



Transforming Lives



Hill's Pet Nutrition

2026 State of Shelter Pet Adoption Report

SPOTLIGHT ON LARGE DOGS

Welcome to the Hill's Pet Nutrition 2026 State of Shelter Pet Adoption Report: Spotlight on Large Dogs

Throughout Hill's Pet Nutrition's ongoing research about the barriers to pet adoption, one consistent insight broke through: **large dogs face disproportionate barriers to adoption.**

Animal-level data from [Shelter Animals Count](#), a program of the ASPCA, further affirms this finding. In 2025, 2.8 million dogs entered U.S. shelters. Large dogs represented just 26% of community intakes yet faced the longest median lengths of stay compared to medium and small dogs.

Large dogs' extended shelter stays add to capacity strains felt by shelters and rescues across the country, prompting the need for a greater understanding of the factors impacting large dog adoption and ownership.

This year's report aims to identify the primary perspectives driving the large dog crisis, as well as innovative approaches shelters have taken to boost adoptions.

The data and insights will cover central questions:

- What are the key barriers holding prospective adopters back from selecting large dogs?
- What experiences shape perceptions toward large dogs?
- What programs and resources would encourage large dog adoption?

Findings are from a proprietary, single-blind survey of 2,000 Americans with diverse socioeconomic backgrounds. The survey was administered to adults aged 18 and older. For the purposes of analyzing age demographic differences, respondents are grouped as follows:

- Gen Z and Millennials: under 45 years old
- Gen X and Baby Boomers: 45 years and older

Topics at a Glance

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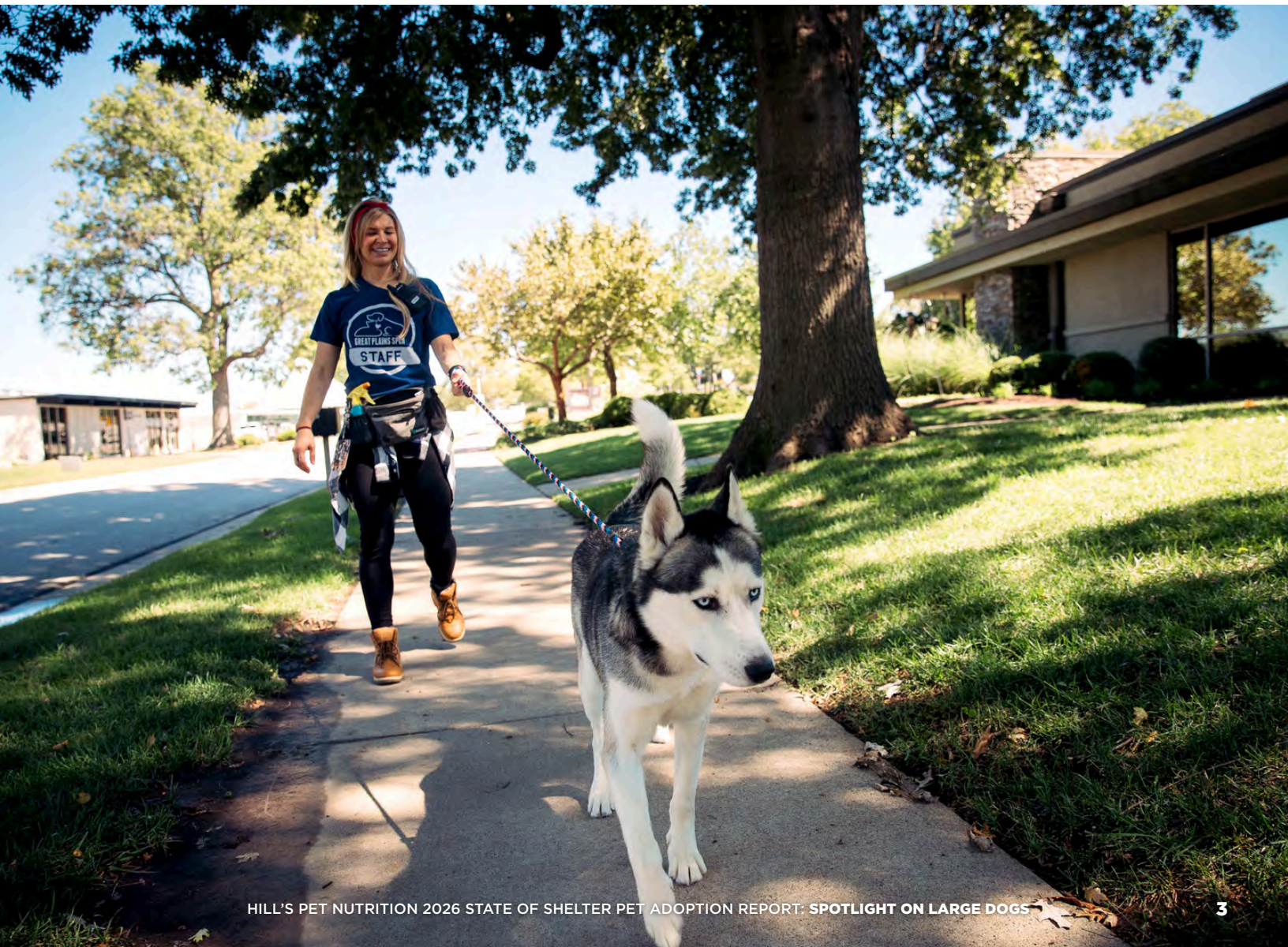
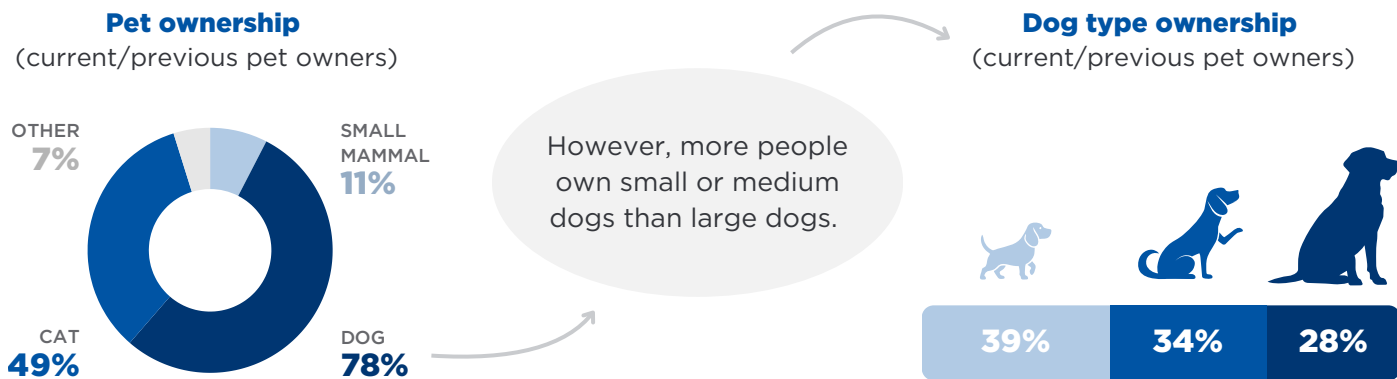


“As a proud pet parent to a 150-pound Newfoundland, I know firsthand the incredible love and laughter that a large-breed dog brings to a home. Yet, countless large dogs remain in shelters, facing amplified barriers to adoption. This year's Hill's State of Shelter Pet Adoption Report examines this issue by diving into the real-world experiences of prospective adopters. Our goal is to equip the animal welfare community with actionable insights that break down barriers, facilitate more large dog adoptions and ensure adopters have the support they need to be successful.”

Chelsie Estey, MSc, DVM, DACVIM (Neurology)
U.S. Chief Veterinary Officer, Hill's Pet Nutrition

Pet Ownership

“Man’s best friend” remains the mantra for many Americans as dogs continue to be the most popular companion animal.



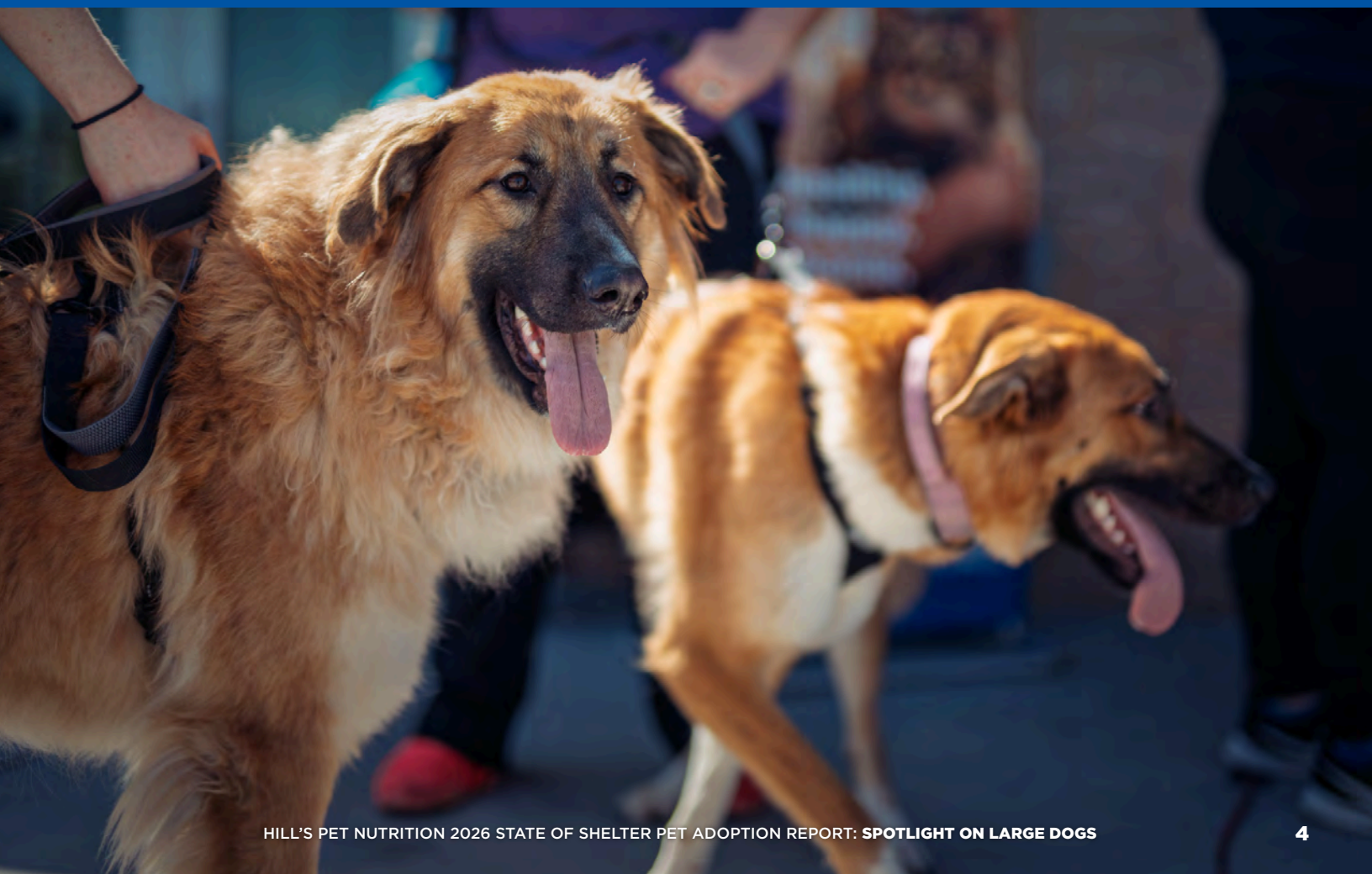
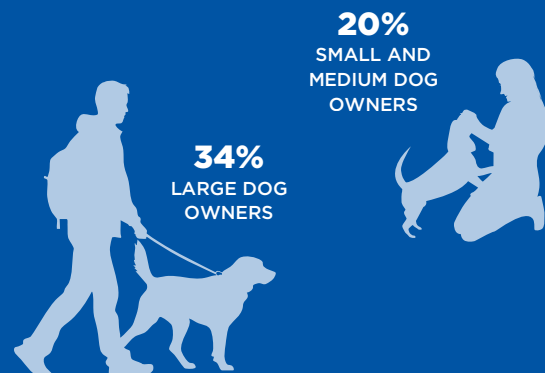
Adoption Likelihood

When asked, **63%** of the total population would be likely to adopt from a shelter in the future. Among those who have adopted from a shelter before, **80%** would do so again. Of current and previous dog owners, nearly one in four Americans have adopted a dog from a shelter or rescue. Large dog owners are more likely to have adopted a current or previous dog from a shelter.

Top five dog acquisition methods (current/previous owners)



Adopted a pet from shelter/rescue

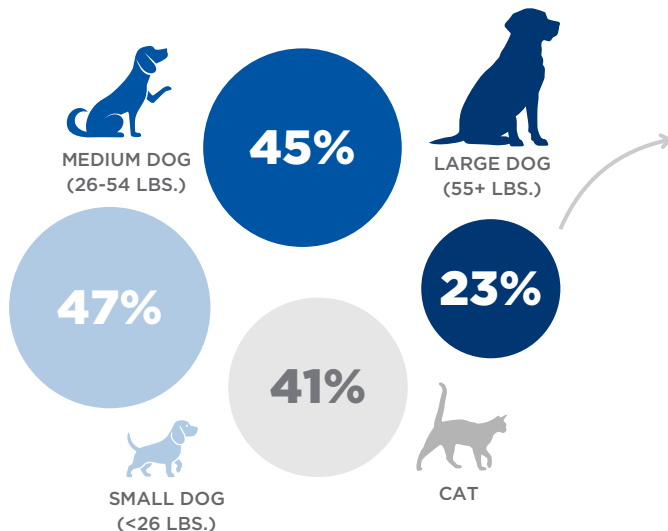




Among respondents who are open to adopting a pet from a shelter or rescue in the future, there is an overall preference for smaller pets. There is a high interest, however, in large dog adoption from younger generations. **Gen Z and Millennial potential adopters are nearly twice as likely to consider a large dog** as Gen X and Baby Boomers.

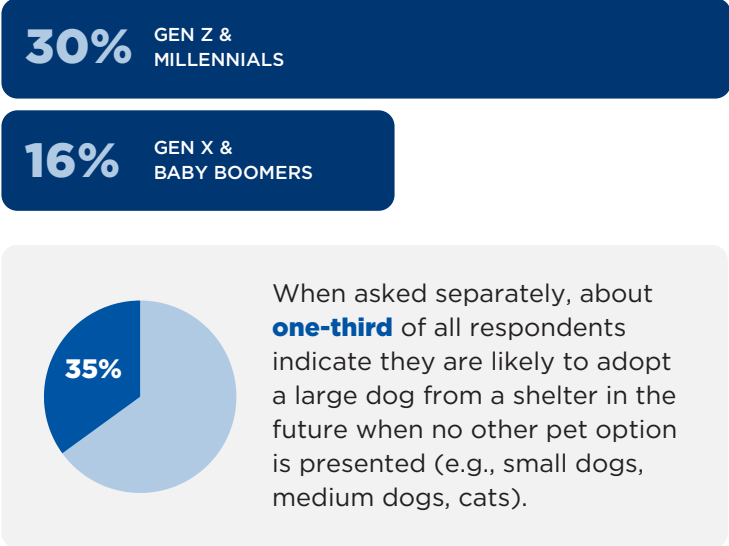
Likelihood to adopt from a shelter across pet types

(potential adopters)



Likelihood to adopt a large dog from a shelter by age

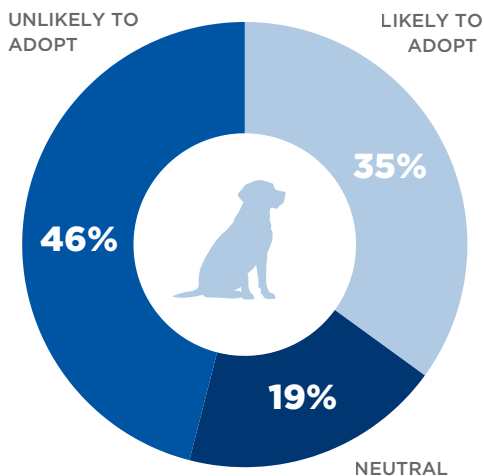
(potential adopters)



Size preference isn't rigid. While smaller pets may lead in head-to-head comparisons, **many Americans remain open to welcoming a large dog into their family.**

Likelihood to adopt a large dog from a shelter

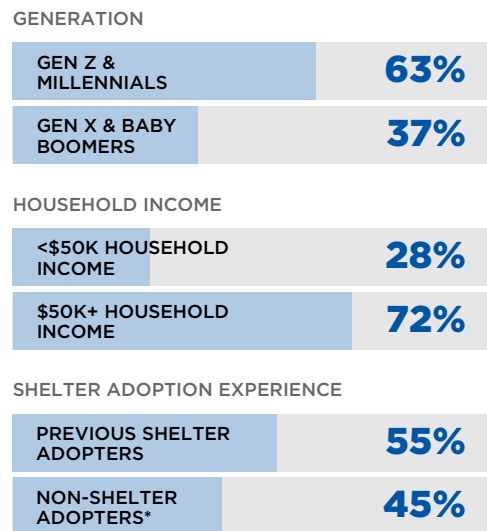
(total population)



Looking at likely large dog adopters through different demographic lenses, patterns emerge. Some independent characteristics stand out, such as:

- Skewing younger
- Higher-earning household incomes
- Having previous shelter adoption experience

Demographic splits among likely large dog adopters



*Non-Shelter Adopter: Anyone who has never adopted from a shelter or rescue.



Unlocking Large Dog Data with Shelter Animals Count

According to **Shelter Animals Count**, a program of the ASPCA, 2.8 million dogs entered shelters in 2025, a 4% decrease from the previous year and a positive signal that fewer dogs are entering the system. In 2025, 2 million dogs were adopted (down less than 1% from 2024), and though adoptions remain the predominant outcome for dogs, shelters and rescues continue to face capacity pressures nationwide due to dogs staying longer in care.

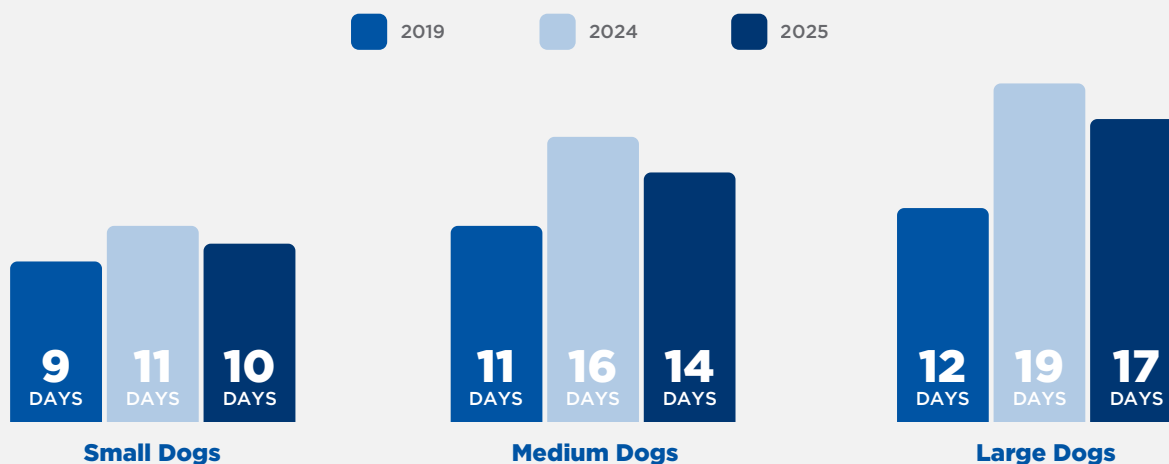
Large dogs represented **26% of dog intakes**, but the **smallest distribution of adoptions at 22%** compared to other dog sizes. Medium dogs made up 38% of intakes and 40% of adoptions, while small dogs made up 36% of intakes and 38% of adoptions. On the surface, these proportions suggest that all dogs are moving through shelters at a similar pace. The reality is more complex: **large dogs spend more time waiting for homes than small and medium dogs.**

Median length of stay from intake to adoption improved across all sizes in 2025, with large dogs

showing the most dramatic progress, dropping from 19 to 17 days. While these reductions are encouraging, **large dogs still spend 70% more time in shelters than small dogs**, and even a single additional day in care can significantly impact shelter capacity constraints.

Of all large dogs entering shelters in 2025, 54% were adopted, in line with adoption rates for small dogs (54%) and medium dogs (53%). These adoption rates are comparable to the previous year, even with large dogs facing distinct barriers and spending more time in shelters.

Median length of stay for dogs until adoption*



*Shelter Animals Count offers animal-level data (ALD), which is detailed records on individual animals, from organizations using select shelter software systems integrated with SAC's API. They added an additional software to analyze ALD in 2025, roughly doubling the number of records in this dataset. As a result, changes to year-over-year trends and comparisons to prior reports may be driven by this shift in data composition.

Perceptions

Although large dogs spend more time in shelters, **most Americans have positive opinions of large dogs as pets.** Those likely to adopt a large dog report significantly more positive opinions.



While there are gaps in agreement across several perceptions, the clearest point of separation between those likely and unlikely to adopt a large dog is **confidence in handling and caring** for one — a 56-percentage-point gap.



Large dog perceptions

■ LIKELY TO ADOPT A LARGE DOG
 ■ UNLIKELY TO ADOPT A LARGE DOG

Large dogs can be great family pets



Large dogs get unfairly labeled as dangerous



With training, large dogs are easy to manage



I feel confident handling and caring for a large dog



Shelters provide enough information to decide if a large dog fits my lifestyle



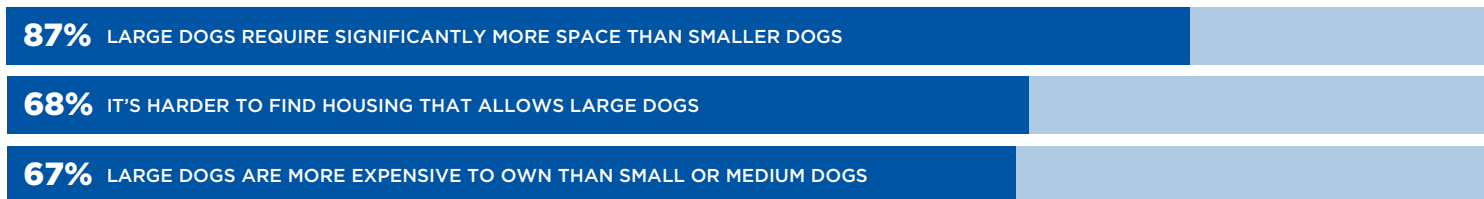
“Shelter intake numbers have risen dramatically since the end of the pandemic and adoptions have struggled to keep pace. Big dogs especially face longer stays in shelters, and those with behavioral challenges can languish for extended periods of time. Behavior problems tend to worsen in a shelter environment presenting a dilemma for staff and volunteers. But shelter leaders are infinitely creative and have come up with many life-saving strategies to care for and market big dogs to adopters.”

Jim Tedford, President and CEO, [The Association for Animal Welfare Advancement](#)



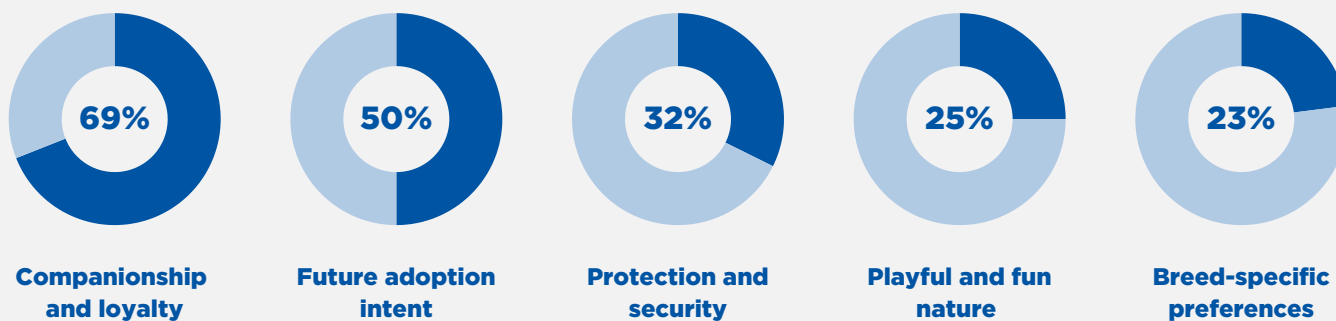
Regardless of likelihood to adopt a large dog, Americans find common ground in recognizing practical challenges such as cost and space requirements.

Large dog perceptions (total population)



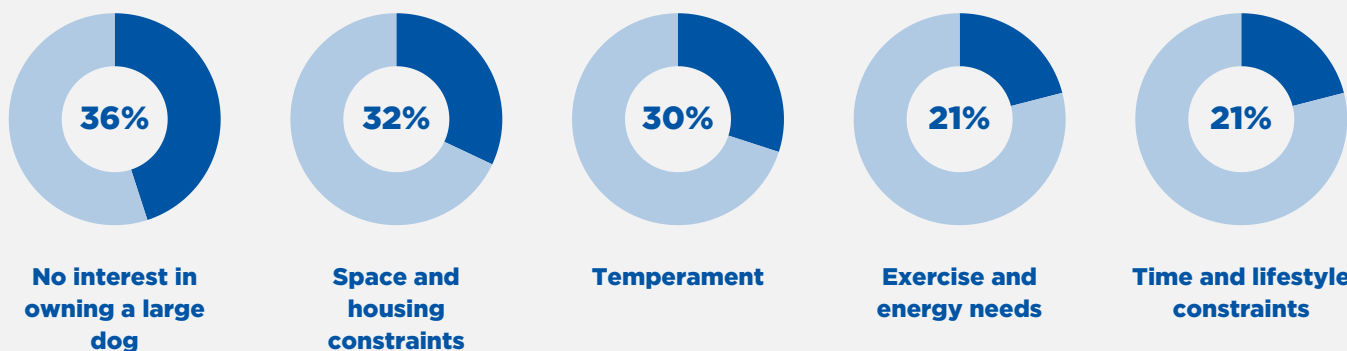
While challenges exist, current and previous large dog owners responded to open-ended questions about large dog ownership with mostly positive experiences. From these responses, **“companionship and loyalty”** emerged as the most frequent theme.

What current/previous large dog owners say about large dogs (top themes)



Among those who have not owned a large dog, hesitancy usually reflects a **lifestyle mismatch**: limited space or housing constraints, concerns about temperament or high energy needs and a general preference against large breeds.

What those who have never owned a large dog say about potential future ownership (top themes)

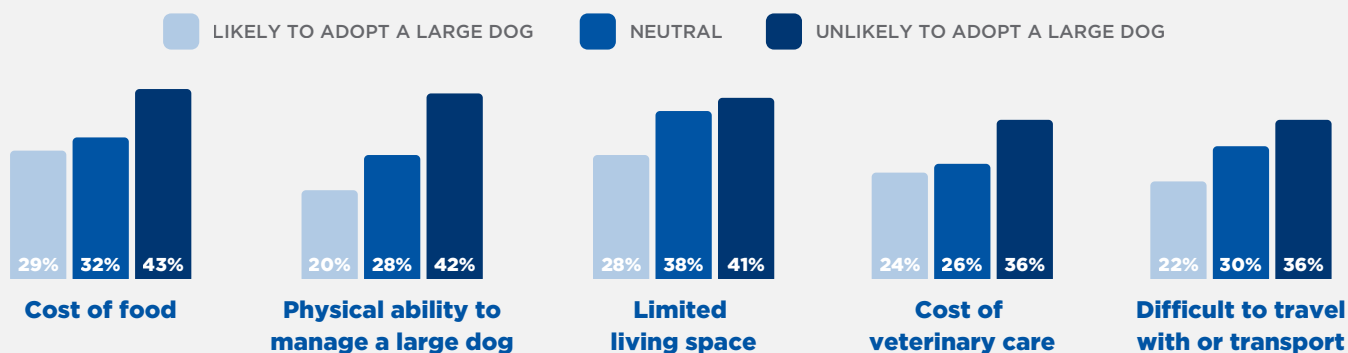


Barriers

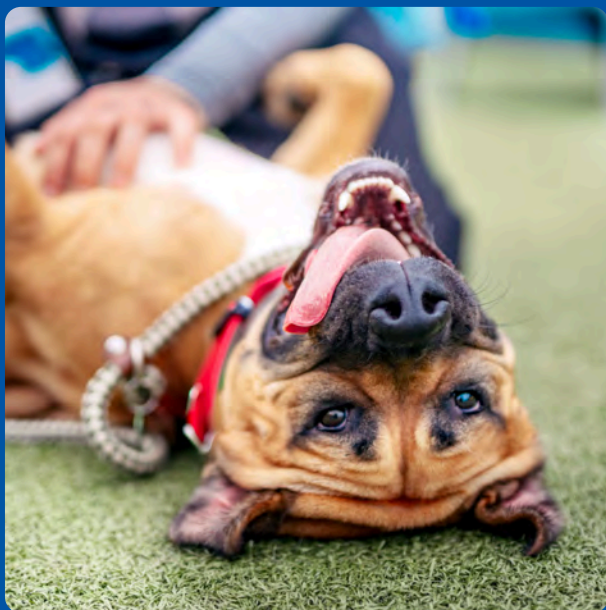
Practical considerations that scale with dog size are the most frequently cited reasons people hesitate to adopt a large dog: the cost of feeding a larger animal, physical handling and living space.

As the likelihood to adopt rises, the weight of these barriers declines, but **cost of care** and **size-related logistics** still factor into many households' decisions.

“What factors are most likely to prevent you from adopting a large dog?”



To broaden adoption prospects, **shelters can ease some of these concerns through education and creative marketing** with adopters. For example, by actively showcasing the diverse personalities and energy levels of large breeds, they can highlight how many are perfectly suited for apartment living or less active homes. Shelters can also demystify veterinary expenses for adopters, emphasizing that routine care is not inherently more costly for a large dog.



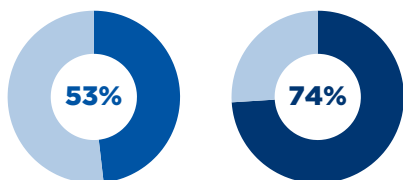
Housing Restrictions

GEN Z & MILLENNIALS

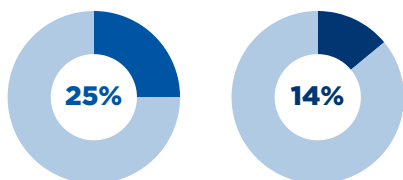
GEN X & BABY BOOMERS

Younger Americans are significantly **more likely to adopt a large dog** than older adults. However, they are also more likely to rent and to live in apartments, raising the chance they face housing restrictions.

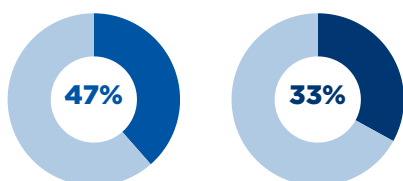
Own their living accommodation



Live in an apartment

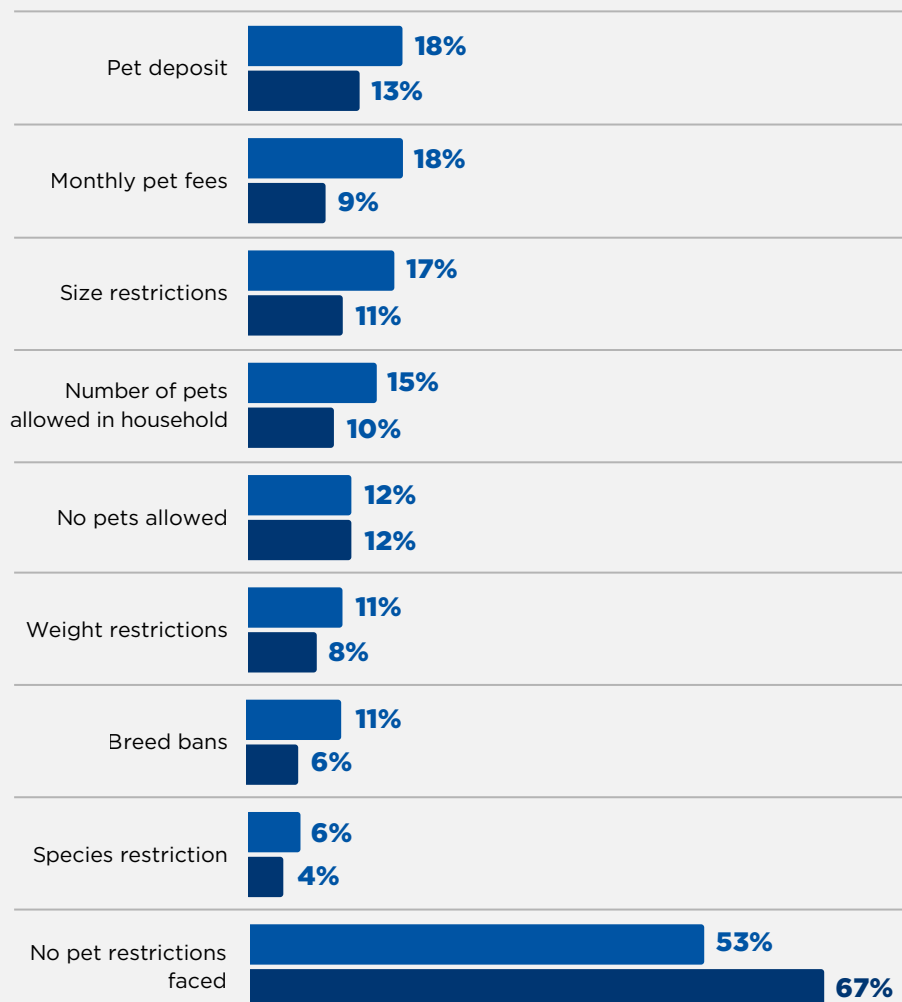


Face at least one housing restriction



When looking at the specific types of pet housing barriers each generation encounters, **financial restrictions are the most prominent.**

Pet housing restrictions faced



“**Across the country**, restrictive pet policies are quietly fueling shelter overcrowding and family separation. [Humane World for Animals](#) works with lawmakers, industry stakeholders, and housing justice and animal advocates to remove these arbitrary barriers based on breed and size and [expand access to affordable, pet-inclusive housing](#). Ensuring renters can keep their pets is not just an animal welfare issue – it’s a housing stability and equity issue for millions of families.”

Jessica Simpson, Program Manager for Companion Animals, Humane World for Animals

Wisconsin Humane Society *Benchwarmer Tryouts*

In February 2025, the Wisconsin Humane Society (WHS) sought to **reduce lengths of stay** for dogs who have spent a longer-than-average time at the shelter, coining these dogs “benchwarmers.”

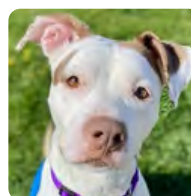
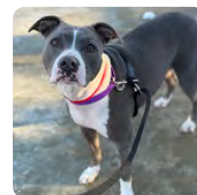
They introduced a foster-to-adopt program called Benchwarmer Tryouts, allowing prospective adopters to bring home a benchwarmer for up to a week to make sure the dog is a good fit for their family.

The program offers the following:

- Those interested complete a foster application and indicate interest in Benchwarmer Tryouts.
- Upon approval by the WHS foster team, the applicant can stop by any shelter location to meet available benchwarmers and bring home a dog the same day.
- If the foster family decides they would like to add the pet to their roster, they can finalize the adoption online from home with a reduced adoption fee of \$75.
- If not, the family can bring the dog back to WHS. The foster family has the option to select another benchwarmer until they find their match.

Benchwarmer Tryouts has led to:

A length of stay reduction for all dogs on the adoption floor from **4.8 days to 4.2 days** between February and November 2025.



68 foster applications approved in the first month of the program.



WHS promotes the Benchwarmer Tryouts program through in-shelter signage, mass email, social media and television spots. When individual benchwarmer dogs are featured in marketing or on adoption channels, WHS consistently highlights the try-out option to reduce perceived barriers and encourage families to consider dogs they may have otherwise overlooked.

WHY WE LOVE THIS

The Benchwarmer Tryouts program benefits everyone involved. It offers adopters a guilt-free trial period, helping them assess a large dog's fit for their lifestyle and encouraging consideration of pets they might otherwise overlook. It addresses common adoption barriers identified in our data, such as

concerns over physical ability to manage a large dog or limited living space, by providing the flexibility to evaluate these factors. The large dog gets a break from the shelter to socialize in a home setting. For WHS, the program helps free shelter capacity so they can care for more pets.



“Systemic issues like housing instability have been unsupportive of especially larger dogs finding adoptive homes quickly. We’re pleased that our Benchwarmer Tryouts program has incentivized families to consider trying out some of our longer-stay dogs, which has had a measurable and meaningful impact on our beloved benchwarmers — and their new families.”

Alison Fotsch, President and CEO, Wisconsin Humane Society

Incentives for Large Dog Adoption

Lower costs — from training to adoption — **rank the highest** among programs and resources that would encourage large dog adoptions. However, most incentives only appeal to those who are already likely to adopt a large dog.

Top eight programs/resources that would motivate large dog adoption

	TOTAL POPULATION	LIKELY TO ADOPT A LARGE DOG	UNLIKELY TO ADOPT A LARGE DOG
Free or discounted large dog training	26%	31%	21%
Financial assistance for initial costs	24%	31%	19%
Lower adoption fee for large dogs	23%	34%	14%
Documented behavior assessments	22%	32%	14%
Starter kit of properly sized items	21%	30%	13%
Foster-to-adopt trial period	19%	27%	12%
Post-adoption behavioral support	18%	24%	12%
None of those	33%	9%	56%



Enhancing successful large dog placements requires **innovative solutions to dismantle common barriers**. Adopters Welcome, a program by Humane World for Animals, provides shelters and rescues with tools and training to transform their adoption processes.



“**Adopters Welcome** is a conversation-based adoption training program that empowers animal professionals to remove barriers to adoption and enhance adoption matches. Through conversation, shelters can help an adopter navigate any potential challenges. An adopter may need help talking with their landlord to allow a large dog or they may need loose-leash training tips so they can walk their dog safely rather than requiring a fenced-in yard. Great adoption matches are a result of trust and communication, not lengthy applications.”

Lindsay Hamrick, Director of Shelter Outreach, Humane World for Animals

THE PATH FORWARD

When it comes to personal circumstances, **sufficient living space** and confidence in **affording the costs** associated with large dog ownership are key motivators to large dog adoption.

Personal motivators for large dog adoption

	TOTAL POPULATION	LIKELY TO ADOPT A LARGE DOG	UNLIKELY TO ADOPT A LARGE DOG
Having sufficient home/yard space	45%	51%	38%
Desire for companionship and affection	33%	48%	21%
Confidence I can afford the costs	32%	42%	24%
Feeling of increased home security	30%	39%	23%
Positive prior experience with large dogs	29%	47%	15%
Preference for calm temperament	28%	35%	21%
Interest in active exercise partner	25%	39%	15%
Belief they are good with kids/families	21%	35%	10%
Preference of size/appearance	20%	35%	10%
Availability at shelter	19%	35%	7%
Access to training resources	18%	23%	16%
Adoption incentives or reduced fees	14%	22%	8%
None of the above	21%	1%	40%



More than two in five likely large dog adopters have had a large dog before.

The MSPCA-Angell

Strategic Initiatives for Large Dog Adoptions

In response to shelter overcapacity challenges, the MSPCA-Angell implemented a **multi-pronged strategy to boost large dog adoptions.**

Strategic Fee-Waived Events

The MSPCA-Angell leveraged data to highlight the ongoing shelter capacity crisis and the urgency of large dog placements through media outreach and social media posts. They launched a series of strategic fee-waived events, specifically for large-breed adult dogs, linking these events to timely news hooks, such as animal relocations. This approach educated the community on capacity issues and the pressing need for adoptions. A post-event survey revealed that the primary motivation for dog adopters who attended was the desire to provide a home for a shelter pet (77.7%), significantly outweighing financial savings (14.8%).

The MASS Coalition

Founded in July 2024, the MSPCA-Angell co-formed the MASS Coalition with several other local animal welfare groups. The coalition's objective is to collectively enhance adoptions, reduce lengths of stay and lower euthanasia rates by sharing ideas, resources and marketing tools. Their collaborative efforts span several areas: providing behavioral support, sharing methods to reduce adoption barriers, participating in joint fee-waived events, expanding transfer opportunities and partnering to bring vaccine and spay/neuter resources to areas in need.

The MSPCA-Angell's initiatives have led to positive results:

At the MSPCA-Angell, live outcomes have **increased by 26%** since 2022.

Their average dog length of stay has **decreased by 12%** (from 17 to 15 days) since 2023.

mspca angell

Their share of Massachusetts dog **intakes doubled** from 5% in 2022 to 10% in 2024.

Across participating organizations, the MASS Coalition has facilitated over **1,080 fee-waived** dog adoptions since its formation in 2024.

WHY
WE LOVE
THIS

The MSPCA-Angell strategically leverages fee-waived events, a key motivator for one-third of likely large dog adopters identified in our data. They amplify the impact of these events by integrating multiple top information sources to reach adopters and successfully grow public

motivation toward helping large dogs. Additionally, the MASS Coalition highlights the immense power of inter-shelter collaboration, demonstrating how combining resources and shared strategies can enhance outcomes for large dogs.



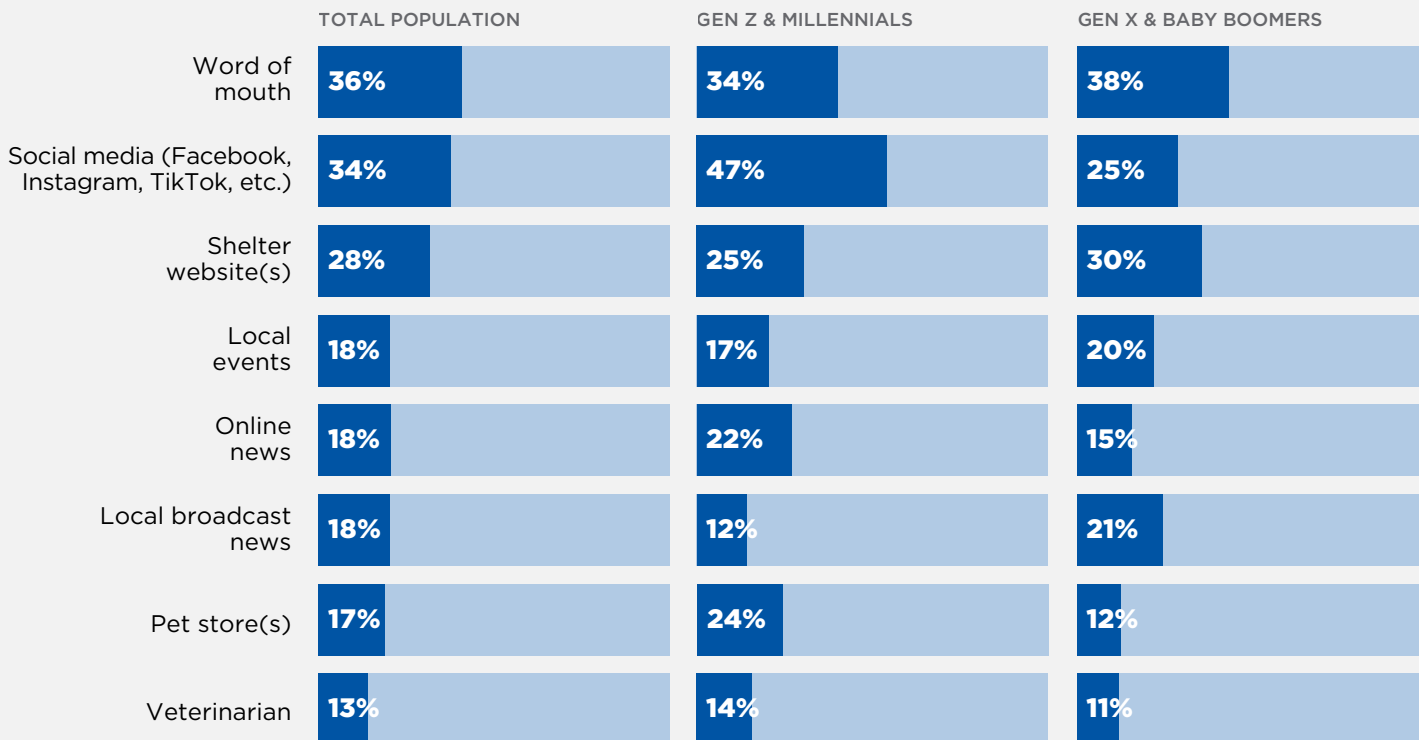
“Animal welfare organizations are no strangers to challenges that threaten the well-being of animals. One thing we know for certain is that overcoming challenges requires adaptation, and we can't do it alone. The current large dog overpopulation crisis, though overwhelming, is driven more by outcomes than intake, which gives us a unique opportunity to innovate and create meaningful solutions. It's now clear that lengthy adoption processes can no longer keep up with the urgent need to save lives. Now is the time to engage our communities to ensure they understand the challenges we face and, most importantly, to empower them to be part of the solution.”

Mike Keiley, Vice President, Animal Protection Division, MSPCA-Angell

Outreach to Future Adopters

Americans are just as likely to get information about local shelters from social media as they are word of mouth. Differing communications preferences among generations creates an opportunity to specialize content across channels.

Top eight shelter sources of information



Hill's Support of Animal Welfare

Founded more than 75 years ago with an unwavering commitment to science-led pet nutrition, Hill's Pet Nutrition is on a mission to help enrich and lengthen the special relationships between people and their pets.

Since its inception in 2002, the **Hill's Food, Shelter & Love program** has:

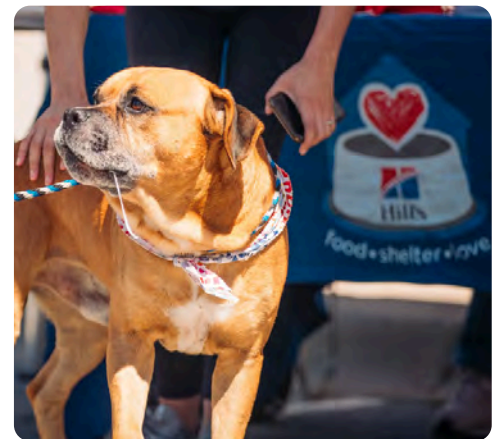
- Supported more than **16 million pet adoptions**, offering a New Pet Parent kit for adopters, which includes a starter bag of Hill's nutrition to ensure a smooth transition for pets into their new homes.
- Provided more than **\$300 million worth of Hill's brand pet foods** to feed pets across our partner animal shelters.

Responding when it matters most:

- Since 2013, Hill's Disaster Relief Network has provided more than **4.4 million pounds of food** and assisted in more than **200 emergencies**.



If you are interested in joining the Hill's Food, Shelter & Love program, please email shelters@hillspet.com



“At the heart of our work is the Hill's Food, Shelter & Love program. Alongside our shelter partners, we deliver trusted nutrition, training resources and emergency support to people and pets across the country. As the capacity crisis persists, we will continue strengthening these partnerships to broaden access to pet ownership and improve outcomes for pets, like large dogs, who face some of the greatest barriers to adoption.”

Rauf Gurbuz, U.S. President and General Manager, Hill's Pet Nutrition



Methodology

Hill's Pet Nutrition partnered with PSB Insights to field a 15-minute online non-probability survey from November 10 - November 24, 2025, to an audience of 2,000 general population American consumers.

Sampling quotas and weights were applied to be representative of the U.S. general population (based on best available data*) on the following characteristics:

**Pet Owners
vs. Non-Pet
Owners****

**Race/
ethnicity****

**Household
Income
Bands****

Gender**

Region**

Age

*U.S. quotas and weights based on Census ACS data, except for Pet Ownership, which came from Forbes Advisor: [Pet Ownership Statistics 2024](#)

**Post-stratification weights applied

Photography courtesy of: [The MSPCA-Angell](#) and [Wisconsin Humane Society](#).