

Affinity Foundation Study into the abandonment, loss and adoption of pets in Spain in 2017: Interpretation of results.



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Outline of results:

- Abandonment is once again the number one pet welfare problem in Spain.
- The number of animals taken in by shelters and animal welfare associations is comparable to that recorded in 2016. This means that approximately 17 out of every 1000 dogs and 10 out of every 1000 cats living in Spain were taken in by public and private animal shelters last year.
- 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 shelters in 2017?

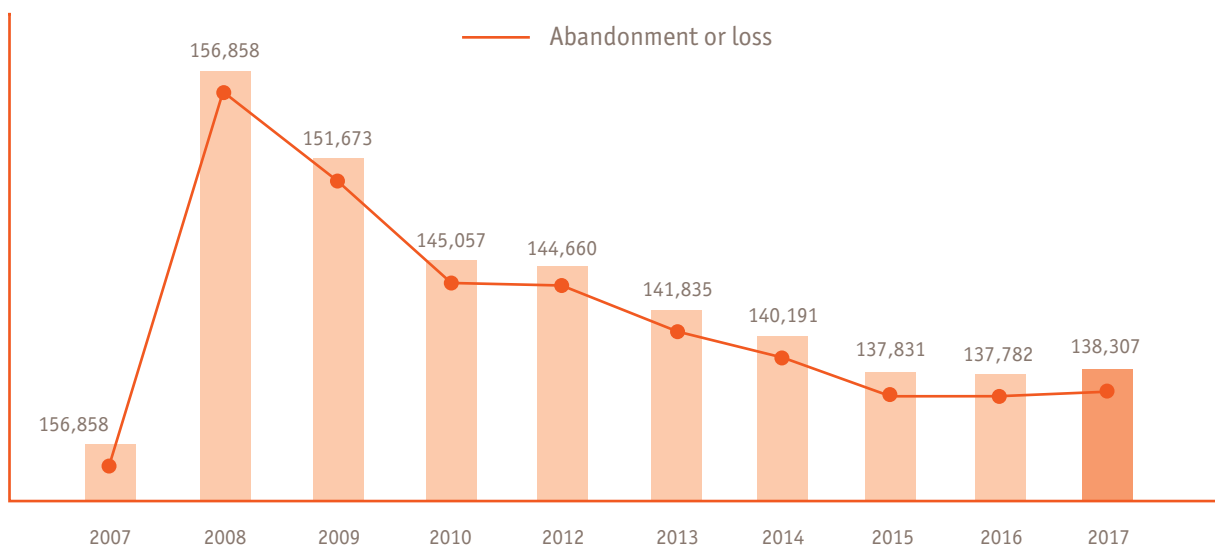
- Key facts and figures:

- In 2017, 138,307 cats and dogs were taken in.
- 104,834 dogs.
- 33,473 cats.

NB: these figures are estimations based on data from 339 private animal shelters, town councils and supra-municipal councils throughout Spain.

- These data mean that the estimated rate of abandonment and/or loss is 23 dogs and 7 cats per 10,000 people (the population of Spain is estimated to be 46,572,132*).
- 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 Trend in number of animals taken in by shelters and animal welfare associations each year



* Source: INE (Spanish National Statistics Institute) (January 2017).

** Source: Affinity Pet Care.

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

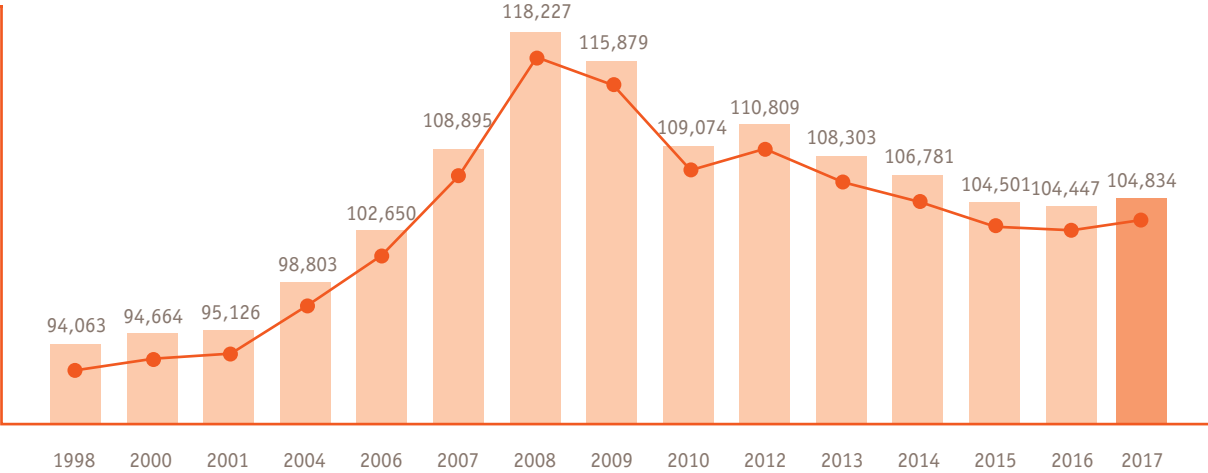
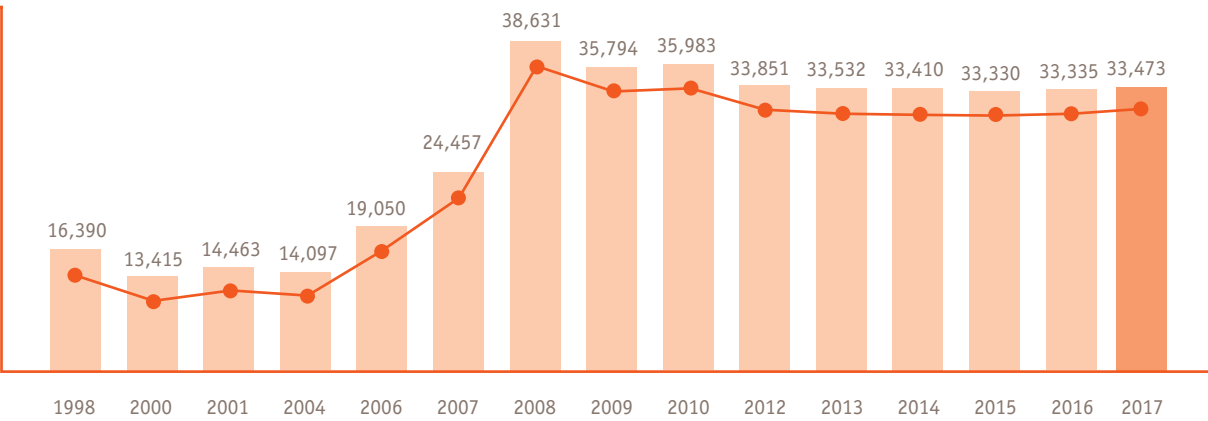


Figure 3 Trend in number of cats taken in by shelters and animal welfare associations each year



The figures give even more cause for concern when the fact that not all households have pets is factored in. Year after year, abandonment continues to be a structural problem that calls for greater intervention and cooperation on the part of all actors – public and private alike – involved in preventing it.

Our interpretation:

- The abandonment of cats and dogs is the biggest welfare problem for pets in Spain¹.
- The overall figures for abandonment and loss in 2017 are almost the same as for 2016. The gradual, though slight, reduction observed in the last few years in the number of animals taken in by shelters seems, unfortunately, to have come to a standstill (Figures 1, 2 and 3).

Abandonment is one of the biggest pet welfare problems.

How many pets are really abandoned?

- Key facts and figures:
 - 17.6% of the cats and dogs taken in by shelters were returned to or picked up by their owners (Figure 4). Following a substantial and highly worrying drop in the number of animals returned as per the 2016 study, numbers have reverted to 2014 levels (Figure 5). As indicated below, there are major differences in the figures for dogs and cats.
 - 23.2% of the dogs taken in by shelters and animal welfare associations were returned to their owners (Figure 6). Fortunately, the downward trend in this figure is recovered in the 2016 study, though it is still below the level for 2015 (Figure 7).
 - Only 3.7% of the cats taken in by shelters were returned to their owners (Figure 8). This figure is practically identical to that recorded in the three previous studies into the abandonment and loss of animals (Figure 9).
 - 33.1% of the dogs and 3.7% of the cats taken in by shelters were properly identified (microchipped) (Figure 10).

Figure 4 Final outcomes for animals taken in by animal shelters

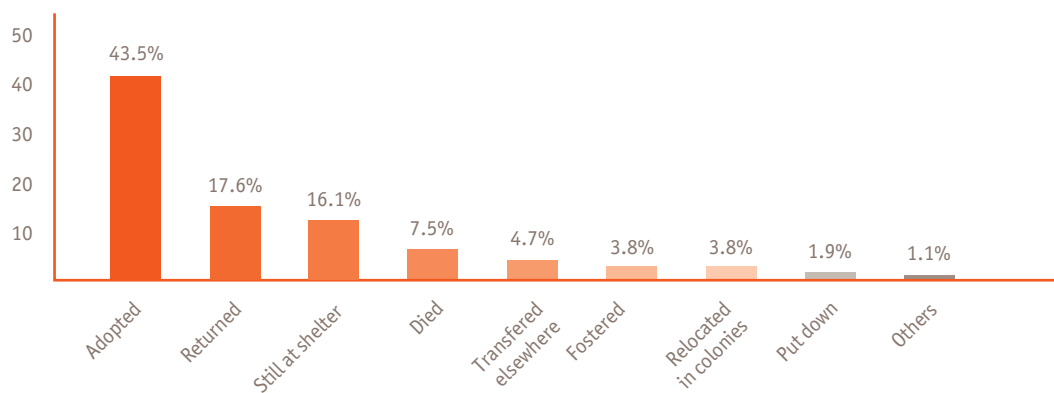


Figure 5 Trend in numbers of animals taken in by shelters which are recovered by owners

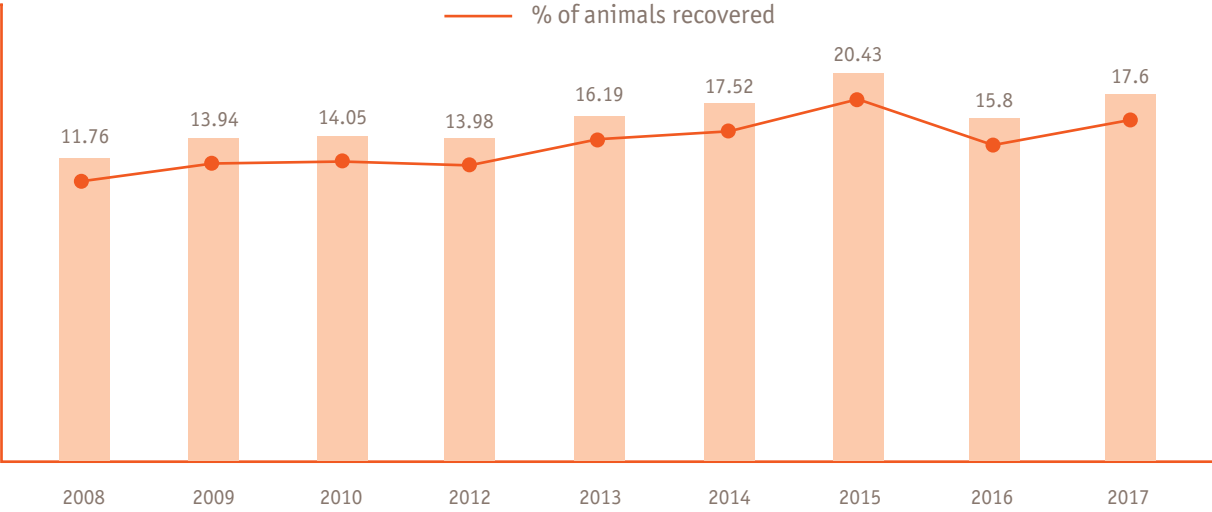


Figure 6 Final outcomes for dogs taken in by shelters

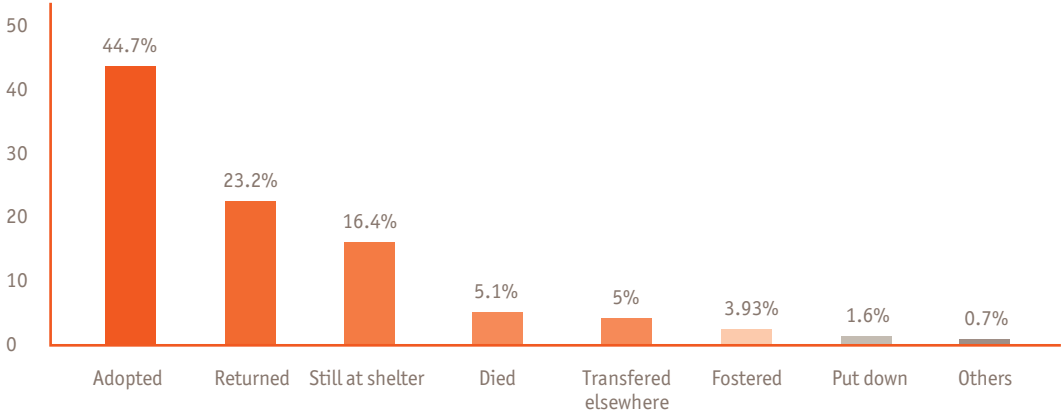


Figure 7 Trend in proportion of dogs taken in by animal shelters recovered by their owners

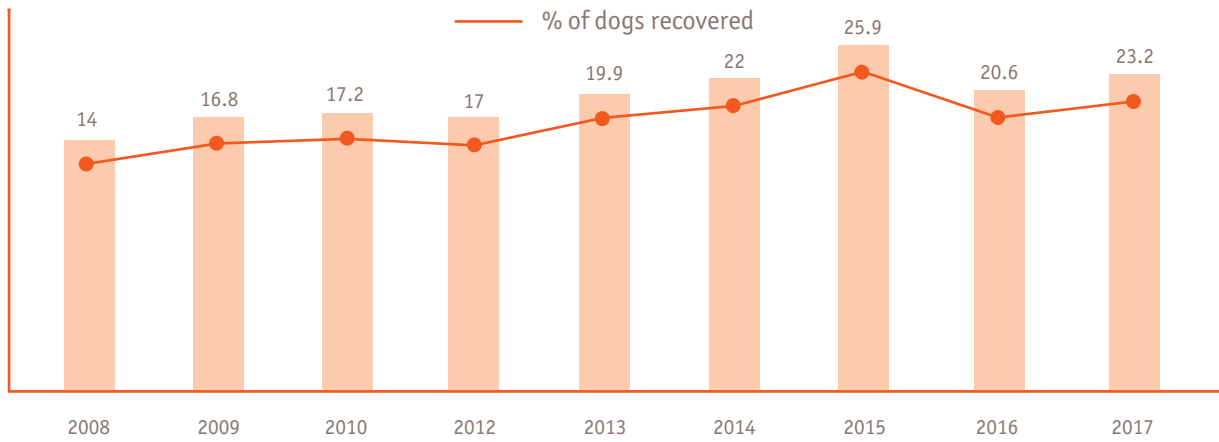


Figure 8 Destino de los gatos que llegan a un refugio o protectora de animales.

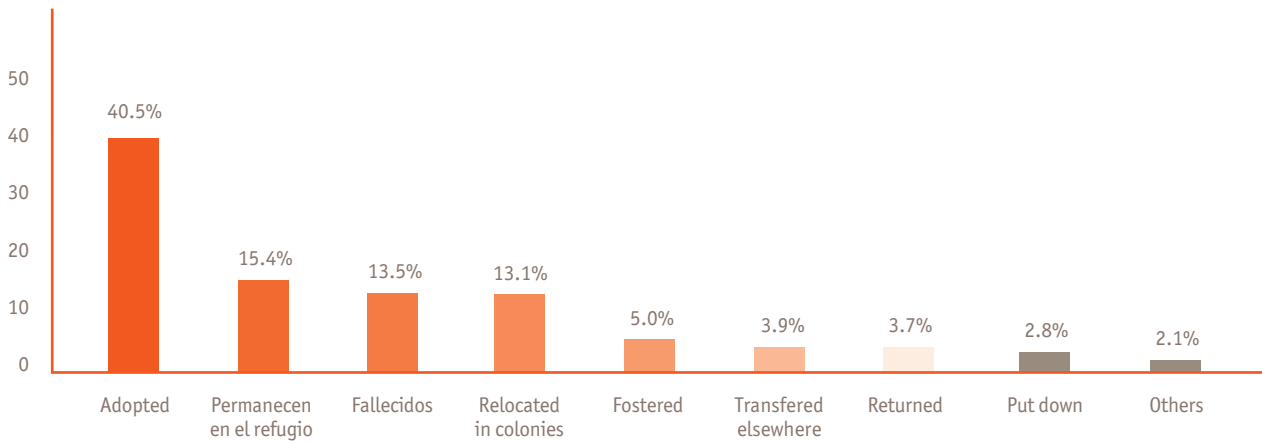


Figure 9 Trend in proportion of cats taken in by animal shelters recovered by their owners

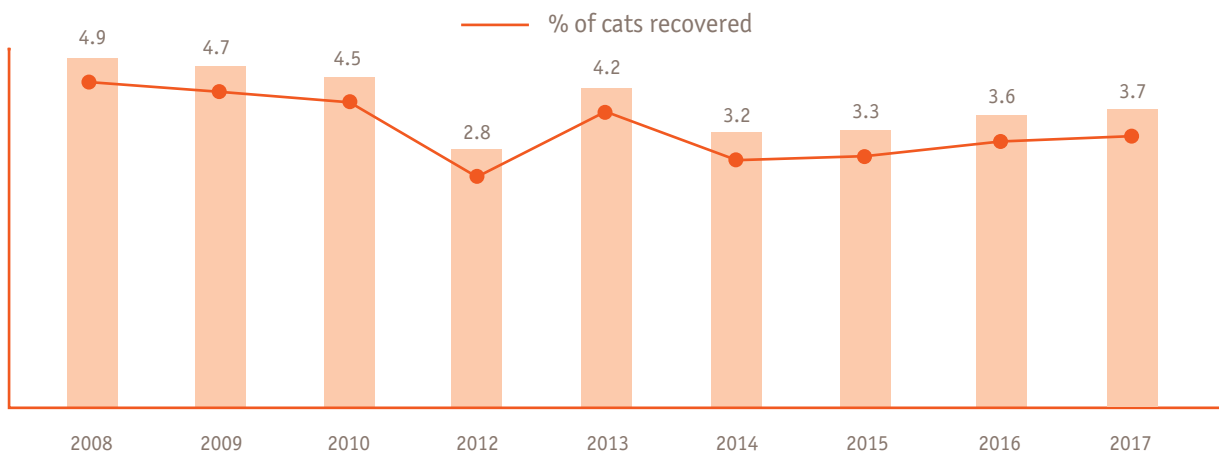
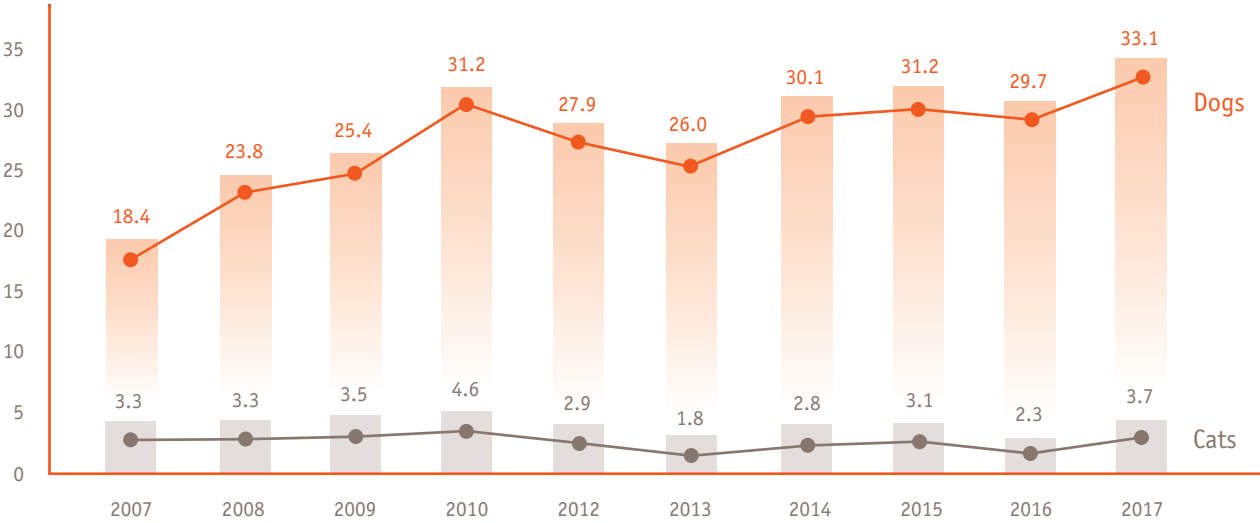


Figure 10 Proportion of cats and dogs taken in by shelters which are properly identified



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.
- The worrying drop in the number of properly identified animals observed last year seems to have righted itself.

Even so, the figures are far lower than the total number of animals identified in Spain, which estimates by Affinity Pet Care 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 30.9%, 37.8% and 31.4% (Figure 11). Month-by-month figures are also shown (Figure 12). Once again, there are marked differences in regard to cats and dogs.
 - The proportion of dogs taken in by shelters in each period was 32.7%, 35.3% and 32% respectively (Figure 13). Month-by-month data are also shown (Figure 14).
 - The proportion of cats taken in by shelters in each period was 26.5%, 43.5% and 30% 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 shelters as a percentage of total intake (2017)

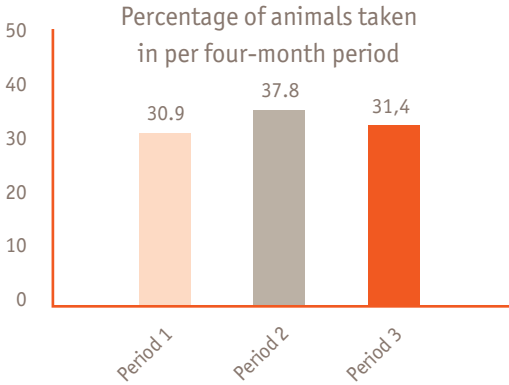


Figure 12 Breakdown by 4-month periods of the number of animals taken in by shelters as a percentage of total intake (2017)

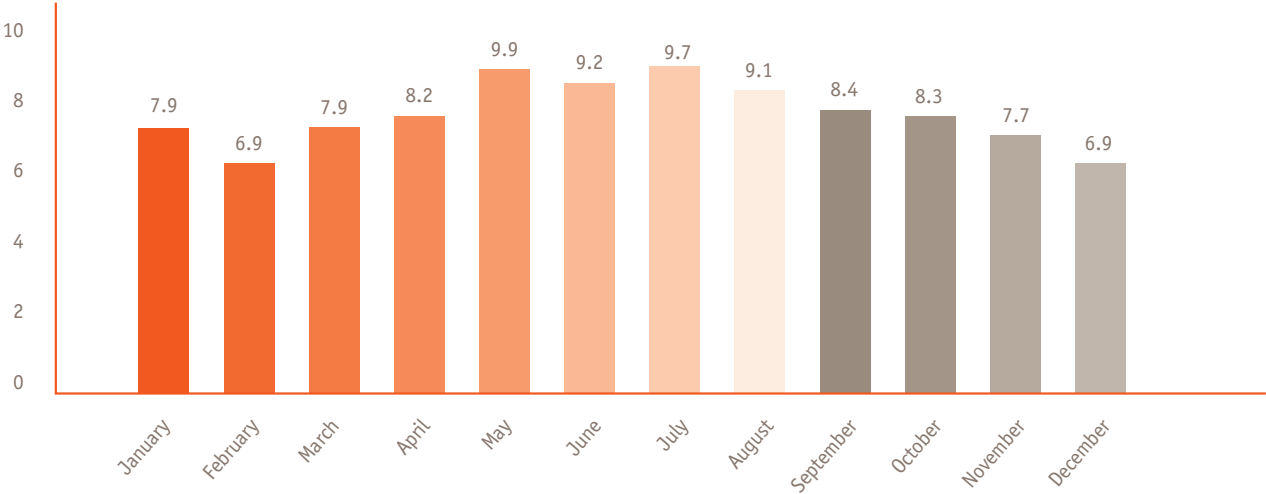


Figure 13 Breakdown by 4-month periods of the number of dogs taken in by shelters as a percentage of total intake

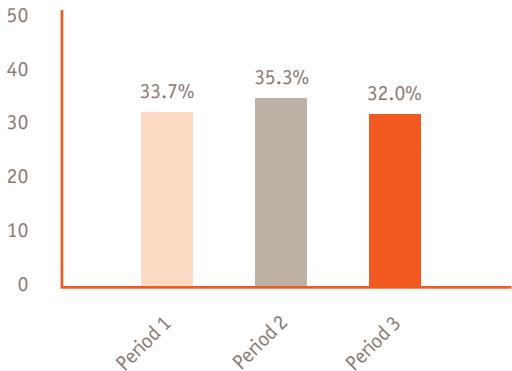


Figure 14 Breakdown month-by-month of the number of dogs taken in by shelters as a percentage of total intake

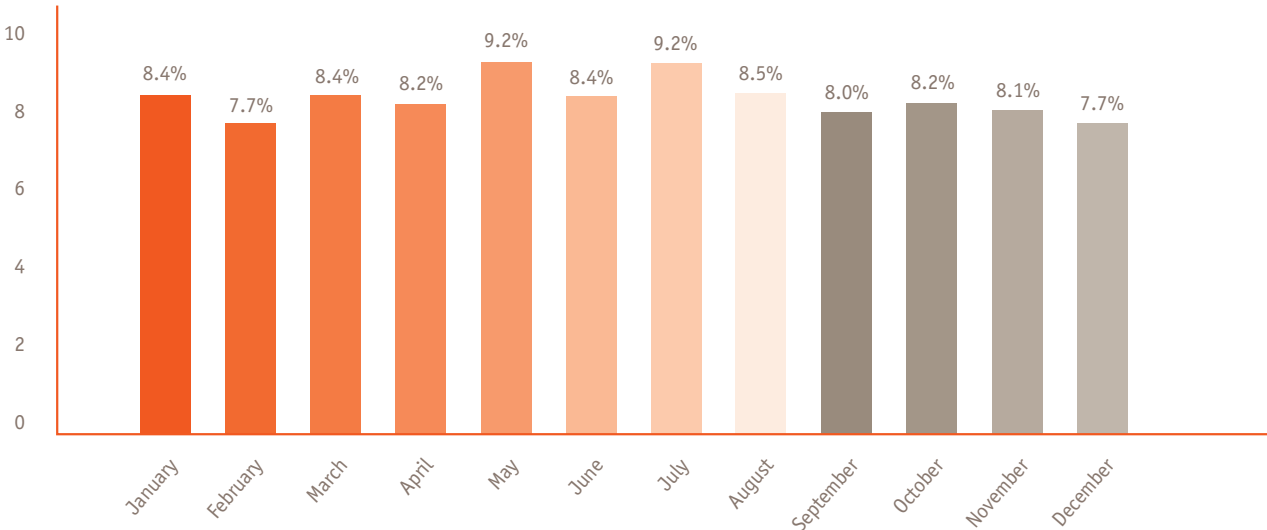


Figure 15 Breakdown by 4-month periods of the number of cats taken in by shelters as a percentage of total intake

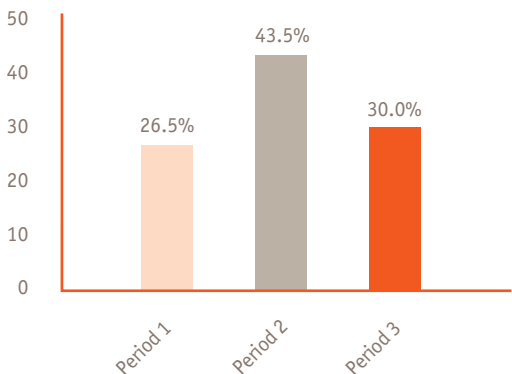
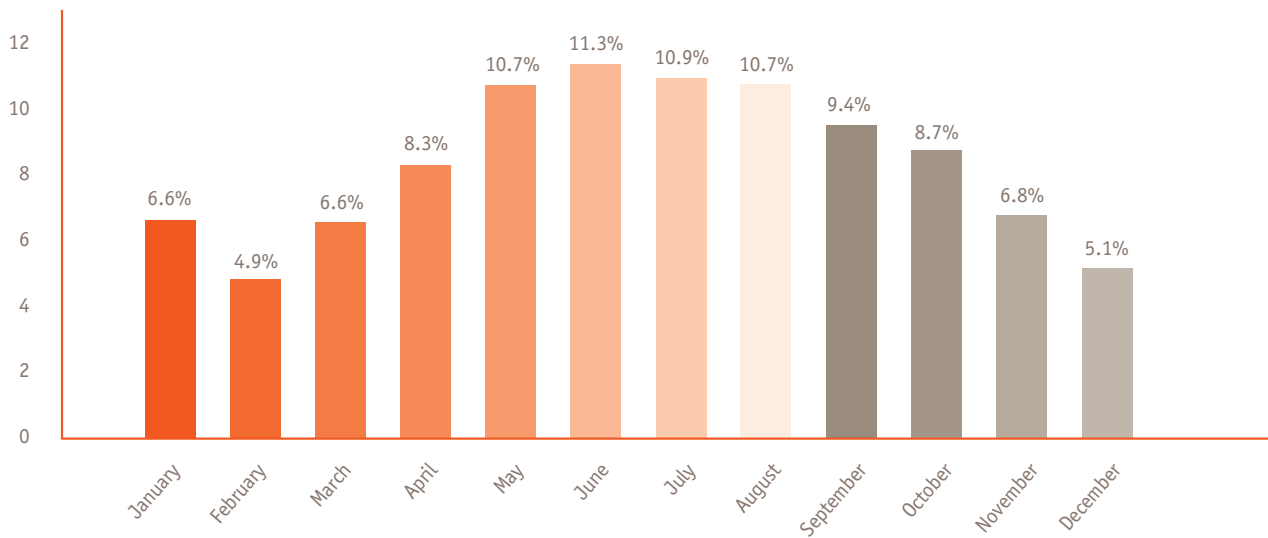


Figure 16 Breakdown month-by-month of the number of cats taken in by shelters as a percentage of total intake



Our interpretation:

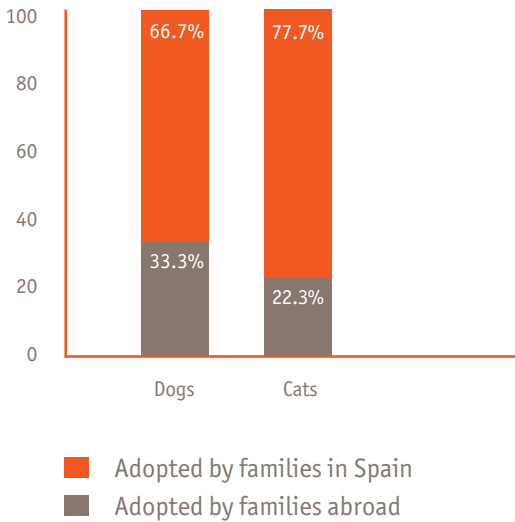
- Contrary to the popular belief that dogs in particular are abandoned mainly before summer holidays, animals are actually abandoned all year round. To understand the slight increase in abandonment and loss in the middle months of the year, it is necessary to look at dogs and cats separately.
- The number of dogs taken in by shelters 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, 17.6% of all the animals taken in by shelters are returned to their owners (Figure 4).
 - 43.5% are adopted and 16.1% remain at the shelter (Figure 4).
 - 7.5% of animals taken in by shelters die or are put down for medical reasons, and a further 1.9% are put down for non-medical reasons (Figure 4).
- What happens to dogs?
 - As indicated above, 23.2% of dogs are returned to their owners (Figure 6).
 - 44.7% are adopted (Figure 6), 66.7% of them by families in Spain and 33.3% by families abroad (Figure 17).
 - 16.4% remain in shelters awaiting adoption, 5.1% die or are put down for medical reasons and 1.6% are put down for non-medical reasons (Figure 6).
- What happens to cats?
 - As indicated above, 3.7% of cats are returned to their owners (Figure 8).
 - 40.5% are adopted, 77.7% of them by families in Spain and 22.3% by families abroad (Figure 17).
 - 15.4% remain in shelters, 13.5% die or are put down for medical reasons and 2.8% are put down for non-medical reasons (Figure 8).

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



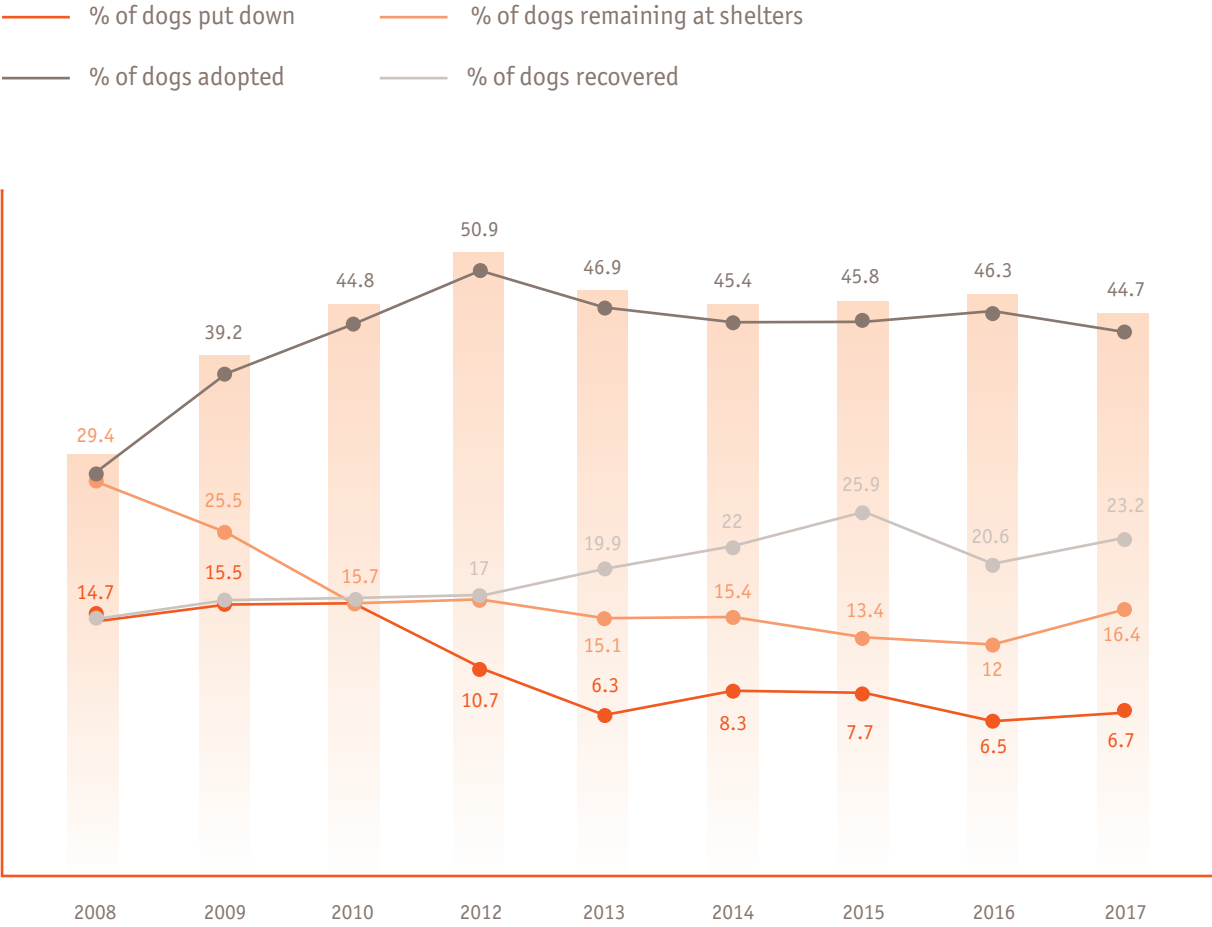
Our interpretation:

- Promoting adoption is one of the most effective strategies for reducing the number of abandoned animals.
- 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 condemned to spend the rest of their lives in a shelter or, in many cases, to be put down.

The data for 2017 show a slight increase in the number of dogs recovered by their owners, but the number of animals remaining in shelters is also up and adoptions are down (Figure 18).

The increasing number of dogs left in shelters is a particular cause for concern. If this trend is maintained, the problem of overcrowding already suffered by many shelters in Spain could become still worse in the medium and long term (Figure 18).

Figure 18 Trend in the proportions of dogs which are recovered by their owners or adopted, which die or are put down and which remain at shelters



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

What is the profile of abandoned dogs and cats?

- 19.92 % of the animals taken in by shelters and animal welfare associations are pure breed, while the rest are mixed-breed (Figure 19).
 - A breakdown of data by species reveals that 23.4% of the dogs and 11.4% of the cats taken in by shelters are pure-breed, while the rest are mixed-breed (Figure 19).
 - Almost half of all dogs abandoned are medium-sized (Figure 20).
 - Most dogs and cats arrive at shelters as adults, though a number of puppies/kittens and seniors are also taken in (Figure 21).

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

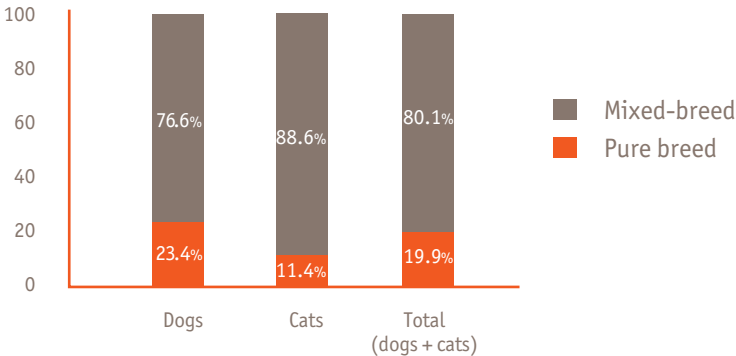


Figure 20 Size of dogs taken in by animal shelters

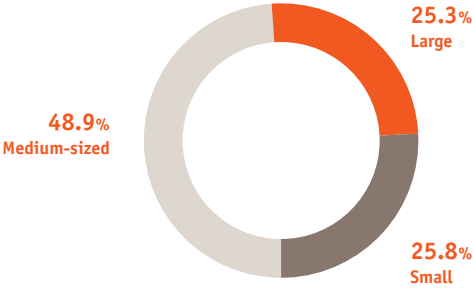
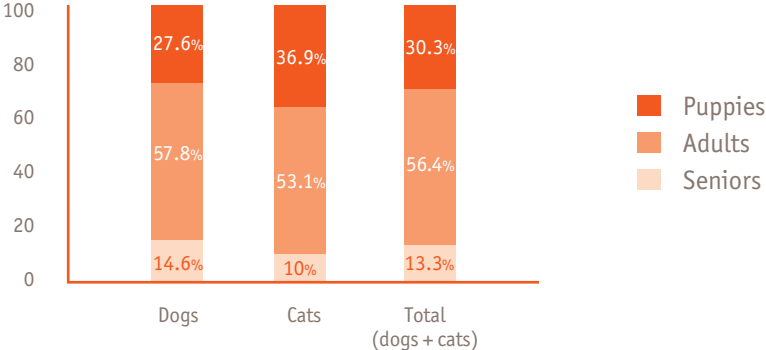


Figure 21 Age-range of animals taken in by shelters



Our interpretation:

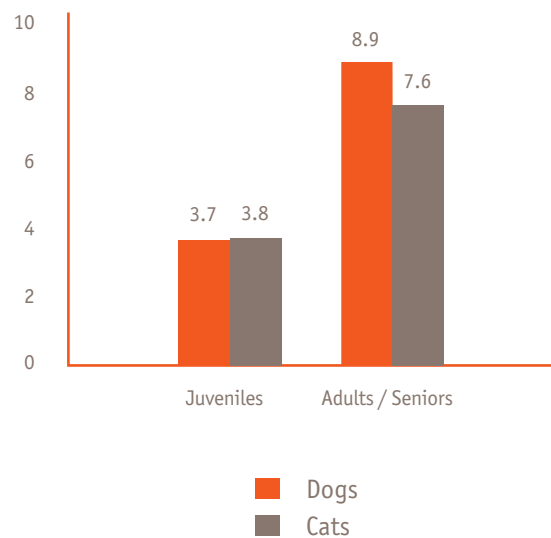
- Abandonment affects dogs and cats of all types and is not restricted to particular age groups or breeds.
- The proportion of medium-sized and large dogs taken in by shelters exceeds the proportion of the general dog population for which they account. This suggests that small dogs may be abandoned and 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.

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

Is it true that juveniles are more likely to be adopted?

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

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



Our interpretation:

- The less time spent by juveniles 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. A scientific study conducted in 2017 as part of the Postgraduate Diploma in Human/Nonhuman Animal Studies at the Fundación Affinity Chair of Animals and Health at the Autonomous University of Barcelona suggests that many people would adopt older animals if they were given aid or incentives in caring for them⁴.

Why do some people abandon their pets?

- Key facts and figures:
 - 65.3% 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). 25.6% are brought in by private individuals who have found them, and only 9.1% are taken directly 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 (15.5%), the end of the hunting season (12.2%), financial factors (11.7%), behaviour of the animal (11.4%) and loss of interest in the animal (10.7%) (Figure 24).

Figure 23 Provenance of animals taken in by shelters

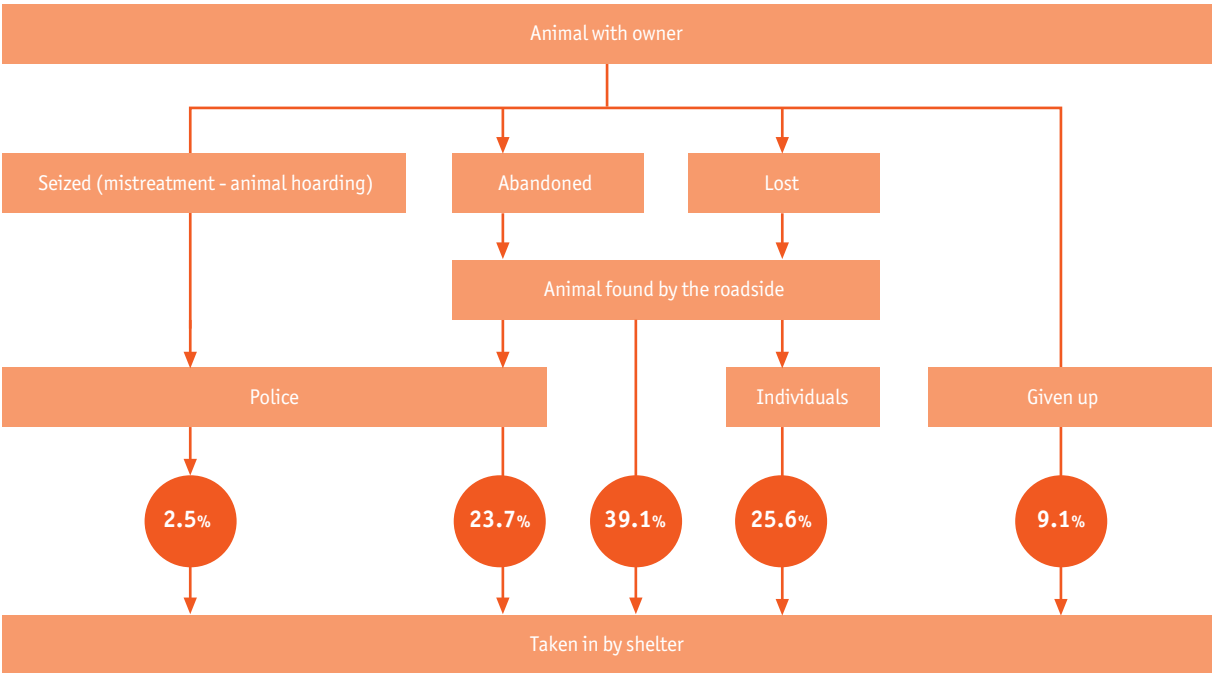
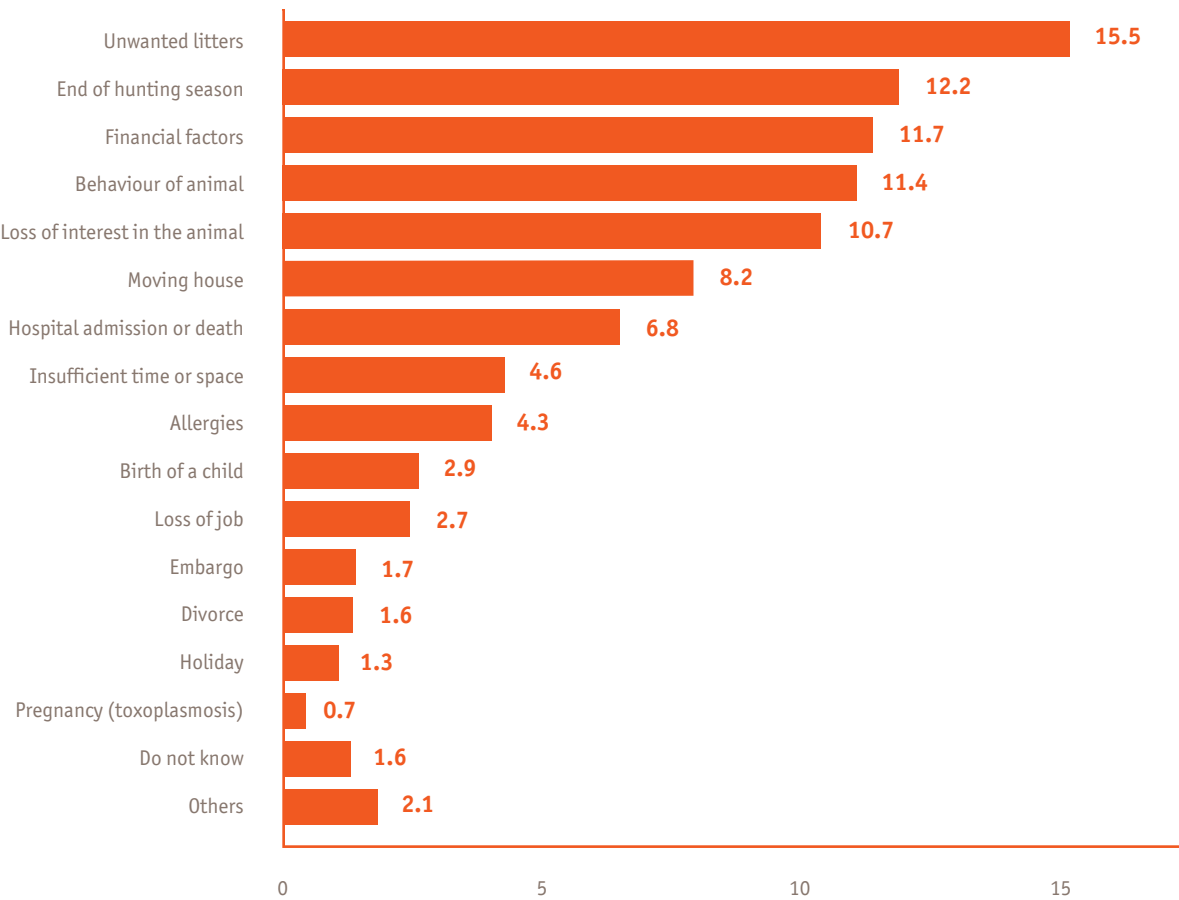


Figure 24 Reasons for abandoning pets



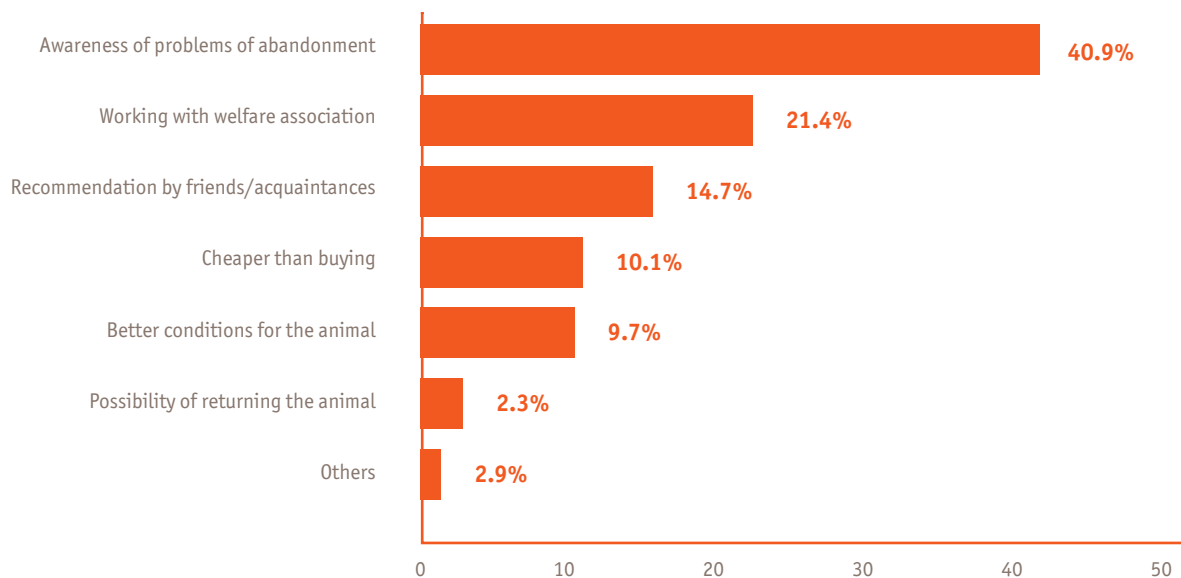
Our interpretation:

- Unwanted litters are the top reason given for abandoning animals again this year.
This again highlights the importance of sterilising pets as one of the best strategies for reducing the number of animals abandoned.
- The animal welfare associations that took part in the study highlighted the end of the hunting season as a significant reason for abandonment. In future studies we will seek to compile information on the total number of animals affected, on their breeds and on the areas of Spain most affected by this worrying situation.
- As shown in the 2016 study, financial factors and behavioural problems are also frequent causes of abandonment of pets.
- 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 (40.9%), a desire to work with an animal welfare association (21.4%) and recommendations by friends or acquaintances (14.7%) (Figure 25).

Figure 25 Reasons given for adopting a pet



Our interpretation:

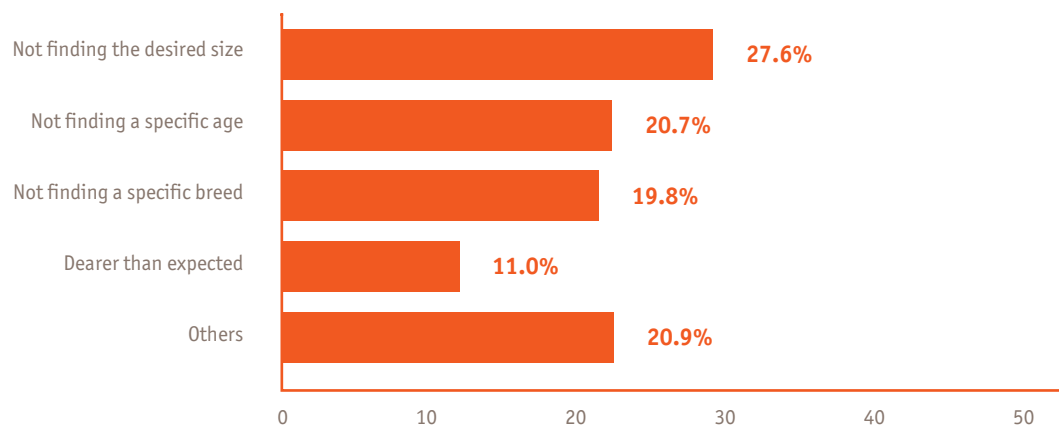
- These results differ only very slightly from those obtained in the 2015 and 2016 studies.
- Adoption is a win-win option for acquiring a pet: it benefits the family, the animal welfare association and, of course, the dog or cat itself.
- By adopting an animal many people not only incorporate a new family member but also support a major social cause: defending animal welfare.

Adoption must be encouraged as a clear option for bringing a pet into a family.

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

- Key facts and figures:
 - 29.2% 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 (27.6%), age (20.7%) or breed (19.8%) (Figure 26).
 - 11% 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 culmination of an in-depth reflection on what impact the pet will have on quality-of-life in the household. In this regard, a study by Fundación Affinity 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 nine 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:
 - 7.2% of the adoptions carried out in 2017 failed.
 - The main reason (41.6%) 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

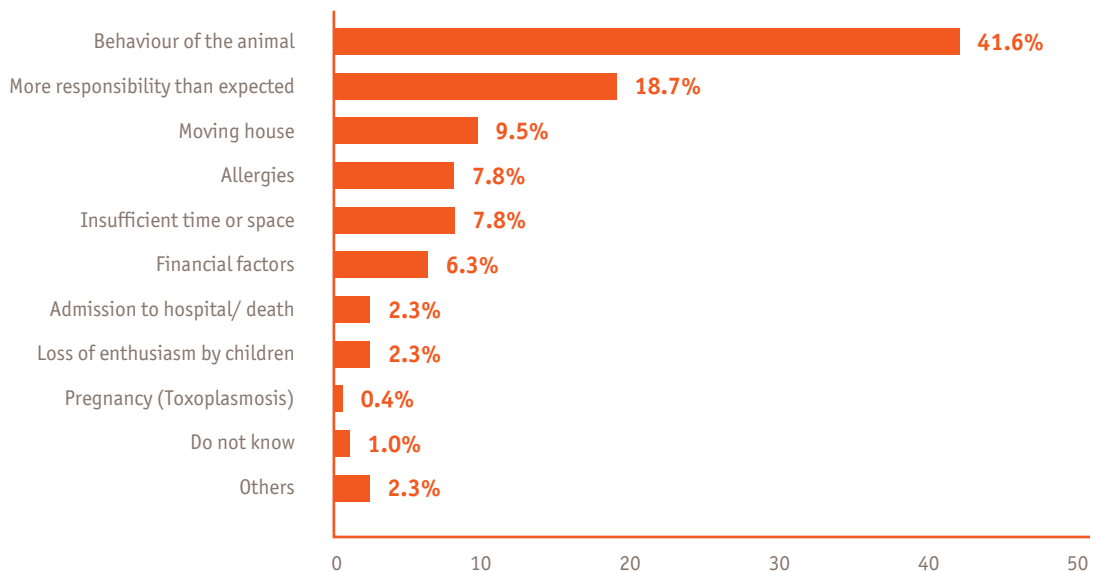
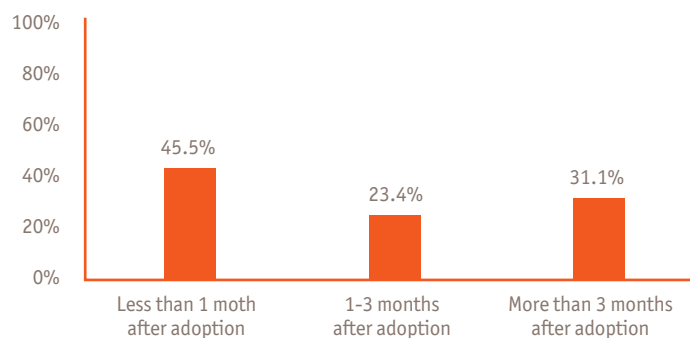


Figure 28 Breakdown of animals returned to shelters by time as from adoption



Our interpretation:

- The increase in the proportion of failed adoptions noted in the 2016 study is maintained.
- 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 welfare associations play in caring for stray and feral cats?

Stray and feral cats tend to form more or less large groups known as colonies. Many are managed by public and private-sector animal welfare associations to ensure that the animals are well cared for. Support for colonies includes regular health checks on cats, feeding and sterilisation to prevent overpopulation problems.

- Key facts and figures:
 - 42.4% of the associations that took part in this study regularly manage cat colonies.
 - The average number of cat colonies handled by each organisation is 29, with an average of 14-15 cats per colony.
 - 13.1% of the cats taken in by shelters and welfare associations in 2017 were relocated to monitored cat colonies (Figure 8).

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 Fundación Affinity Animals & Health Chair at the Autonomous University of Barcelona indicates that most people are unaware that monitored cat colonies exist, but react favourably to the idea⁵. This finding is particularly interesting in view of the fact that 704 monitored cat colonies were counted in Barcelona in 2016.
- A large increase is observed in the proportion of abandoned or lost cats which are relocated in colonies, from 6.5% in 2016 to 13.1% in 2017. The trend in this indicator merits careful monitoring in the coming years, as a steady increase could stretch the capacity of the cat colonies.

Main conclusions:

- Abandonment continues to be a major animal welfare problem in Spain. The numbers of animals taken in by shelters in 2017 are comparable to those recorded in the 2016 study. This seems to confirm that the slight downward trend observed in recent years has stalled somewhat.
- Sterilisation, proper identification and adoption are the three main strategies for preventing or at least minimising the impact of pet abandonment. Sterilisation 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 combating the problem of 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.

The importance of educating the public on matters of responsible pet care must be stressed as an essential factor in preventing abandonment in the medium and long term.

- Over and above mere 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.

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