.
3. Root Kustritz MV (2007) Determining the optimal age for gonadectomy of dogs and cats. *Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association*, 231 (11), pp 1665–1675.
4. Pérez S, Calvo P, Bowen J, Bulbena A, Fatjó J (2016) Public perception of urban feral cats and its management in Barcelona. *International Society of Anthrozoology Annual Conference 2016*, Barcelona.



FOUNDATION
— 1987 —

www.fundacion-affinity.org/en

www.fundacion-affinity.org/en/abandonment-and-adoption-studies