



LEADING THE WAY HOME

2025 Pet Reunification Research Insights



A woman with curly hair, wearing a brown shirt and blue jeans, is smiling and holding a small, fluffy brown dog. The dog is wearing a blue collar with a tag. The scene is set in a bright, indoor environment, possibly a home or a veterinary clinic. A diagonal blue line runs from the top right corner towards the center of the page.

INTRODUCTION

DocuPet's mission is to help provide a safe and happy home to every pet in North America. Unfortunately, we know that millions of dogs and cats get lost each year and many do not make it back to their loving families. Without proper identification to help a finder or an animal welfare professional reunite a lost pet, pet owners are forced to hope their animal will be returned to them by someone who knows their pet or wait for their pet to find their way home independently.

However, with visible identification, lost pets have a much higher chance of reunification. That is why DocuPet is on a mission—It is our collective goal to see every dog and cat in North America registered, tagged and protected.



We have expanded from being simply a pet licensing company to being a company dedicated to offering comprehensive pet reunification solutions and leading the way in the development of new technology to protect pets.

A central component to the culture of DocuPet is curiosity. We want to understand how to provide the most innovative and effective services to help lost pets get home quickly. We ask lots of questions, invest in research, and work closely with animal welfare leaders to help us achieve our mission.

As a result, we have developed state-of-the-art technology while continually enhancing our services. We have expanded from being simply a pet licensing company to a company dedicated to offering comprehensive pet reunification solutions, and leading the way in new technology development to protect pets. Nowhere is this more evident than the National Pet Registry, a nationwide network created and managed by DocuPet, empowering pet owners, shelters, and communities with registration and reunification tools that help reunite lost pets faster than ever!

ABOUT THIS REPORT



As indicated above, our initial business model was primarily focused on providing pet licensing services across North America. Why? Because we understood that a lost pet wearing a visible license identification tag had a greater chance of being returned to their owner.

In 2018, 2019 and 2020 we conducted research focused on the pet licensing industry.



In 2018, we assessed the standard rates and commonalities between pet licensing programs across North America and discovered, on average, only 13% of pets were licensed.



In 2019, we examined the best practices and policies of varying programs to help us design and implement successful licensing programs that would increase compliance.



In 2020, we focused on understanding the differences between those who license their pets and those who do not.

Now, having gained the comprehensive understanding of how to be the most effective pet licensing provider, DocuPet has broadened its focus on community-based lost-pet reunification and pet reunification for pets already admitted to shelters.

In an effort to better understand how many pets actually go missing, we began with reviewing the existing research. We were curious about understanding what happens prior to a lost pet entering a shelter and the beliefs and attitudes of pet owners regarding lost pets and prevention activities. However, we found that most of the literature was centered on lost pets who had already entered the animal welfare system with the exception of a highly regarded study conducted in 2012 by Dr. Emily Weiss, Dr. Margaret Slater and Dr. Linda Lord. In this study, the researchers examined the frequency of lost

dogs and cats in the United States and the methods used to locate them. They found that 14% of dogs and 15% of cats had been reported lost at least one time by their owner. They also found that a visible form of identification (tag) was the most useful tool when attempting to reunite a lost dog with its owner. While this information was and continues to be compelling, we recognized that the study results were 15 years old and wanted to see if the data was similar in 2025.

As such, we engaged Marketspark, an Idaho-based research firm, to develop and deploy a research survey to help collect more recent lost-pet and return to owner (RTO) data for animals prior to shelter intake. Further, in an effort to be able to compare the information from the 2012 findings, many of the questions posed in our survey were modeled after questions posed by the previous study.

However, it must be noted that the Weiss et al study involved a qualitative approach including in-depth interviews where our study was quantitative in nature (survey format) and did not provide for individual interviews or follow-up inquiries.

Lastly, while DocuPet recognizes that both dogs and cats become lost, we chose to only focus on dogs for this survey. Specifically, we sought to collect the following data points:



Number of lost dogs and return to owner rates without animal welfare intervention.



Dog owner attitudes and behaviors regarding lost dogs, finding dogs, rehoming dogs, lost dog prevention activities including pet ID tags and microchips, and known and utilized lost pet resources.



DOCUPET SURVEY

General Survey Information

We queried 1,500 people across North America (US and Canada) who either currently owned a dog or had owned a dog within the last twelve (12) months. The survey was completed online and consisted of twenty-five (25) questions. The respondents received a \$5.00 gift card completion after taking the survey as a thank you for their participation.

Respondent Profile Information

The sample consisted of 80% of the respondents residing in the United States and 20% residing in Canada. Further, 50% of the respondents reported living in a suburban location, 40% reported living in an urban area, and 10% reported living in rural communities. The geographic breakdown for each country closely mirrored its population density.

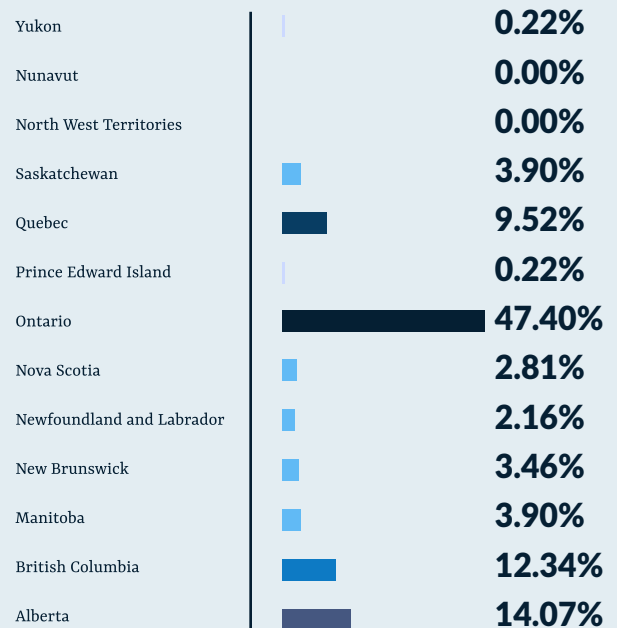
UNITED STATES RESIDENTS

Question: In which region do you currently reside?



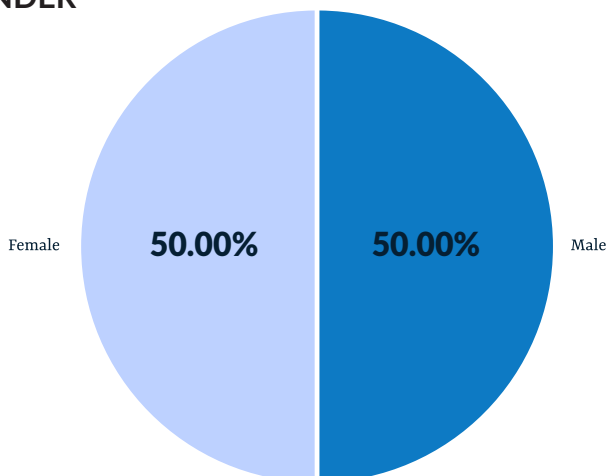
CANADIAN RESIDENTS

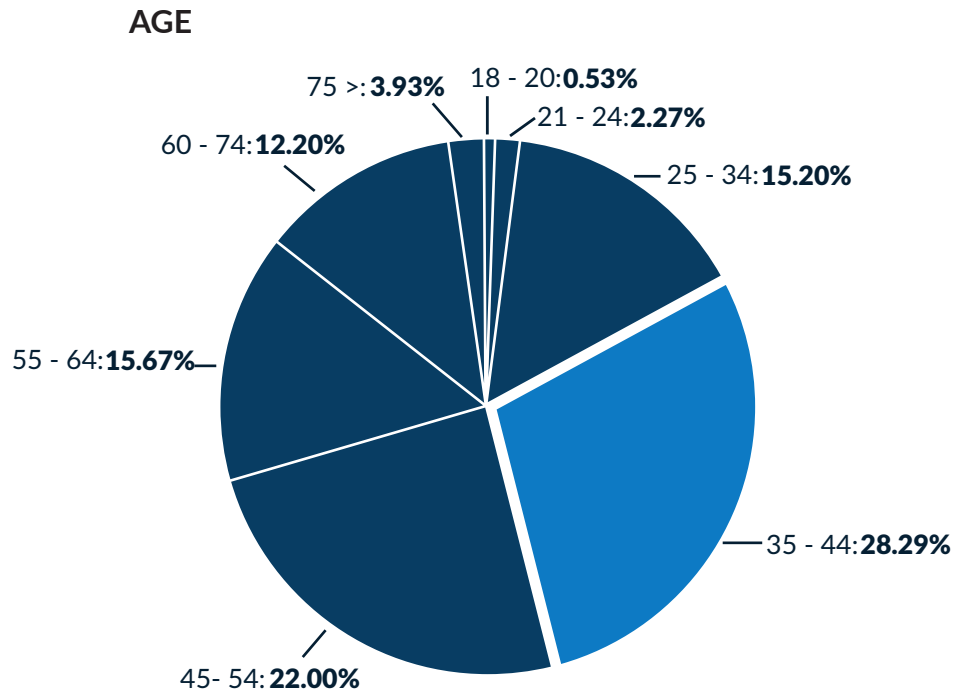
Question: Which province or territory do you currently reside?



The respondents were equally divided by gender with a cross section of ages represented.

GENDER

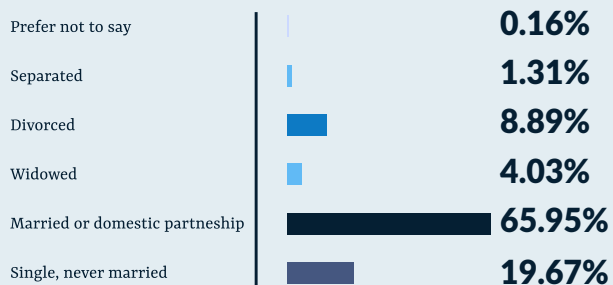




The respondents reported that 65% were in a marital or domestic partnership relationship, 50% reported they did not have any children under the age of 18 years old living in their household, over 78% reported having at least some post-high school education, 62% reported being employed for wages, and 70% report owning their own home.

RELATIONSHIP STATUS

Question: What is your relationship status?



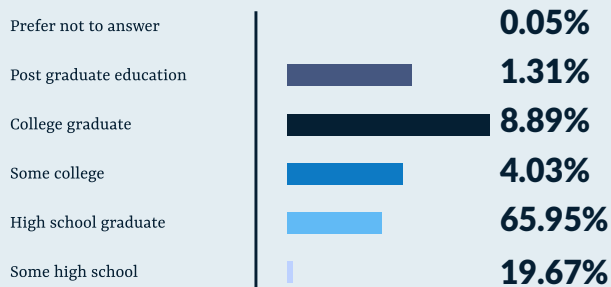
CHILDREN UNDER 18 LIVING IN HOUSEHOLD

Question: How many children aged 18 or under are currently living in your home?



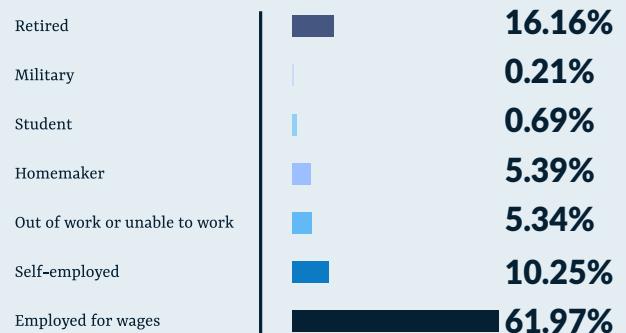
EDUCATION LEVEL

Question: What is the highest level of education you have completed?



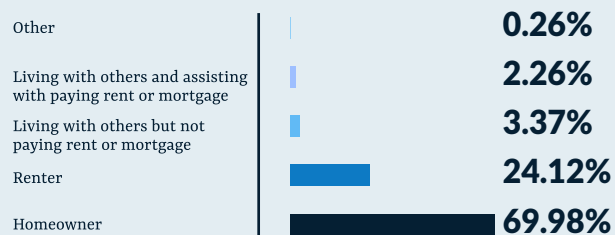
EMPLOYMENT STATUS

Question: What is your employment status?



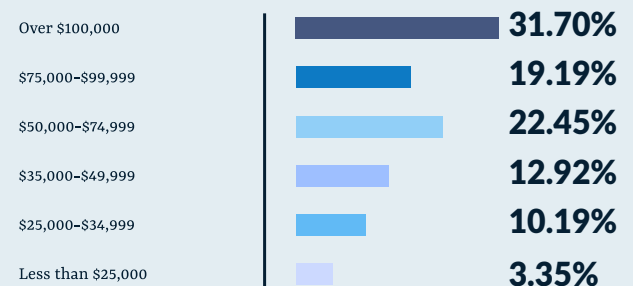
HOUSING SITUATION

Question: Which of the following best describes your current housing situation



HOUSEHOLD INCOME

Question: What is your household income level?

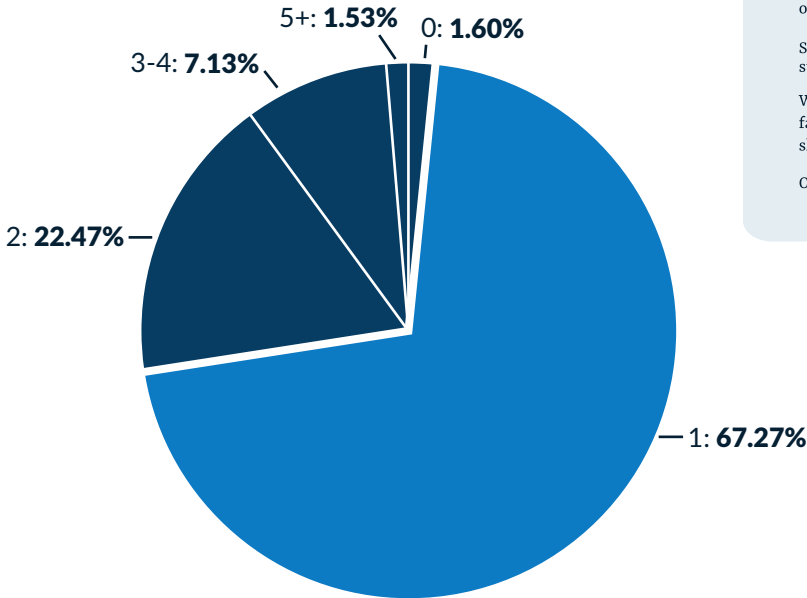


75% of the respondents reported a household income over \$50,000.

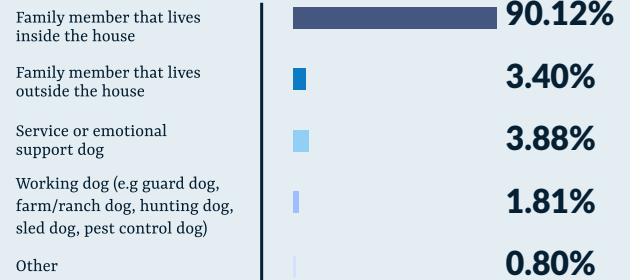
It must be noted that the population of pet owners who are extremely low income/poor and/or homeless are not represented in this data. While the research team understands these owners contribute to the number of lost animals and animals surrendered to shelters, we also recognize surveying this population requires an intensive, face-to face canvassing effort. Due to resource constraints, this population is under-represented in this survey.

Dog Ownership Information

Nearly 90% of all owners reported having two (2) or fewer dogs.

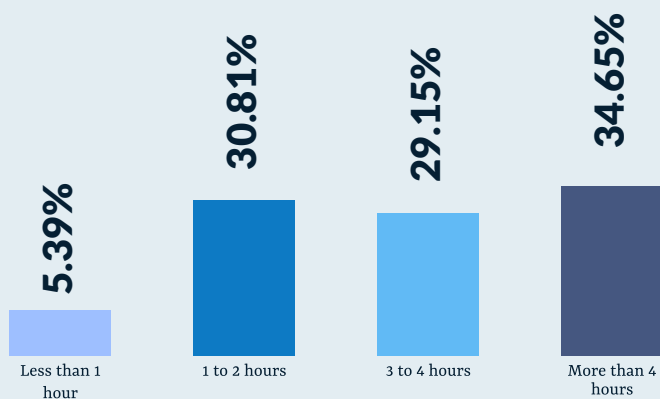


Question: Which best describes the primary role of your dog in your family?

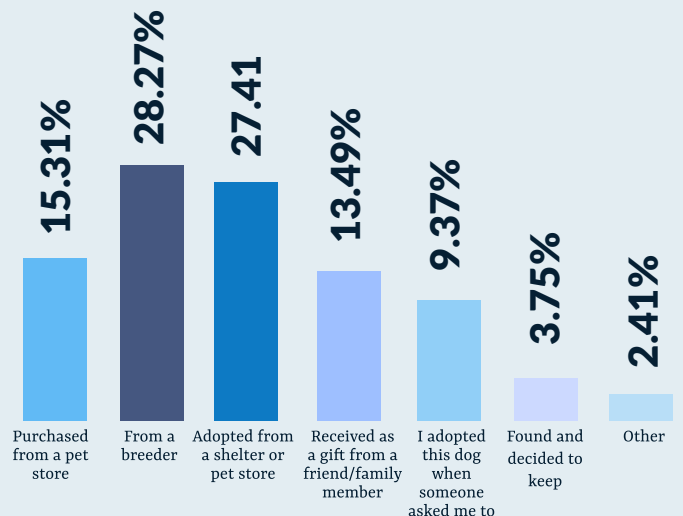


90% of dog owners regard their dogs as family members.

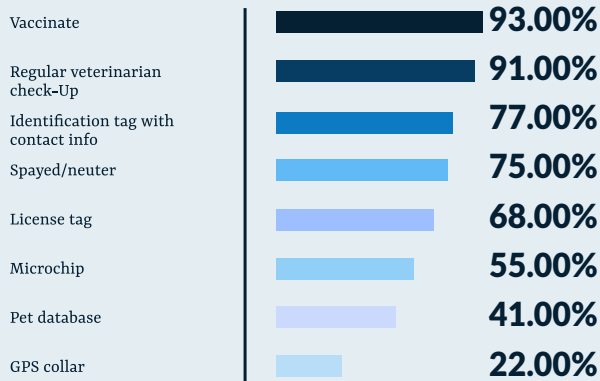
Question: On a typical day, how much time do you spend on caring for and interacting with your dog(s)?



Question: How did you acquire the dog in your care?



Question: Which of the following have you done for your dog and why?



77% of dog owners reported ID tags as the first tool used for reunification purposes, as compared to microchips or other tools.

When we asked respondents what actions have they taken for their dogs, over 90% reported providing some type of veterinary care, and over 75% reported having a pet identification tag on their dog with their contact information. Additionally, we learned that cost, awareness, animal health, and perceived need are key factors in making this decision.





OWNER INSIGHTS

Number of Dogs Lost and Owner Profiles

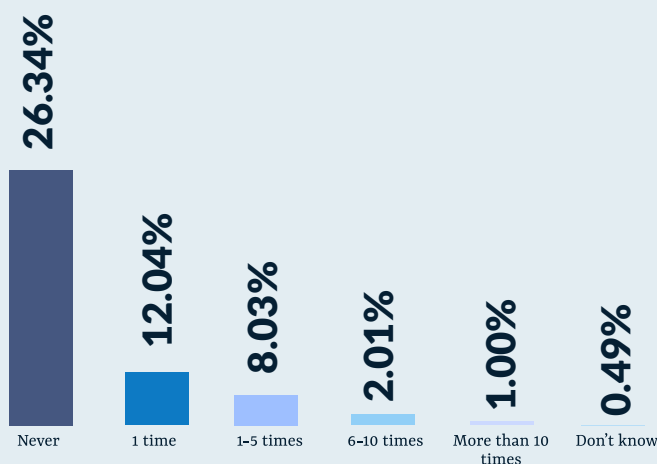
In an effort to determine how many dogs actually become lost, we wanted to know how many times an owner lost a dog in the past five years. This question was intentionally similar to the Weiss et al study where 14% of their pet owners reported losing a dog at least once in the past five (5) years. In that study, a minimum time period for which an owner considered their dog to be lost was not presented.

In contrast, since our research was based on a survey format without the opportunity to ask follow-up questions, we wanted to ensure the owner's responses were clearly indicative of a dog whose whereabouts were most likely unknown. As such, we added a minimum "time missing" criteria of four (4) hours. **And we found that just over 23% of the owners reported losing their dogs at least once in the past five (5) years.**

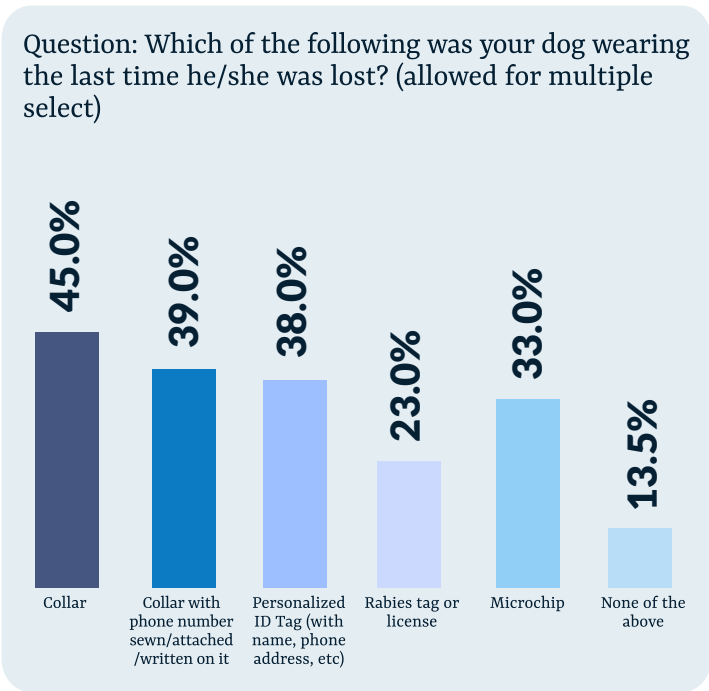
This figure represents a 9% increase from the Weiss et al study and is based on dogs who were "lost" for at least four (4) hours. **Would this number be even higher had we not added the minimum "time-missing" criteria? Are more dogs getting lost in 2025 than in 2012?** It is hard to know for sure but we can hypothesize that this may be the case.

Further, when we analyzed the respondent's age, gender, education level, reported household income, and location where they lived, we found that younger, well educated, male owners who lived in urban areas, and were slightly wealthier, were more likely to have lost their dogs in the past five (5) years.

Question: Over the past five years, how many times has a dog living in your household ever become lost or gone missing for more than 4 hours?



We also asked our dog owners what type of pet reunification tool, if any, was their dog wearing at the time they were lost.

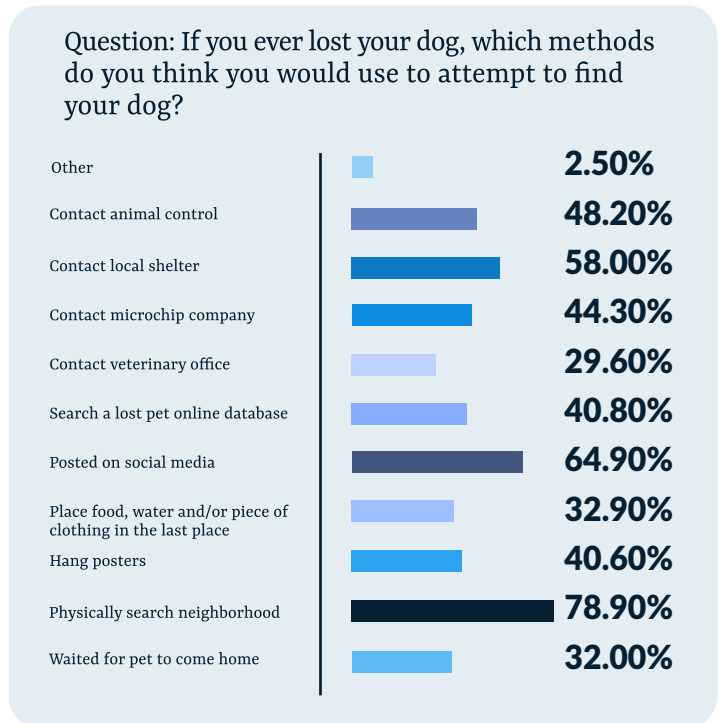


Our results yielded that over half of the dogs were not wearing a collar with a visible ID tag (despite 77% of owners reporting their dogs have an ID tag) and only 33% reported their dogs had a microchip. It should be noted that owners may actually use multiple tools to protect their dogs (e.g. a dog may be wearing a collar with embroidered information, a personalized ID tag, and may also be microchipped). It's also important to recognize that 45% were not actually wearing a collar when they went missing and 14% were not protected at all by any type of reunification tool.

Question: If you ever lost your dog, which methods do you think you would use to attempt to find your dog?

Lastly, for the 76% of owners who reported they had not lost a dog in the past five (5) years they believed that they would be most inclined to search their neighborhood or post on social media (similar to those owners who had

lost their dogs). But, this group also reported being more likely to contact their local animal control and/or shelter for assistance.



Question: From your perspective, which social media sites would be the most helpful for finding a lost dog? (Facebook, Next Door, Instagram & Tik Toc)

It is also interesting to note that when all survey respondents were asked which social media sites they believed would be most helpful, Facebook and NextDoor were reported as being perceived as the most helpful.

LOST DOG RECOVERY EFFORTS



Lost Dog Recovery Efforts and Outcomes

In addition to understanding how dogs become lost, we wanted to explore how many dogs were reunited with their owners, and the resources pet owners utilized to help find their lost dogs. The good news is, in our study, just over 96% of the respondents reported finding their dogs and only a little over 3% reported their dogs were never found*.

Further, 25% of owners reported the dog returned on its own and 22% reported the dog was returned by someone who knew where the dog lived (i.e. neighbor, friend or family member).

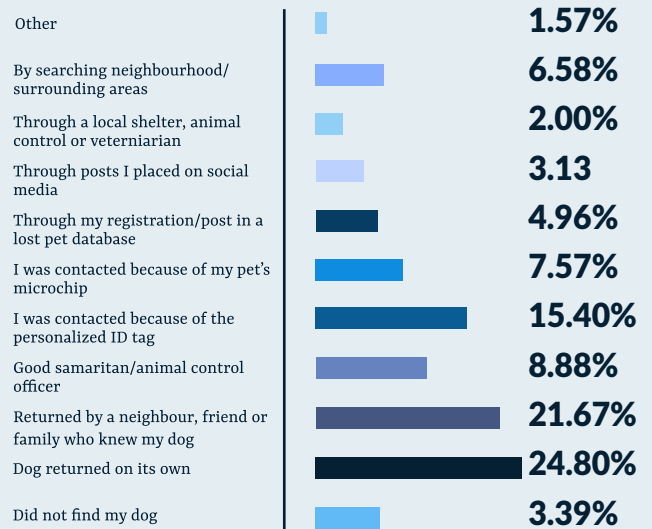
However, for the remaining 53% of dogs who were reunited with their families, 30% (15% of the total dogs reunited) of the dogs were reunited as a result of them wearing a personalized ID tag with the owner's contact information, and 15% (7.5% of the total dogs reunited) were reunited due to having been microchipped.

***Caveat:** Our survey only included persons who owned or had owned a dog within the past twelve (12) months. As such, it is possible for the larger population of persons who have ever owned a dog but have not had a dog for the past twelve (12) months, the percentage of dogs who never return home may be higher and the percentage of dogs who were reunited with their owners may be lower. Thus, the overall rate of lost dogs being reunited or permanently lost may be different for the larger population of owned dogs.

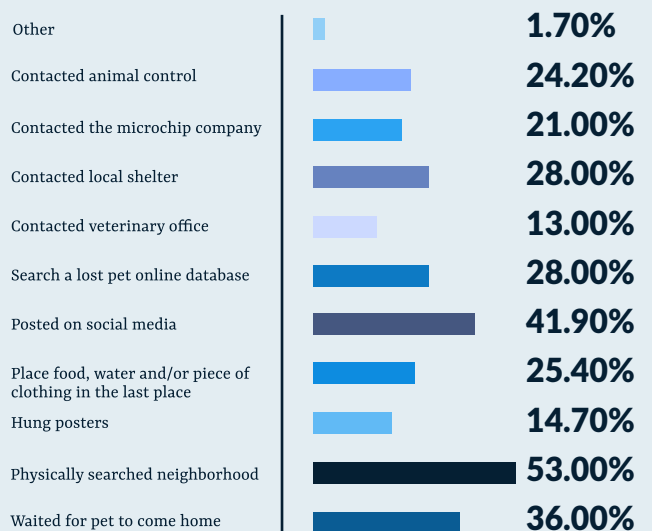
Question: To the best of your recollection, what methods were used to attempt to find your dog?

Owners who had lost their dog tried a myriad of methods to find their dog with physical search and social media posts being the most common. Interestingly, close to 18% reported they had contacted their local animal control agency and/or shelter but only 2% of lost dogs were actually reunited from these services.

Question: In the end, how did you find your dog?



Question: To the best of your recollection, what methods were used to attempt to find your dog?





FINDER INSIGHTS

As stated earlier in this document, the survey questions were presented to respondents who currently have a dog and focused on their role as a dog owner but also how they would manage a situation if they were to find a dog. We do recognize that their answers may not generalize to persons who do not or have never owned a dog and may not be as familiar with dog behavior or reunification.

Question: If you encounter a dog without its owner, how do you decide if it is lost?

What indicators do you look for?

One of our first curiosities was understanding how a finder who encounters a dog without its owner would decide if it is lost, i.e. what indicators would they look for to help them make this determination? Not surprisingly, the respondents reported they would observe the dog and use their instincts and awareness of common indicators. Interestingly, some of the respondents, despite owning a dog, acknowledge even they may not know how to recognize if a dog is lost or not.



The responses below are listed in ascending order of those with higher frequency of mention to lower frequency of mention.

Lost Dog Clues	
Tag, Collar	Health benefits; Population control; Recommended by vet; Already done when adopted dog; Sense of responsibility
Behavioral clues/appearance	Health benefits; Required by law; Required by breeder/shelter/vet/boarding service
Lack of owner nearby	Maintain health & prevent illness; Optimize care & feeding recommendations; Prevent more expensive treatments in future; Track vitals & stats
Online social media post looking for a dog	Lost Dog Recovery/Reunification; Proof of ownership; Required by vet/breeder/shelter/municipality
Information from authorities or shelter	Found confirmation from police, shelters, or animal control
Uncertain	Some respondents simply don't know how to determine if a dog is lost.

Question: If you were to find a dog that is lost, how likely would you be to do the following?

Building upon the above question, when we asked the respondents what they would likely do if they actually found a dog, the most common response (94%) was to look for a tag with numerous other actions offered as ways to help.

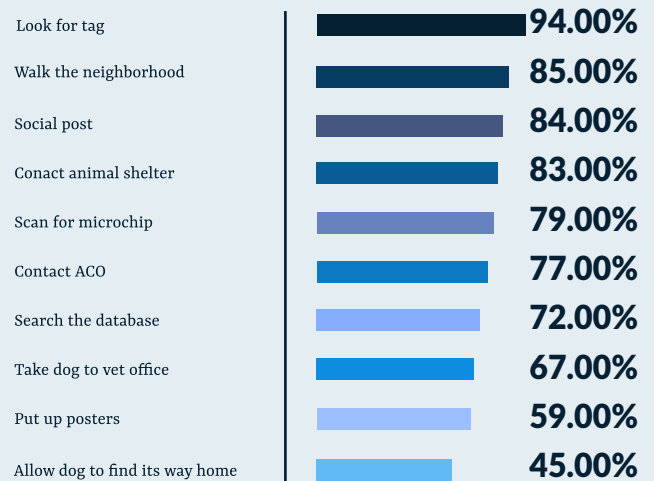
What is most striking, is that 45% of respondents indicated that they would do nothing and allow the dog to find its way home on its own. Thus, regardless of the actions that the respondents believe they would take, it is quite apparent the majority of finders want to help when confronted with this situation.

94% of respondents would look for a tag if they found a lost dog.

Question: If you were unable to find the owner of a lost dog, how likely would you be to do the following?

Further, our respondents indicated that if they were unsuccessful in finding the owner, they would most likely foster the dog, bring them to a shelter, rehome the dog themselves or adopt the dog themselves. Again, indicating a desire to be a helper if/when finding a dog they believe is lost. The frequency of these interventions may not be as high for non-dog owning finders.

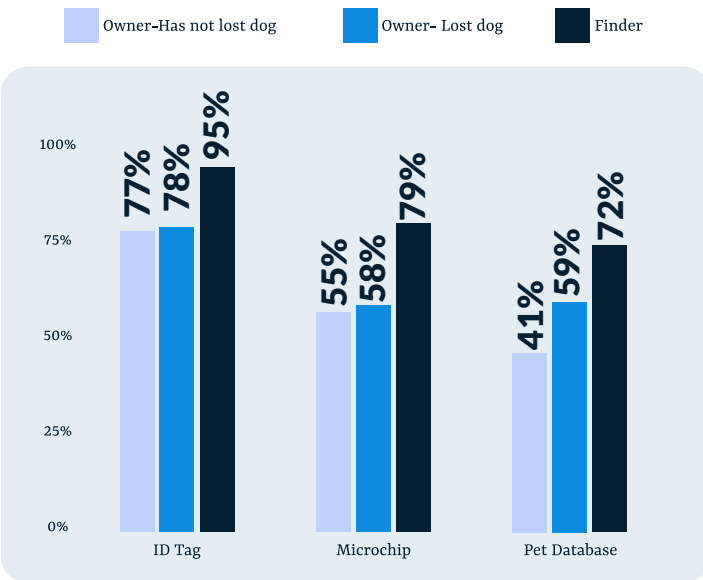
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Question: If you were unable to find the owner of a lost dog, how likely would you be to do the following?

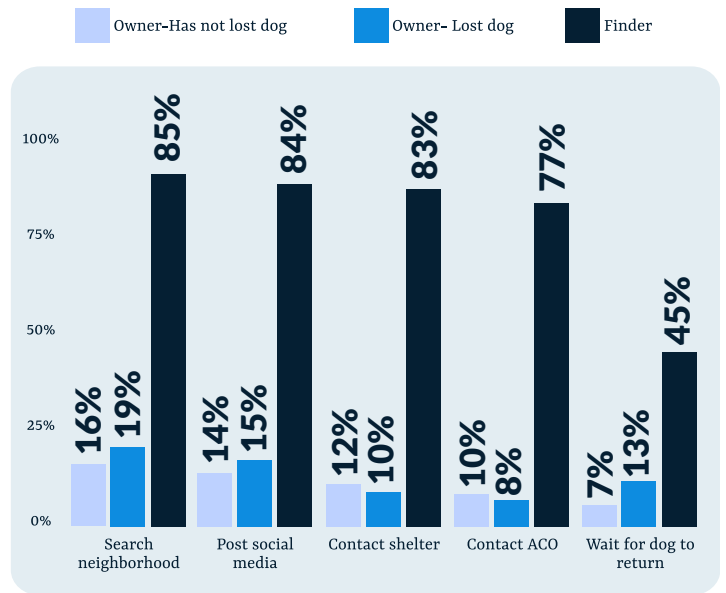


Interestingly, when we examine what preventive resources respondents report employing for their own dogs, it is actually less than what they expect others to do. As such, it appears their expectation of available tools/resources to employ if they encounter a lost dog are higher than they have enabled for their own dogs.



In regards to pet identification, 95% of respondents report they would look for a tag on a lost dog while only 77% report having an ID tag on their own dog. Similarly, the expectation as a finder to scan for a microchip or search a pet database is higher than what they report they are utilizing for their own dogs.

Additionally, when comparing respondents who report never having lost a dog to those who have, there is a slight difference in the use of tags and microchips but a fairly significant difference in the use of registering their dogs in a pet database system.



When we compare the use of non-identification tools and resources to help reunify a lost dog, respondents report being willing to search the neighborhood, utilize social media posts, contact their local shelter or animal control agency, and allow the dog to find its way home independently at much higher rates than if they were looking for their lost dog. And, when comparing tools to be used by an owner depending on their history of having lost a dog, it is not surprising to see that those who had lost a dog in the past, called upon that previous experience when considering what they would do in the future.

Both of these findings may indicate a sense of false security for some pet owners with a perception that “it won’t happen” to me or my dog.

KEY INSIGHTS AND FINDINGS

The vast majority of dog owners surveyed are highly involved pet owners.



Most consider their dogs to be a member of the family and report spending more than three (3) hours a day interacting with and caring for their dogs.



Basic care measures like vaccinations and vet check-up appointments are common (over 90% of owners doing so). However, lack of awareness, education, misconceptions, cost and inconvenience contribute to pet owners more frequently engaging in other measures such as spay/neuter, ID tags, microchips, GPS collars, and use of pet databases.

Nearly a quarter (23%) of all owners had lost their dog at least once in the past 5 years.



Over 50% of lost dogs were not wearing visible ID when they went missing. This was despite 77% of the owners reporting that their dogs have ID tags.

Finders are very willing/likely to help if given the tools.

A clear, simple message educating owners about the power of a visible ID tag could reduce the time dogs remain lost and the likelihood of return.



94% of respondents said if they find a lost dog they are likely or very likely to look for an ID tag; it is the first thing they do.



45% of finders report that they would do nothing and allow the dog to find its way home.

Owners may believe that losing their dog won't/can't happen to them.



Respondents reported that if owners provide ID tags and microchips with updated pet databases, they are willing to use these tools, despite using these tools at a lower rate for their own pets.

Community-based pet reunification is key to helping reduce shelter intake for lost dogs.



60% of respondents reported if they are unsuccessful at reuniting a found dog with its owner, they would likely “turn” the dog into a shelter.



By helping community members better understand the tools and resources available when they lose or find a dog, fewer people need to rely on shelters, allowing those resources to be reserved for dogs with no other options.





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