Data Basics Workbook

Powered by Hill's
Transforming Lives

Welcome to the World of Animal Shelter Data!

Welcome to the Data Basics Workbook, a cornerstone of the Shelter Animals Count Data Foundations Series, powered by Hill's Pet Nutrition. We are excited to introduce this groundbreaking resource, which is designed to help your organization strengthen its data practices, improve consistency, and contribute to a larger, more impactful movement in animal welfare.

At Shelter Animals Count, we know that reliable and standardized data is one of the most powerful tools available to organizations like yours. This workbook was created to guide you in building the foundation for better data collection, interpretation, and reporting. By embracing standardized data practices, you not only enhance your own organization's work but also help to advance the entire animal welfare field.

Why is data so important? When we all measure and report information consistently, we can begin to uncover trends and patterns that reveal the true challenges and successes of our work—from the local level all the way to national trends. Your data is a critical piece of this collective effort, contributing to the larger puzzle that influences policy decisions, funding opportunities, and the development of programs that support pets and strengthen communities.

Inside this workbook, you'll find essential resources and actionable strategies for developing and strengthening your organization's data practices. From understanding and using the correct terminology to learning techniques for ensuring data accuracy and cleanup, this guide will empower you to make the most of your data and contribute to the collective progress of the industry.

Hill's Pet Nutrition values this workbook because it lays the groundwork for standardized data practices and helps create a unified approach to understanding the needs of animals nationwide. Together, by improving data standards and transparency, we are building a stronger, more unified animal welfare network—one where every organization, and every animal, has a voice. We're proud to support you on this important journey and look forward to the positive change we'll create together.

Thank you for your dedication to this vital work.

With gratitude,

Stephanie Filer
Executive Director, Shelter Animals Count

Courtney Suthoff
Director of Shelter and External Communications, Hill's Pet Nutrition

> "As a leader in animal welfare, Hill's Pet Nutrition is proud to support the Data Basics Workbook because it's the first resource of its kind in our industry. By providing organizations with the tools to standardize data practices, this workbook helps create a unified approach to measuring and understanding the needs of animals across the country. Standardized data not only strengthens individual organizations but also empowers the entire field to make data-driven decisions that drive progress and save lives."
>
> Courtney Suthoff, Hill's Pet Nutrition

Introduction and Purpose of this Workbook

Shelter Animals Count (SAC) has proudly partnered with Hills Pet Nutrition to bring this foundational guide to animal shelter data to animal welfare professionals and advocates everywhere. Written and designed for all levels of learners, it's especially written to serve as a key learning manual for animal welfare employees. Because animal shelter professionals often learn 'on the job' and must begin regular work almost immediately after starting, they're typically entering and reading animal shelter data before they fully understand the basics and the importance of accurate, consistent information.

The workbook is designed in three sections. In each section, you'll also find discussion questions and group activities which can both be used by facilitators to spark insights and create an engaged learning experience. Whether you're a seasoned animal welfare professional who wants a refresher on animal shelter data, a supervisor training new team members, a dedicated volunteer, or a brand new animal shelter employee, we promise you'll gain valuable information and skills by reading the workbook and completing the activities and quizzes.

In **Part 1**, we'll talk about the role of animal shelter data and how individual animal shelter data contributes to the overall national dataset managed by Shelter Animals Count.

In **Part 2**, we'll give you tips on animal shelter data best practices and we'll walk you through some real-life animal shelter data questions and offer advice on how to get the most out of your own data. Learn the value of contributing your data to Shelter Animals Count, and how you can use our dashboards and portals to transparently highlight your data.

In **Part 3**, we'll talk terminology and give you simple, straightforward definitions for all the words and phrases you're likely to encounter in talks about animal shelter data. in this section, we'll also break down some basic data calculations that can help you make program and policy decisions based on your own data, and you'll be able to browse through our **Animal Welfare Glossary**.
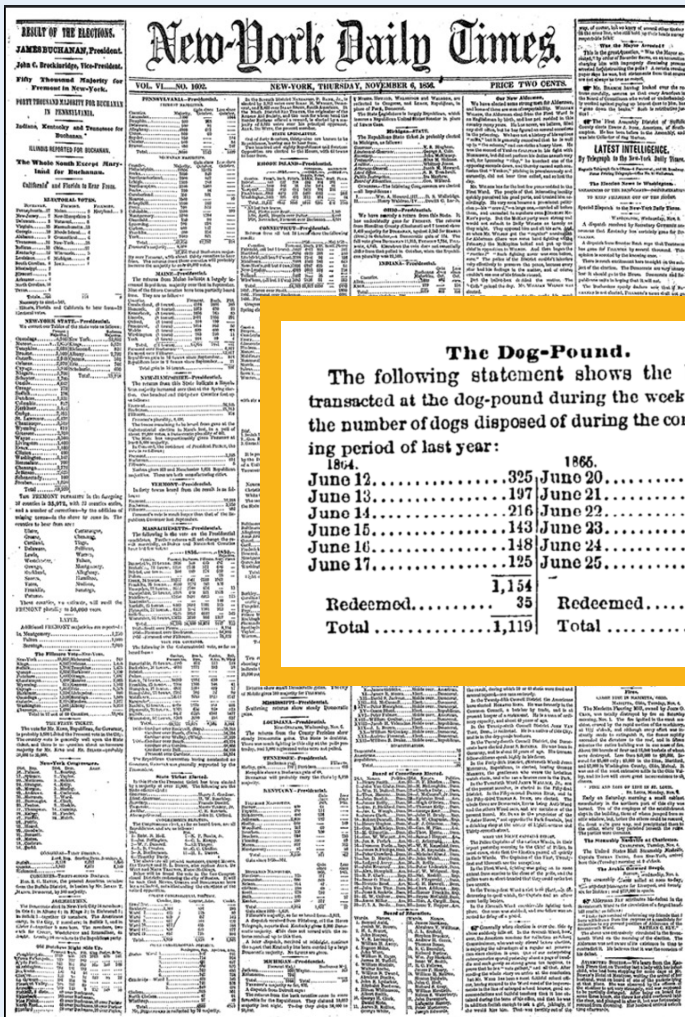
Part 1

Animal Shelter Data Basics

What is animal shelter data and why do we collect it?

Think about all the animals that come through the doors of your animal shelter or rescue. Each one has a story: where they came from, their health, and where they end up. Shelter data is like keeping a diary for each of these animals. It's writing down important information about every cat, dog, or other animal in your care.

The Dog-Pound.

The following statement shows the business transacted at the dog-pound during the week, and also the number of dogs disposed of during the corresponding period of last year:

1864.		1865.	
June 12	325	June 20	808
June 13	197	June 21	222
June 14	216	June 22	114
June 15	143	June 23	126
June 16	148	June 24	77
June 17	125	June 25	66
	1,154		913
Redeemed	35	Redeemed	66
Total	1,119	Total	829

A Brief History of Animal Shelter Data

You might be surprised to know that local government agencies in some parts of the U.S. have been keeping records of animal intakes and outcomes since the mid-1800s. In cities like New York, Boston, and Philadelphia, animal intakes and outcomes were reported in newspapers as early as 1850. This is a clue that stray and homeless pets were considered a matter of public interest very early in our history.

More recently, there have been national efforts to standardize animal shelter and rescue data. One of the biggest challenges in animal welfare data is the lack of state and federal reporting standards. This results in inconsistencies in how and what animal shelters and rescues report, which makes it difficult for us to get an accurate national picture of how many animals are entering and exiting shelters, and how they are coming and going. The following timeline includes both the emergence of shelter data management systems and various national efforts to standardize animal shelter and rescue data.

Animal Shelter and Rescue Data Timeline

1984: Early data collection efforts begin in animal welfare.

1993: The National Council on Pet Population Study and Policy forms to track and address pet homelessness and overpopulation.

2004: Animal welfare leaders from around the nation came together in Asilomar, California to create a model of data standardization that became known as the Asilomar Accords. They also adopted definitions for the terms "adoptable," "healthy," and "unadoptable."

2011: American Humane establishes the Animal Welfare Research institute.

2012: Shelter Animals Count is formed as an independent non-profit with the goal of creating a centralized, standardized database for shelter data and provide a national overview of intake and outcome trends.

2016: Shelter Animals Count begins collecting intake/outcome data for dogs and cats.

2021: Shelter Animals Count data collection expands to include all species as well as Community Services.

Position Statement on Data Collection & Reporting - ASPCA
The Asilomar Accords
American Humane - History
New York Times - Time Machine

When we talk about shelter data today, we're talking about:

- How many animals come to our shelter?
- Where they came from.
- Their age, type, and health.
- What happens during animals' stay
- Where animals go when they leave.

Did you know?

Animal shelter data management systems can track more than just animal data. Many organizations use them to track animal control functions and community pet services, as well as licensing, foster care, and other metrics. This toolkit is mainly focused on the basics of intakes, care, and outcomes because these are the most widely-tracked metrics.

Animal shelters share some similarities with other types of organizations like hospitals. Just like animal shelters, hospitals track intake types (emergency, scheduled), length of stay, outcome types (discharged, transferred to another facility), status (in surgery, recovery, ICU), and population capacity. Just like hospitals, high-functioning animal shelters don't just need to collect data - they need to understand their data and use it to set priorities and make decisions.

Animal shelter data-tracking isn't just busywork. Keeping track of all this information might seem like an extra chore, but it's actually a powerful tool for helping animals!

Here's how:

We can find out what works best.

If lots of cats get adopted at weekend events, we know to plan more of them or if certain types of dogs are more likely to stay longer, we can create special programs to help them get adopted more quickly.

We can plan ahead.

We can review historical trends. When we know kitten season is coming, we can be prepared with foster supplies and people ready to help. We can also determine if a lot of stray pets are coming from one part of a community and direct more support and services to that place.

We can ask for and get help when needed.

We can show our community exactly what supplies we need to help a particular population of vulnerable pets. We can show our supporters and donors how their help makes a difference.

Discussion Question

Without looking, guess what type of intake (stray, owner surrender, transfer, or something else) is most common at your shelter or rescue. Next, ask someone at your shelter to find out this information. If you report to Shelter Animals Count, you can find this information on your personalized data dashboard too!

You can think of shelter data like pieces of a puzzle. Each piece of information - an intake, an outcome, a medical treatment - connects with others to show the complete picture of what's happening in your shelter. When pieces are missing or placed incorrectly, you can't see the whole picture clearly.

In modern animal sheltering, data is the key to understanding and improving how we help animals. Shelter data is standardized information that we collect and share about every animal and every service we provide. This standardization means that regardless of shelter management software you use (or don't use), you're collecting similar core information that can be understood across the field.

When you enter data into your shelter software database, it serves multiple purposes including helping you manage **daily operations**, create **standardized reports**, and contribute to **Shelter Animals Count's national database**. Chances are, if you use an animal shelter database, your data is included in one of our SAC national reports!

Every time you enter information into your shelter software, you create a legal record, track a point in each animal's journey through the software system, contribute to big picture data, and help Shelter Animals Count achieve their mission of making sure every shelter pet is counted. There are many animal shelter software systems. Don't forget, you can automatically transfer your data to Shelter Animals Count through our APIs with many softwares. Regardless of what database your shelter or rescue uses, it probably allows you to create animal records, perform daily tasks, and run reports.

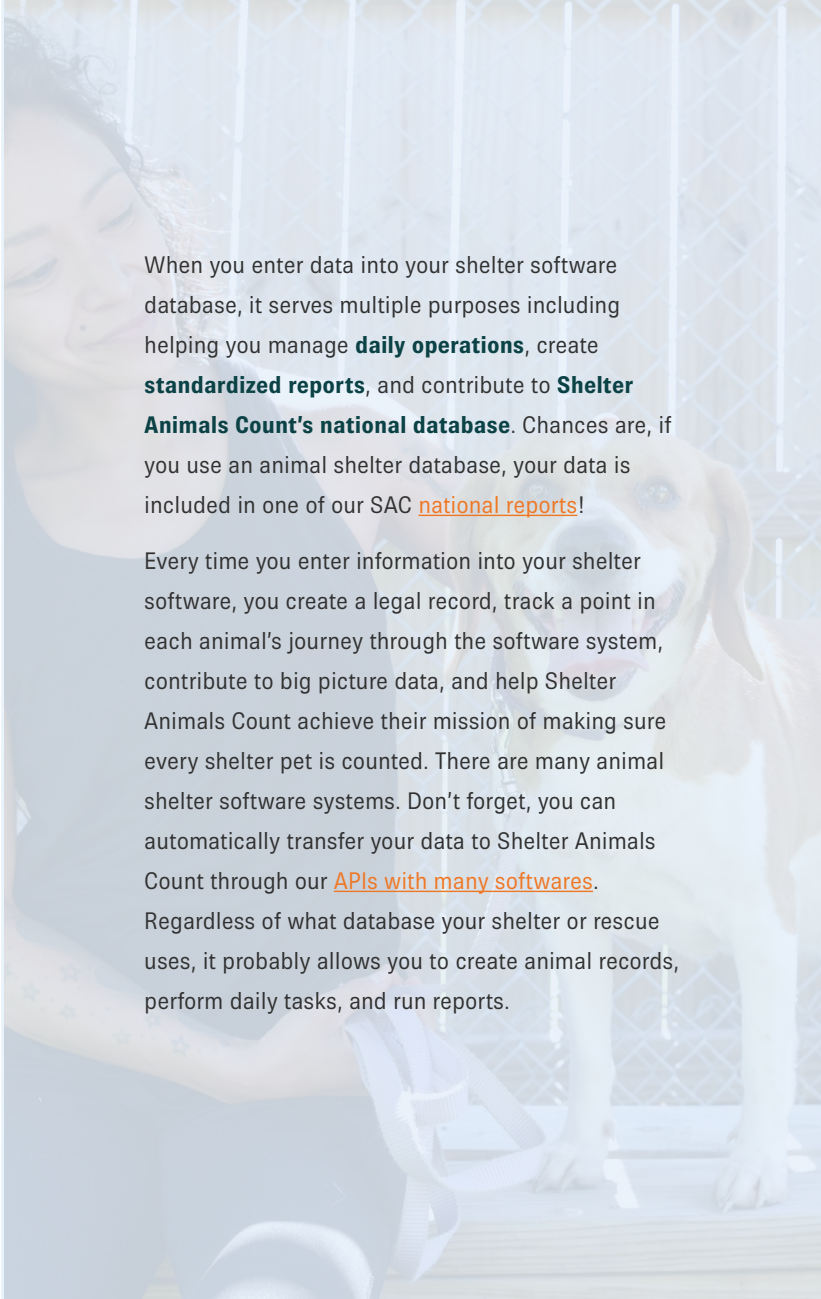## Key data points tracked by animal shelter software systems include:

- Intake types
  stray, owner surrender, transfer in, etc.

- Animal characteristics
  species, age, sex, breed, etc.

- Outcomes
  adoption, return to owner, transfer out, etc.

- Intake and outcome reasons

- Length of stay (LOS)

- Medical and behavioral information

- Program metrics
  spay/neuter services, pet food banks, animal control information, etc.

Try This!

Choose three pets in your current population and look up their individual records. These should be pets you have met and feel free to pick your 'favorites.' Find their records and read all the details. What did you learn about these pets, if anything? What should have been in their record, but isn't? If you have something to share about any of your picks, enter a new note about them that can help them find their new families!

SAC collects all of this data to provide comprehensive information about how many pets enter and exit animal shelters and rescues throughout the United States. When you visit the intakes and outcomes dashboard, you can explore month-to-month changes and data trends within the current calendar year. To learn about regional and state data trends over multiple years, you can visit the SAC Industry Trends Dashboard.

When animal welfare professionals begin to use animal shelter software, they may not know that many organizations track community pet services like spay and neuter, vet services, field services, and behavior services. You can find the national aggregated community services data on the SAC Community Services Dashboard.

Learning Comprehension Quiz

1   When did Shelter Animals Count start collecting intake/outcome data for dogs and cats?

_____

2   What is one reason data-tracking is important for helping animals?

_____
_____
_____
_____

3   What is one way your organization uses data to make decisions?

_____
_____
_____
_____

4   According to this guide, how could data help us save more vulnerable kittens?

_____
_____
_____
_____

Ideas on How You Can Use Data to Bring in Community Support

There are so many opportunities for animal welfare organizations to use data to communicate their mission, improve services, and save more lives. Here are 20 creative and potentially impactful ways animal shelters and rescue groups can use their data to improve operations, community engagement, and animal outcomes.

Identify Seasonal Trends: Use intake and outcome data to predict high-traffic seasons and prepare resources like staffing, fosters, and supplies accordingly.

Pinpoint Adoption Trends: Analyze adoption rates by species, breed, age, and season to design targeted adoption promotions.

Monitor Length of Stay (LOS): Track and reduce the average LOS for animals, especially long-stay animals, by creating specific strategies like special events or focused marketing.

Create Targeted Foster Recruitment: Identify which types of animals (e.g., neonates, large dogs, medical cases) stay the longest and recruit fosters for these groups.

Analyze Return-to-Owner (RTO) Rates: Study which animals are reunited with their families most often (and least often) to tailor RTO efforts, like microchipping or online lost pet searches.

Develop Customized Volunteer Roles: Use data on staffing bottlenecks to create volunteer roles that alleviate specific operational pain points, such as cleaning or animal enrichment.

Predict Staffing Needs: Use historical data on shelter activity to plan optimal staffing levels for intake, care, and adoption peaks.

Highlight Community Impact: Share data like lives saved, RTOs, and spay/neuter numbers in infographics to show the shelter's impact and build community trust and support.

Plan for Disaster Response: Review intake data from past emergencies (e.g., storms, fires) to build disaster plans, stock supplies, and improve readiness.

Track Euthanasia Trends: Use historical data to identify the most vulnerable populations and invest in solutions, such as medical funding or training staff in specific animal handling.

Improve Marketing Strategies: Analyze the success of past campaigns (e.g., adoption promotions or events) to identify what works and what doesn't for specific animal types.

Measure Program Effectiveness: Use metrics to evaluate the success of programs like TNR (Trap-Neuter-Return), behavior modification, or spay/neuter campaigns.

Guide Resource Allocation: Analyze which services (e.g., medical care, behavioral interventions) have the greatest impact on outcomes and allocate funds strategically.

Build Data-Driven Partnerships: Present compelling metrics to attract funding and collaboration from donors, rescue groups, or corporate sponsors.

Enhance Public Education Efforts: Share data trends (e.g., overpopulation or stray dog hotspots) with the community to foster awareness and action.

Set and Track Goals: Use data to set SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Time-bound) goals for reducing intake, increasing adoptions, or other objectives.

Boost Employee and Volunteer Morale: Celebrate successes by sharing stats on animals saved, length of stay reduced, or volunteer hours contributed.

Reduce Owner Surrenders: Use intake data to identify common reasons for surrender and create programs (e.g., pet food pantries or behavior support) to keep pets in homes.

Optimize Kennel Space: Track which kennel configurations or housing types result in the best outcomes for different animal populations (e.g., double-sided kennels for large dogs).

Engage with Funders: Use compelling data to write grant applications and demonstrate the shelter's efficiency, innovation, and impact to potential funders.

Try This!

What is something you'd like to know about animals that enter and exit your shelter or rescue? Is this something you can discover in your shelter software system? What might you be able to do or change if you knew this information?

Great Examples

Now that you've learned about some ways that you can highlight your data to bring in community support, let's see it in action!

Here are some examples of how organizations are highlighting their data in meaningful ways:

Operation Kindness Impact Figures are a customer-friendly, visualization of shelter data.

San Diego Humane Society Annual Reports combine data and stories to teach the public about the important work performed by this large organization.

Dallas Animal Services open data portal provides real-time intake and outcome data.

KC Pet Project statistics offer a visual data summary as well as a more detailed version of annual data that connects to monthly data reports.

Michigan Humane intake and outcome report is an easy-to-understand spreadsheet version of a data report.

Wisconsin Humane Society's animal intakes and outcomes page transparently shows their data and philosophies.

Did you know?

You can embed your Shelter Animals Count dashboards showing your data on your website? Here is how Wisconsin Humane Society highlights their data using SAC's dashboards.

Email info@shelteranimalscount.org to add our dashboards to your website for easy data sharing.
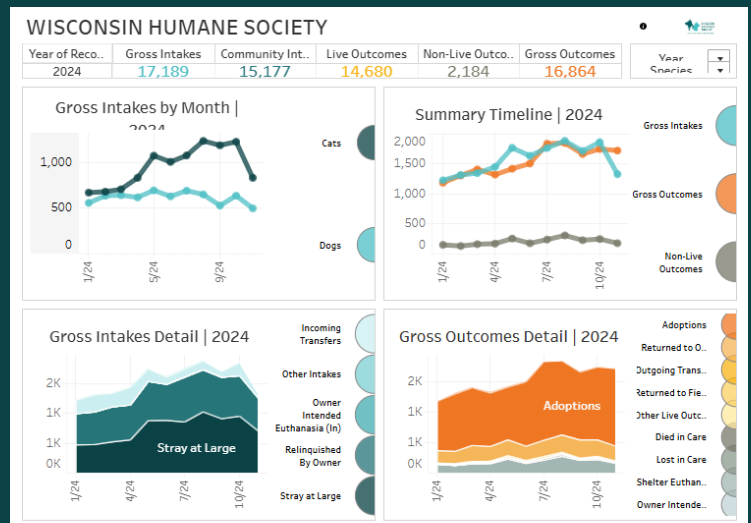
This dashboard is live on the Wisconsin Humane Society website and data is updated thanks to Shelter Animals Count. The dashboard is interactive, and you can select various years of data or view only certain species.

The Power of Your Data: Why Participating in Shelter Animals Count Matters

Your organization's data is more than just numbers—it's a story, a voice, and a crucial piece of the puzzle in understanding the challenges and successes of animal welfare. By contributing your data to Shelter Animals Count (SAC), you're joining a national movement to create a unified, accurate, and transparent picture of animal welfare across the United States. Together, we can use data to drive progress, improve outcomes, and save more lives.

■ Reporting Shelter ■ Non Reporting Shelter
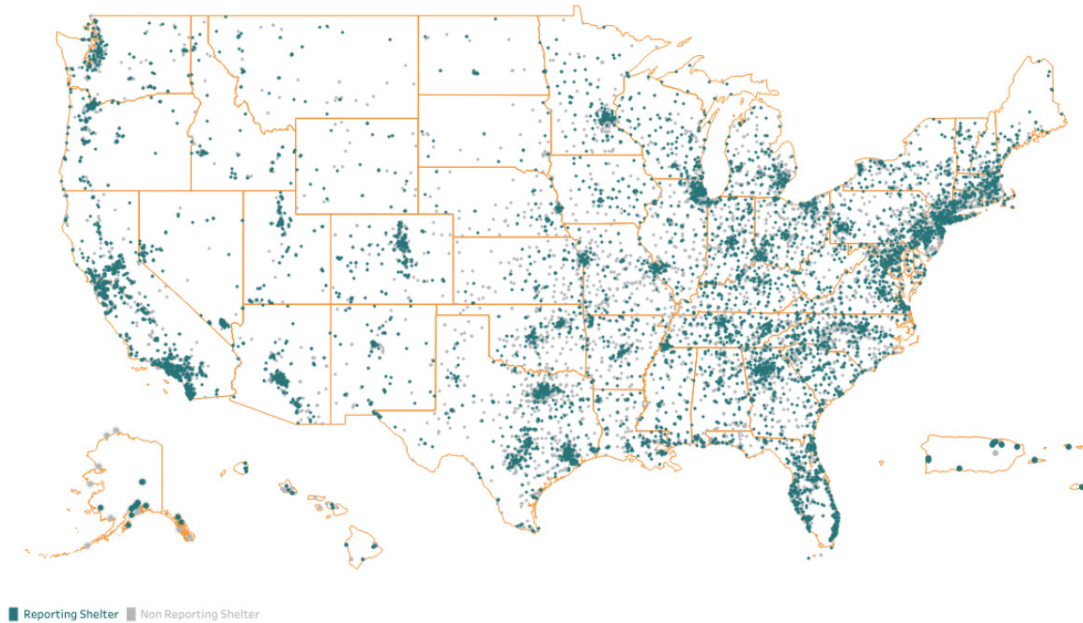
How Your Data Fuels National Progress

Build the Bigger Picture
Contribute to a unified view of animal welfare trends across the U.S.

Advance the Field
Tackle challenges like length of stay and live outcomes with standardized data.

Inspire Change
Drive better policies, funding, and collaboration at every level.

Why Every Data Point Matters

Complete the Picture
Every intake, outcome, and service builds the foundation for change.

Foster Collaboration
Your data strengthens a national effort to improve animal welfare.

Empower Progress
Together, we create a future guided by data and better outcomes for animals and communities.

The Role of Shelter Animals Count

Shelter Animals Count (SAC) serves as a national nonprofit organization dedicated to the collection, analysis, and sharing of reliable data about animals in shelters and rescues across the United States. It acts as a neutral entity that empowers organizations to use data as a tool for improving animal welfare efforts at local and national levels.

It's core roles include:

Providing a Centralized Data Platform: SAC collects and maintains standardized data, offering organizations a platform to track shelter trends and benchmark their performance in relation to other organizations in the industry.

Advancing Transparency and Accountability: By promoting data standardization and sharing, SAC fosters trust and collaboration among stakeholders.

Supporting Informed Decision-Making: The data collected enables animal welfare organizations to make evidence-based decisions that address challenges such as overpopulation, length of stay, and adoption barriers.

> Shelter Animals Count is a vital resource for the animal welfare field, turning raw data into actionable insights that help save lives and build a brighter future for animals.

Promoting Collaboration: SAC brings together shelters, rescues, and other partners to share insights and resources, driving collective solutions to industry-wide issues.

Advocating for a Data-Driven Culture: Through educational initiatives like the Data Foundations Series, SAC emphasizes the importance of using data to tell impactful stories, secure funding, and improve outcomes for animals.
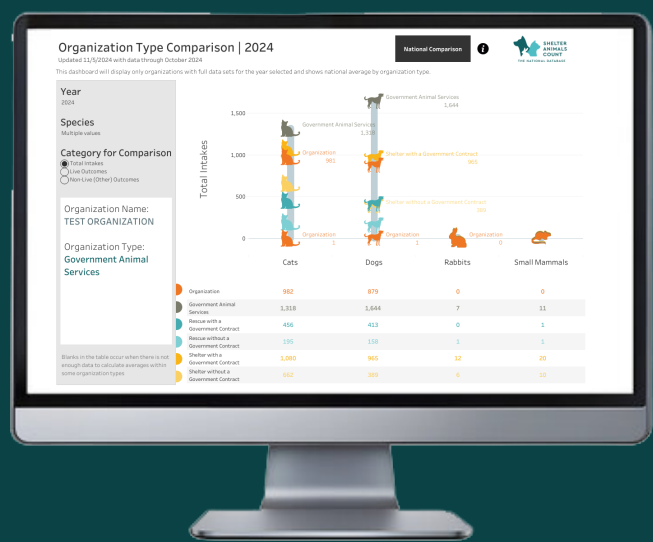
Understanding Animal-Level Data

Animal-level data provides detailed information about each individual animal in a shelter, including age, breed, sex, alter status, intake and outcome types, and key dates. Unlike aggregated data, which combines information into categories, this data focuses on the unique journey of each animal.

Shelter Animals Count uses animal-level data to uncover trends, address challenges, and provide deeper insights into shelter operations. This detailed view helps organizations make informed decisions and improve outcomes for animals and communities.

🌐 Animal Level Data SOPs - Shelter Animals Count

Register Your Organization with Shelter Animals Count:

Registration Instructions:

Register your account for free online at Shelter Animals Count. Once registered, you should receive an email confirmation to confirm your account and set a password. From there, we recommend utilizing our Youtube Channel for assistance on navigating your portal. Any questions can be directed to our help desk at **info@shelteranimalscount.org**

FAQs

FAQs under Organizations Webpage:

Organizations - Shelter Animals Count

Contributor Corner Resources/FAQs:

Contributor Corner - Shelter Animals Count

APIs Available:

APIs (Application Programming Interfaces) from Shelter Animals Count can be thought of as a digital bridge. They allow software programs, like the ones animal shelters and rescues use, to share data directly with Shelter Animals Count.

Instead of manually entering data, APIs let systems "talk" to each other automatically, making it faster, easier, and more accurate for organizations to submit their shelter data. Think of it like connecting your fitness tracker to a health app—once connected, the data flows seamlessly between them, saving time and keeping things up to date. Your dashboards and reports will automatically be updated in your SAC portal and your organization will qualify for grants available throughout the year.

To opt into our available API data transfers, follow the steps below:

Animals First Users:
Follow these instructions to opt-in to the API through Animals First.

Animal Shelter Manager Users:
Follow these instructions to opt-in to the API through Animal Shelter Manager.

PetPoint Users:
Follow these instructions to opt-in to the API through PetPoint.

Petstablished Users:
Follow these instructions to opt-in to the API through Petstablished.

Shelterluv Users:
Follow these instructions to opt-in to the API through Shelterluv.

Other Software Users:
Development is in the works. Please fill out this form to enroll and be notified when API is available for your shelter's software.

Other Data Entry Resources:

CSV Download Instructions for softwares: Resources - Shelter Animals Count

How to Enter Data Manually

How to Enter Data with a CSV File Upload

Available Dashboards

Intake and Outcome Database (IOD) - Shelter Animals Count

Community Services Database (CSD) - Shelter Animals Count

Industry Trends Dashboard - Shelter Animals Count

Embeddable Dashboards

Enter Your Data in SAC & It Can Sync to Your Website! - Shelter Animals Count

Analytical Dashboard Help

The Analytics and Forecast Dashboard is NOW LIVE! - Shelter Animals Count
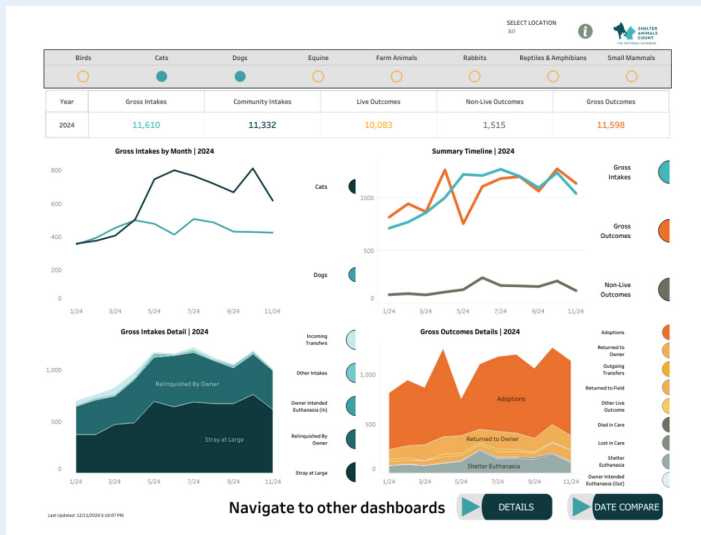
Analytics and Forecast Dashboard Walkthrough

The Data Detail Dashboard

Dashboard Examples

## Shelter Summary Dashboards

Intake/Outcome Dashboard

On the intake/outcome dashboard, organizations can see totals of intake and outcomes by type and age group as well as comparisons to prior months and years.
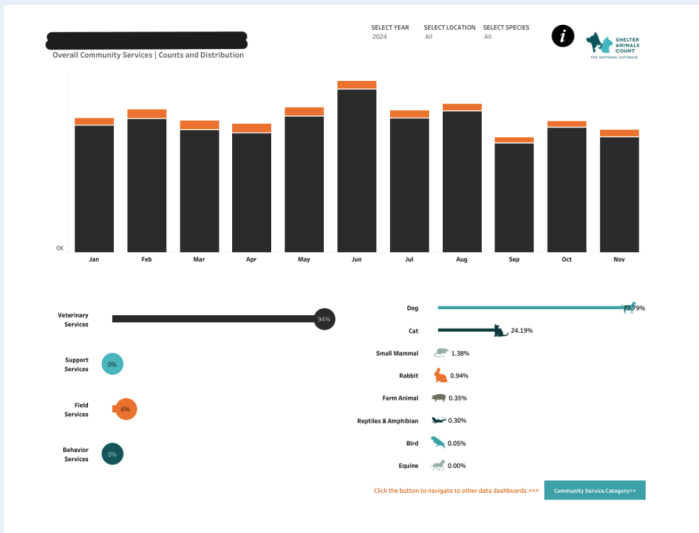

National Organization Comparison Dashboard

Compare your organization's data with your state, region and organization type averages to identify areas of strength and challenges.
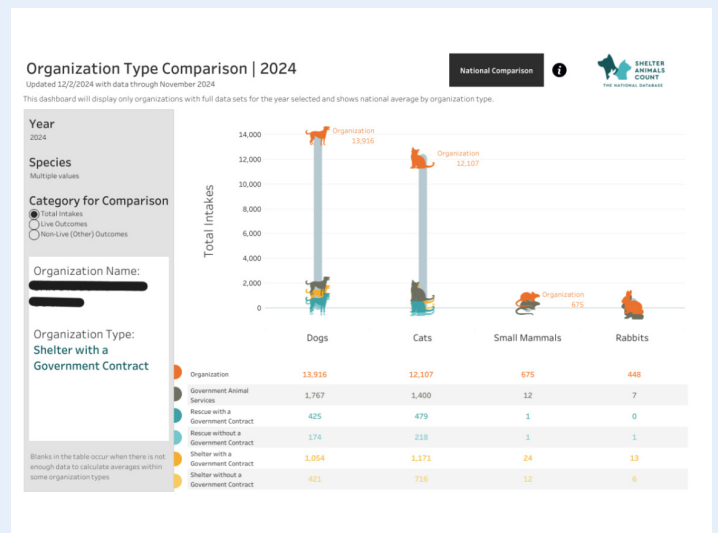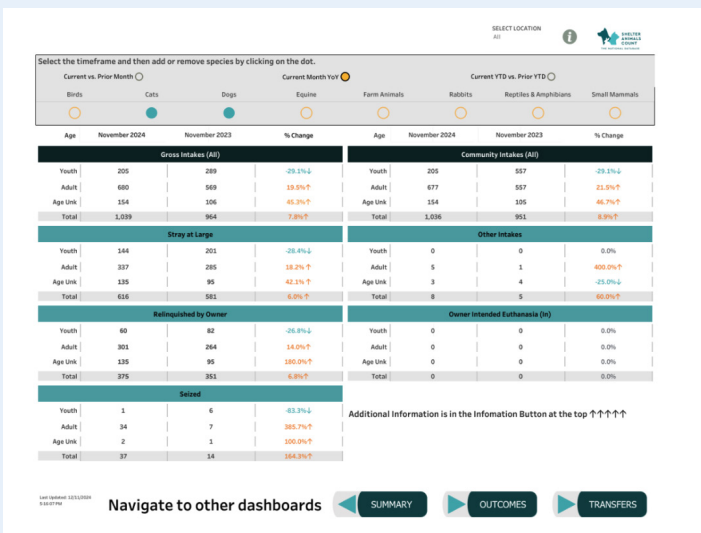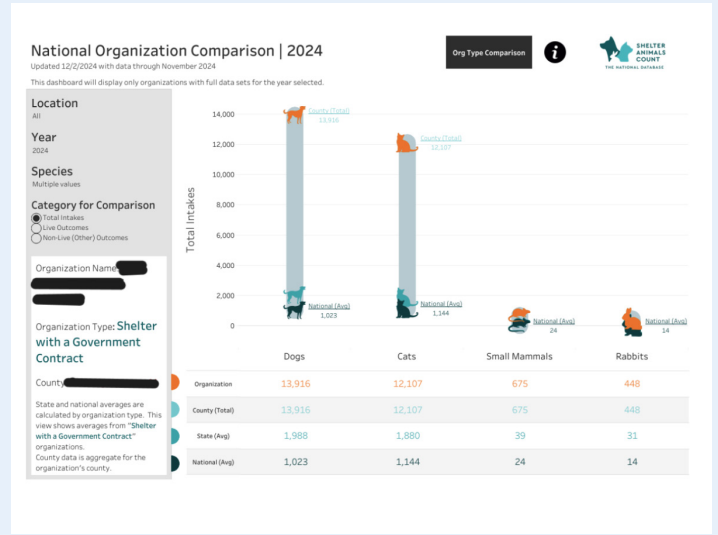
Dashboard Examples

Community Services Dashboard

Organizations can see and understand their distribution of community services they are offering to community and owned pets.

Analytics Dashboard

Organizations can use their Analytics Dashboard to see intake and outcome rates, population balance as well as a forecast on where intakes and outcomes are projected to be based on previous years' data.
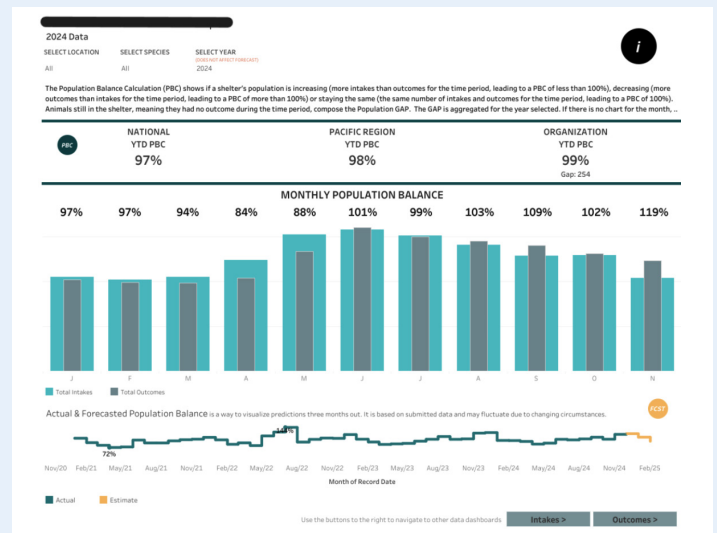
Rehome Dashboard Powered by Adopt-A-Pet

SAC is proud to host the Rehome Dashboard, provided by Adopt-A-Pet. This dashboard gives details on your organization's Rehome referrals for organizations that participate in the Rehome program.
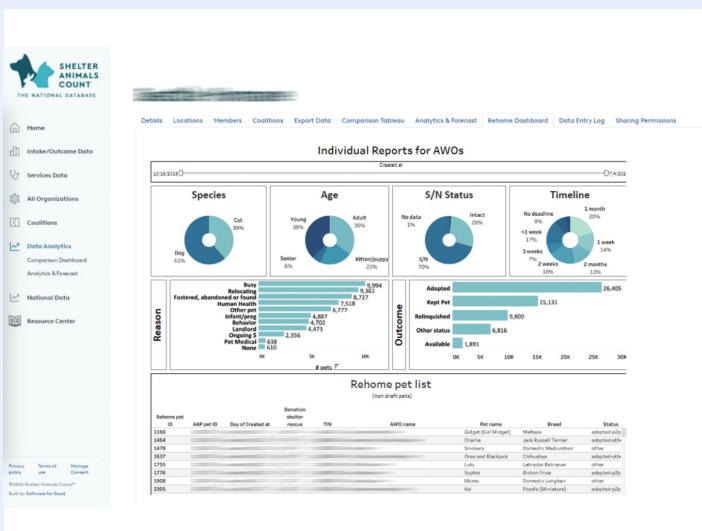
Speaking the Language of Animal Sheltering

Welcome to Animal Welfare's Data Glossary.

Every field has its own language, and animal welfare is no different. When you first start working in an animal shelter or rescue, it might feel like everyone's speaking in code! Don't worry - by the end of this section, you'll be fluent in shelter-speak.

The Players: Imagine your city's animal welfare community as a team of superheroes, each with their own special role in helping a community's pets. Let's meet the team:

Animal shelters are physical buildings and can be run by the government or a nonprofit. Can you think of an example of a government shelter and a nonprofit animal shelter near you? Nonprofit animal shelters often use names like 'humane society,' or 'spca.'

Example
In Phoenix, Arizona, there is a government animal shelter called Maricopa County Animal Care and Control as well as a large nonprofit animal shelter called Arizona Humane Society. These two work together to help tens of thousands of animals each year!

Animal rescues don't usually have a central building. Instead, they operate with a network of dedicated foster homes. Each animal lives with a volunteer family while waiting for their new home. It's like having hundreds of tiny shelters spread throughout your community!

Example
Muttville Senior Dog Rescue specializes in helping older dogs. They have a large foster program, a 'hospice' program for dogs near the end of their lives, and a cage-free facility for dogs while they're waiting for a foster placement.

Sanctuaries provide animals with permanent homes and lifelong care. While they might adopt out some animals, their primary mission is serving as a primary 'home' for animals, sometimes including those with special needs.

Example
10 wolf hybrids were seized in a cruelty case in Riverside, California and were transferred to a sanctuary in Arizona.

Talk about it!

What type is your organization? A shelter, a rescue, or a sanctuary? What other organizations are in your local animal welfare ecosystem. What types of organizations are these? If you need help, you can use a search engine to find local shelters, rescues, and sanctuaries in your area.

The Journey Begins: Understanding Intake

Every animal that comes through our doors has a story. We track these stories through "intake types" - the different ways animals enter our care.

Over-the-Counter vs. From the Field When someone brings an animal directly to us, we call that "over-the-counter." When animal control brings them in, that's "from the field." Both are important paths that bring animals to safety.

The Five Main Ways Animals Come to Us:

1. **From the Community**
Remember that cat you found in your backyard? When unknown pets come to us, they're "strays." We hold them for a legal period (called a "stray hold") to give owners a chance to find them.

2. **Owner Relinquishment**
Sometimes families face hard choices and need to surrender their pets. We call these "owner surrenders" or "relinquishments."

3. **Transfers**
Animals sometimes need to move between organizations. Maybe a small rescue needs help with a large case, or a shelter in another state has space we don't. These are our "transfers in."

4. **Seizures/Confiscates:**
In some cases, pets are taken into custody by animal control or law enforcement due to neglect, cruelty, ordinance violations, police arrests, evictions, or other legal circumstances. These pets are housed at the organization for a legally mandated hold period and may be either owned or unowned.

5. **Born in Care**
Sometimes pregnant animals come to us, leading to tiny new arrivals!

Real World Example

Meet Luna: She came to us as a stray (intake type) found by animal co[...] the field). She had no collar or microchip, so she stayed with us throug[...] hold period. What happened next? That's where outcomes come in...

The Next Chapter: Understanding Outcomes

Every intake needs an outcome - it's how we track where animals go when they leave our care. Th[...] split into two main categories: live outcomes and non-live outcomes.

Live Outcomes: The Happy Endings

- **Adoption:** Finding new loving homes
- **Return to Owner:** Reuniting lost pets with their families
- **Transfers Out:** Moving to partner organizations
- **Return-to-Field:** For community cats who go back to their outdoor homes

Other Outcomes We track these too, because honest data helps us improve:

- **Euthanasia**
- **Lost in care/missing**
- **Died in care**

Status Types: The Middle Chapters

Between intake and outcome, animals transition through various "status types" that reflect their journey within the organization. Keeping detailed and consistent statuses is essential for tracking progress, ensuring proper care, and providing transparency to stakeholders.

Standardizing how statuses are recorded helps organizations align their data, making it easier to identify trends, analyze outcomes, and collaborate with other groups. Clear and consistent status tracking also reduces errors, supports better resource allocation, and ensures every animal's unique circumstances are accounted for accurately.

These "middle chapter" statuses often reflect whether an animal is temporarily unavailable for outcomes, ready for adoption or placement, in foster care, or held for specific legal or medical reasons. Standardizing the terms and definitions used to describe these statuses ensures they are meaningful within the organization and comparable across the animal welfare community.

By maintaining clear and detailed status records, shelters can better support animals, improve operational efficiency, and contribute valuable insights to larger data-driven efforts in animal welfare.

Location, Location, Location

Where animals stay while in care plays a vital role in their overall experience. Each space within a shelter or rescue serves a specific purpose, influenced by the organization's layout and operational needs. While location and status may sometimes use overlapping terms, they refer to distinct aspects of an animal's journey: location describes where the animal is housed, while status reflects their readiness for adoption or other outcomes.

For instance, spaces dedicated to adoption are designed to help potential adopters meet pets looking for new homes. Stray holding areas provide a safe place for lost pets to wait for their families, while isolation spaces are used for animals who are sick or recovering and need to be kept separate for health reasons. Quarantine areas could be reserved for animals under observation for rabies or those that might pose a public safety risk.

Clearly documenting and understanding the purpose of each location helps ensure animals are housed appropriately and receive the care they need while contributing to accurate data tracking and operational efficiency. Thoughtful use of these spaces is crucial for both the well-being of the animals and the smooth operation of the organization.

The Numbers Game: Important Calculations

Now for the math that helps us save lives! Don't worry - we'll keep it simple:

Population Balance
Think of your shelter like a bathtub. Intakes are water flowing in, outcomes are water flowing out. Population balance tells us if we're keeping up with the flow. Each day, your shelter should monitor the total number of animals that entered and the total number of animals that left through any outcome type. If the intakes exceed outcomes for even a few days, your organization can reach or exceed capacity.

Length of Stay (LOS)
How long animals spend with us, from intake to outcome. When you calculate the length of stay, you include only animals that have received an outcome. Important because shorter stays = more lives we can save while longer stays cause more stress on animals and use up space and resources that could help other pets in need. This is different from how you calculate days in care, which is the number of days spent in custody of animals that are currently in the shelter and have not yet received an outcome.

Try This!

Pick three animals currently in your care. Can you identify:

1. Their intake type
2. Their current status
3. Their location in the shelter
4. Days in care so far

What did you learn from this?

Extra credit:

Can you tell how many days in care these three animals spent in your shelter or rescue before they became available? In some shelters, animals spend unnecessary time in an 'unavailable' status which can lengthen your overall length of stay which can increase your overall capacity.

The Details Matter: Animal Information

Every animal gets their own profile with important details:

Animal ID (their unique number)
Species, breed, color
Age and sex
Medical status (spayed/neutered?)
Location found (for strays)
Microchip information
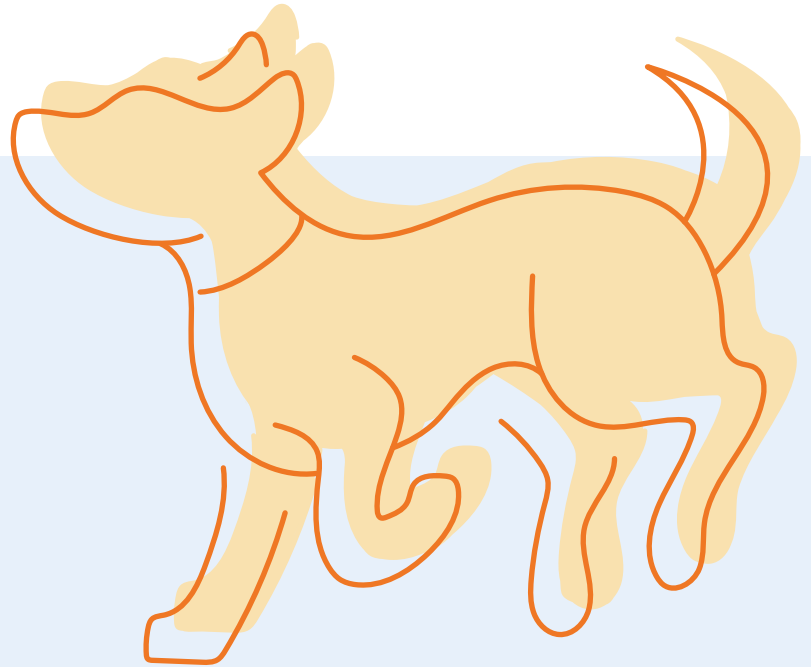
Real World Example

Let's put it all together! Here's Buddy's Story:

Intake Type: Stray

Found: 123 Main Street (zip code 12345)

Description: Male, neutered, 2 year old, black Lab mix

Status: Available after stray hold

Location: Adoption floor

Days in care: 12

Outcome: Adoption!

A Note about Notes

In every shelter software system, there are places to add individualized notes or memos about animals in your care. You can write notes about an animal's behavior or medical history, observations about an animal's behavior or medical condition in the shelter.

QUICK QUIZ!

1 What's the difference between "Length of Stay" and "Days in Care"?

_____

_____

_____

2 Name three different types of animal welfare organizations.

_____

_____

_____

3 What status type would you assign to:

A dog on the second day at the shelter after coming in as a stray?

_____

A cat ready for adoption?

_____

4 week old puppy in a foster home?

_____

Animal Welfare Glossary

The Animal Welfare Glossary from Shelter Animals Count is designed to help define the terms commonly used in the animal welfare sector. Whether you are new to the industry or a seasoned professional, this glossary serves as a valuable resource to ensure a clear and consistent understanding of key terms. By providing comprehensive definitions for the various types of animal welfare organizations, intake and outcome types, and other essential terms, this glossary supports better communication, data collection, and reporting across the field.

Types of Animal Welfare Organizations (AWO)

The following are organizations that intake animals into their care:

Government Animal Shelter: A city or county-operated entity providing animal control services and housing services.

Other terms that you often see referring to this type of shelter:

- **Animal Services:** A term frequently used in the names of organizations or agencies that operate as animal shelters, often providing both sheltering and animal control services. These organizations are sometimes also referred to as Animal Care and Control.

- **Pound:** An antiquated term for a municipal or government animal shelter. It is less commonly used today, as it is tied to a period of animal sheltering when impoundment and euthanasia were the primary functions of municipal animal services.

Animal Shelter with Government Contract: A private/nonprofit agency with a contract for animal control services or housing services. A government contract is a formal agreement with a government entity for animal control and/or housing services.

Animal Shelter without Government Contract: A private/nonprofit agency with a physical facility but no government contract.
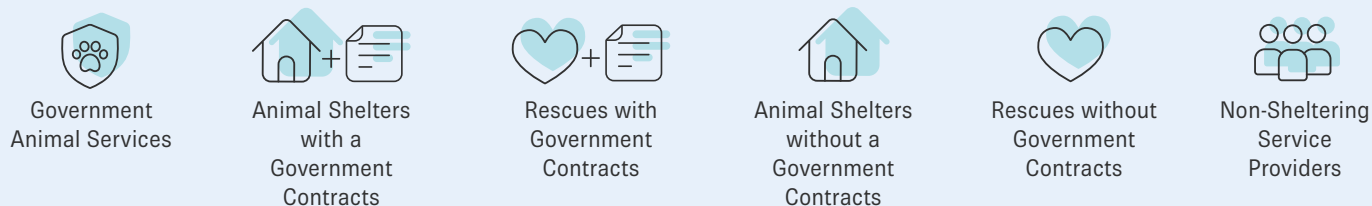
Humane Society or SPCA: Many organizations have these terms in their name. Traditionally, they are unaffiliated with national animal organizations with similar names and are nonprofit organizations that may or may not have government contracts.

Animal Rescue: *Also called 'foster-based rescue'* An animal welfare organization that houses animals exclusively in the homes of volunteers and/or staff of the organization. Rescues can also be 501(c)(3) nonprofit organizations and in some cases, can hold full or partial contracts with government entities.

Sanctuary: A nonprofit that houses animals for the remainder of their lives. Sanctuaries can also be 501(c)(3) nonprofit organizations and some sanctuaries also function as rescue groups that adopt some animals.

How Shelter Animals Count Distinguishes Organizations

We distinguish among six types of animal welfare organizations:

Government Animal Services	Animal Shelters with a Government Contracts	Rescues with Government Contracts	Animal Shelters without a Government Contracts	Rescues without Government Contracts	Non-Sheltering Service Providers

Note: Animal shelters and rescues with government contracts have one or more agreements with a city, town, or county to intake and care for pets in need. The types of contracts and animals included in these contracts vary widely and may include or exclude certain species (eg. cats), types of impounds (eg. owner surrenders), and services (eg. TNR). In general, organizations with government contracts tend to be open intake or open admission, while organizations that do not have government contracts are more likely to be limited intake or limited admission – though it varies by municipality.

The following are entities that do not intake or house animals specifically:

Non-Sheltering Service Provider: Also called 'non-sheltering animal welfare organization An agency providing direct or partnered services without sheltering animals.

Field or Animal Control Services: Entities that provide this may respond to requests in a defined service area to help animals that are lost/free-roaming, sick/injured, dangerous, or in danger, etc. Animals are housed with sheltering or community partners.

The following are categories of intake, which define how an organization processes animals entering into their care:

Open Intake: *Also called 'open admission'* An organization required by government contract to accept all animals from a service area. Most open intake organizations are brick-and-mortar animal shelters, not rescue groups.

Limited Intake: *Also called 'limited admission'* An organization that can choose which animals to accept and is not required to accept any from the public. Some animal shelters and most rescue groups are considered limited intake.

Managed Intake: Managed intake is a structured approach to accepting animals into a shelter, where admission is guided by specific criteria or scheduled based on the organization's capacity to provide appropriate housing, medical, and behavioral care. This process may include offering alternatives or resources to the community (including low-cost services, supplies to care for the pet, Finder Foster, etc) when immediate admission is not feasible, ensuring animals receive the care they need at the right time.

Finder Foster Intake: A process in which the organization conducts an intake assessment of stray pets with their finders or caretakers. The pet stays with the finder for the agreed-upon hold period, helping to prevent shelter overcrowding and ensuring the pet's well-being by keeping them in a home environment when it benefits both the animal and their caregiver. The finder has the option to voluntarily care for the pet as a foster during this time, until the pet is reclaimed by its owner or caregiver, adopted, or returned to the shelter.

Intakes and Outcomes

Intakes

Total Intake: *Also called 'Gross Intake'* Total animals entering the organization. This includes animals moving from one animal welfare organization to another, referred to as 'transfers in' (see below for definition).

Community Intake: *Also called 'Net Intake'* Total animals entering the shelter minus transfers in from other organizations. Community intake is used when summing intakes in larger areas than a single organization to prevent double-counting of animals with intakes solely from transfers among organizations. It assumes that animals transferred between organizations have already been recorded under a different intake type by the relevant organization in the data set.

Community Intakes vs Total Intakes:

A shelter in Massachusetts has an intake of 250 dogs in one month, however 50 of those came from a shelter in Florida. Their total intake would be 250 dogs for the month and their community intake would be 200 dogs.

Intake Types

Stray: Also called 'at-large' Animal stated to be unowned, free-roaming, or owner not present. Animal is held for a legally mandated period that must be kept in the custody of an organization to allow for the animal to be returned to its owner or caregiver. *Note: Please refer to the definition of trap-neuter-return for animals brought in as strays with the intent of being returned to their original community.*

Relinquished by Owner: *Also called 'owner surrender'* Animal admitted by its owner, including adoption returns.

Seizure/Confiscate: Pets impounded by animal control or law enforcement due to neglect, cruelty, ordinance violations, police arrests, evictions, or other legal circumstances are housed at the organization for a specific period as mandated by state and local laws. These pets may be either owned or stray.

Intake Type Processes from the Community:

Over-the-Counter: *Also called Public Drop Off* Animal is brought into the organization by a community member. These can be stray animals or owner-relinquishments.

From the Field: Animal is brought into the organization by an animal control officer or law enforcement. These can be stray animals, owner relinquishments, or animals seized by an animal control or other law enforcement officer.

Transfer In: Animal transferred into the organization's possession from another organization.

Other Intakes: Pets born in care or other types of intakes not listed above.

Outcomes

Total Live Outcomes: Sum of animals that left the organization's care through a live placement.

Community Live Outcomes: Sum of animals that left the organization's care through a live outcome type minus transfers to another animal welfare organization.

Total Non-Live Outcomes: Sum of animals that left the organization's care via a non-live outcome. This includes died, missing, and euthanized.

Total Outcomes: Includes all outcomes including adoptions, return to owner/field, other live outcomes, transfers out, shelter euthanasia, died in care/lost in care.

Outcome Types

Adoption: Animal custody permanently transferred from the organization to an individual adopter via an adoption process.

Return to Owner (RTO): *Also called 'Return to Home' or 'RTH'* Animal returned to its owner after being processed as an intake.

Return-to-field (RTF): Return-to-field as an outcome type is the return of felines taken into the organization, counted as stray intake and then returned to their capture location as free roaming felines. This is only for felines brought into the organization as a stray without the intention of having them returned to where they were found. Return-to-field is an outcome decision made by the organization.

Transfer Out: Animal custody transitioned to another organization. Entities may include local rescue partners or national groups.

Other Types of Outcomes

Lost in Care: Animal outcome is unknown. This is also referred to as 'missing' and may include stolen animals.

Died in Care: Animal died, unassisted, while in the custody of the organization.

Shelter Euthanasia: Animal euthanized in the custody of the organization.

Services that Can be Intakes and Outcomes

Owner Intended Euthanasia (OIE): *Also called "Owner Requested Euthanasia" or "ORE"* This term refers to situations where an owner brings their pet to the shelter or community clinic specifically requesting euthanasia due to a medical or behavioral issue. It does not include cases where a pet is surrendered without an intent for euthanasia, and the shelter later decides on that outcome.

> **Standardizing the Data:**
>
> Shelter Animals Count recommends standardizing data by treating Owner Intended Euthanasia as a community service rather than including it in intake/outcome analyses.
>
> Since July 1, 2022, Shelter Animals Count has recorded Owner Intended Euthanasia (OIE) as a community service, reflecting its primary purpose as a support to the community. Shelters can still choose to log OIE as either an intake/outcome or as a community service in our system. If logged as an intake/outcome, the data appears in the organization's individual Intake/Outcome dashboards (see definitions) only and does not appear in aggregate intake/outcome public dashboards on the SAC website. All OIE data appears in our Community Services dashboard (see definitions). For standardized reporting, OIE data is combined and reported solely as a community service in all Shelter Animals Count publications. This approach applies to both new and historical data, and organizations can update their historical records through the SAC portal if needed.

Services that are not Intakes and Outcomes

Trap-neuter-return (TNR): When a cat is brought to an organization or one of their contracted spay/neuter providers for the purpose of sterilization and ultimately return to where it was found.

Return to Owner in Field: A pet that is found by animal control or shelter staff while in the community and returned to their owner without entering the organization or processing as an intake.

Shelter Animals Count advises that you report Trap-Neuter-Return and Return to Owner in Field data as a service in our Community Services Database not as an intake/outcome.

Common Calculations

Population Balance Calculation: The percentage of total intakes that have had an outcome.

> **The Population Balance Calculation**
>
> The Population Balance Calculation (PBC) is a simple formula used by Shelter Animals Count to understand whether a shelter's animal population is growing, shrinking, or staying the same over a given period. It's calculated by dividing the total number of animals leaving the shelter (outcomes) by the total number coming in (intakes).

Here's what different PBC percentages mean:

- **100%:** The shelter is in balance. Animals are leaving at the same rate they're arriving, so the overall population isn't changing.

- **Under 100%:** The population is increasing. For example, a PBC of 97% means that 3% more animals entered the shelter than left it, so some animals stayed behind.

- **Over 100%:** The population is decreasing. For example, a PBC of 107% means that 7% more animals left than entered, reducing the shelter population.

Example

From January to June 2024, the overall PBC was **94.2%**, indicating that slightly more animals came into shelters than were leaving, which increased the population.

The PBC helps shelters and communities quickly understand whether they are keeping up with animal intake, allowing them to plan resources and strategies effectively.

Start Count: The number of animals in your care on the first day of the period of time selected

End Count: The number of animals in your care on the last day of the period of time selected

> **When tracking data**
>
> When tracking data, consider these key points for measuring your organization's metrics:
>
> | | |
> |---|---|
> | Beginning Count Total in Care | Ending Count Total in Care |
> | Beginning Count in Foster | Ending Count in Foster |
> | Beginning Count in Shelter | Ending Count in Shelter |

Length of Stay (LOS): Calculated as the number of days from intake to outcome for animals that have already had a permanent outcome.

Example

An example of Length of Stay: A pet arrives at your organization as a stray on January 1. The pet serves a 5 day mandated stray hold period and is adopted on January 10th. Their length of stay would equal 9 days.

Outcomes

Intakes

Days in Care: The number of days that an animal has been in the organization's care from the date of the initial intake and has not had a permanent outcome.

An example of days in care: You have a pet in your shelter that arrived on May 1st. The pet is still in your care at the shelter on May 10th. The days in care for that pet would equate to 10 days.

When analyzing data for multiple animals, you can use averages or medians to understand population trends.

- **Averages** give a central value for the group but can be influenced by outliers. For example, if one animal has a much longer or shorter length of stay than the others, it can distort the average.

- **Medians** are a better choice when outliers are present because they represent the middle value in the data, providing a more accurate picture of typical trends.

The following definitions are metrics that are just one part of assessing outcomes and should not be used as the sole measure of success. When used independently, Shelter Animals Count recommends prioritizing live outcome measurement at the community level rather than limiting the focus to the shelter level.

Live Release Rate: The percentage of animals with an outcome that leave with a live outcome. Calculated as live outcomes/total outcomes.

Save Rate: The percentage of animals entering an organization that do not leave by a non-live outcome. It is calculated by taking your Total Intakes minus Non-live Outcomes divided by Total Intakes

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Intake Type Rate: The percentage of total intakes that are a specific intake type.

How to Calculate: [Intake Type]/Total Intakes (gross)

- 6% Other Intakes
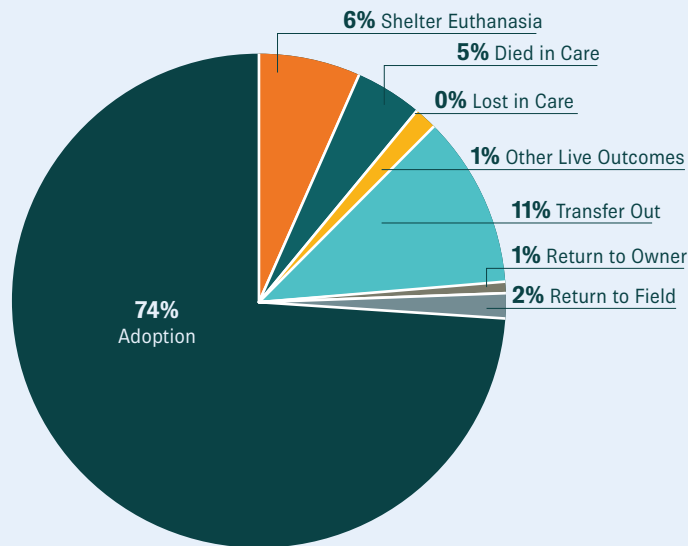- 20% Transfer in
- 53% Strays
- 21% Relinquished by owner
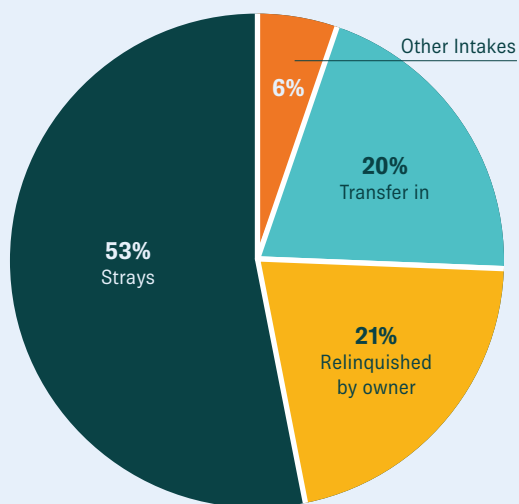
Understanding what your organization's intake consists of allows for better program development. Here is an example of what an organization's intake type rate could look like.

Outcome Type Rate: The percentage of total outcomes that are a specific outcome type.

How to Calculate: [Outcome Type]/ Total Outcome

Considerations: Understanding what outcome types make up the majority of your organization's total outcomes allow your organization to identify areas of strengths and improvements for programming.

- 6% Shelter Euthanasia
- 5% Died in Care
- 0% Lost in Care
- 1% Other Live Outcomes
- 11% Transfer Out
- 1% Return to Owner
- 2% Return to Field
- 74% Adoption

If adoptions are decreasing as a percentage of total outcomes, what outcomes increased? Is there a need for concern or program changes. Here is an example of what an organization's outcome type rate could look like.

Days in Care: Outcome Type Rate of Total Intakes: The percentage of animals entering the shelter that are leaving by a certain outcome type.

How to Calculate: [Outcome Type]/ Total Intakes (gross)

Considerations: Outcome as a percentage of intake allow you to see that portion of animals coming into your organization's care, leave by a specific outcome.

Adoptions	RTO	Transfer Out	Euthanasia	Gap
55%	8%	11%	7%	19%

0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90% 100%
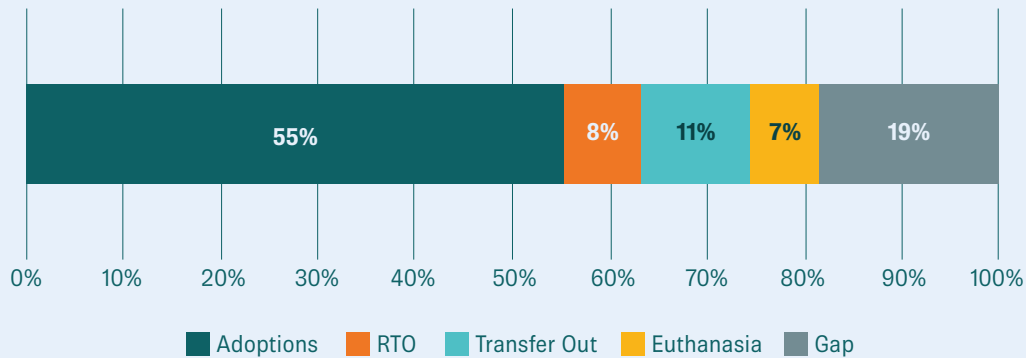
Note: Outcomes as a percentage of intake allow you to see what portion of animals actually coming into your organization's care, leave by a specific outcome. If your intake is decreasing, outcomes will also decrease. Therefore, if you look at the outcome rate of intake, you may find that more animals entering the shelter are leaving via specific outcomes.

Animal Information

Altered/unaltered: Also called 'sterilized/unsterilized,' or 'spayed/neutered/intact.' The animal's reproductive status. This status may be updated during the animals' stay so this will not necessarily indicate which animals were spayed or neutered on intake.

Intake Date: The date the animal entered the organization's custody.

Intake Subtype: A more specific description of why the animal is in the organization's custody.

Intake Reason: The reported reason the animal is in the organization's custody. The list of possible reasons vary widely among shelters.

Outcome Date: The date the animal left the organization's custody.

Outcome Subtype: A more specific description of why the animal is no longer in the organization's custody.

Outcome Reason: The reported reason the animal is no longer in the organization's custody. The list of possible reasons vary widely among shelters.

Sex: The sex of the animal.

Size: The animal's approximate size classification.

Species: The species of the animal.

This varies on the species that your organization serves. Can include: Dog, Cat, Guinea Pig, Rabbit, Horse, Pig, Bird, and so on.

Animal Ages

Based on software, here are common ways that animals can be aged in your system

Date of Birth: The reported or estimated birthdate of the animal. This is often an estimate or guess based on appearance and teeth.

Intake Age (Group): The animal's age group at intake.

Animal Details

Breed (Primary): The animal's primary breed, usually only determined by physical appearance and a breed guess.

Breed (Secondary): The animal's secondary breed, if applicable. When selecting breeds, it's important to list them in a way that provides value to potential adopters, helping them make informed decisions and it helps with your data tracking on what is coming into your shelter.

> **Tip**
>
> Adopt-a-Pet has a great resource for Dog Breeds that you can view here.

Color (Primary): The animal's primary color.

Color (Secondary): The animal's secondary color, if applicable. When selecting colors, it's important to list them in a way that provides value to potential adopters and it helps with your data tracking on what is coming into your shelter.

When selecting colors, it's important to list them in a way that provides value to potential adopters and it helps with your data tracking on what is coming into your shelter.

About our Sponsor:

About Hill's Pet Nutrition: Founded more than 75 years ago, Hill's Pet Nutrition has been committed to providing pets with the best nutrition through extensive research and a scientific understanding of their specific needs. Their team of 220+ veterinarians, PhD nutritionists, and food scientists constantly strive to develop innovative solutions for pet health. Hill's offers a full line of products, including their Prescription Diet therapeutic nutrition and Science Diet wellness products, which are available at veterinary clinics and pet specialty retailers worldwide. For more information about their products and nutritional philosophy, please visit www.HillsPet.com

The Data Foundations Series:

The Data Basics Workbook is part of our Data Foundations Series, a collaborative initiative between Shelter Animals Count, the national database for animal sheltering statistics, and Hill's Pet Nutrition, a leading partner in animal welfare. This series empowers animal welfare organizations with essential data knowledge and tools for success. This dynamic series features educational blogs and webinars on critical topics such as animal welfare terminology, data standardization, and key sheltering metrics.

Explore pivotal topics with us, including:

- Length of Stay
- Data Terminology and Standardization
- Kitten Care Data
- Big Dog Behavior Data
- Community Data Perspectives

The Data Foundations Series features the Data Basics Workbook—a groundbreaking resource now available to help shelters and rescues implement data-driven strategies. Featuring a comprehensive glossary of key terms and practical guidance on data standardization, this workbook is an essential tool for animal welfare professionals at every level. Together, we're laying the foundation for stronger, data-informed practices in animal welfare.

Learn more at shelteranimalscount.org/data-foundations

Special Thanks

This workbook written in collaboration with Kristen Hassen from Outcomes for Pets. OutcomeForPets.com

About Shelter Animals Count (SAC):

SAC is a collaborative, industry-led nonprofit organization formed by a diverse group of animal welfare agencies to create and share The National Database of sheltered animal statistics, providing facts and enabling insights that will improve animal welfare throughout the country. By relying on the strength of our robust dataset, SAC ensures that the trends we report reflect the realities that shelters and rescues are experiencing across the nation. Our data is trusted by thousands of organizations and industry partners because of its accuracy and the integrity of our analysis practices.

Follow Shelter Animals Count on Facebook, LinkedIn, and Instagram. For further insights from Shelter Animals Count, download the 2024 Mid-Year Report and the 2023 Annual Report.