

Shelter Animals Count Data Report:

NATIONAL TRENDS IN FOSTER-BASED RESCUE OPERATIONS

January 2023 to December 2024



SHELTER ANIMALS COUNT
THE NATIONAL DATABASE

Overview

Foster-based rescues are a critical part of the animal welfare system, and their operations often differ substantially from brick-and-mortar shelters. Using data from Pawlytics and comparing it to the Shelter Animals Count National Database, we can get a better understanding of how fostering organizations shape animal outcomes, intake sources, and adoption pathways.



Methodology

Dataset Information

- **National Totals:** Data on overall intake and outcomes by organization type were sourced from the Shelter Animals Count (SAC) 2024 Full Year Report.
 - 4,110 shelters and 9,417 foster-based organizations located across 50 U.S. states
 - 5.8 million community intakes and 1.2 million transfers: 3.4 million cats and 3.6 million dogs
 - Aggregate monthly data for each organization and detailed animal-level data for a representative sample of animals
- **Foster-Based Rescue Dataset:** Provided by Pawlytics, this dataset includes:
 - 107 de-identified foster-based organizations located across 34 states
 - 40,492 total animals: 18,954 cats and 21,538 dogs
 - Detailed animal-level information on intakes, outcomes, transfers, and length of stay
- **Date Range:** January 2023 – December 2024

Standard descriptive statistics were used to identify key trends, and results were compared against SAC's national dataset, which reflects operations from brick-and-mortar shelters and rescues across the United States. This comparative approach allows for a clearer understanding of how foster-based organizations fit within the broader animal welfare system.

Intake & Outcome Data




Analysis on intakes and outcomes are from Shelter Animals Count's National Dataset.




Intakes

When we look at national data from Shelter Animals Count, foster-based rescue organizations take in 15% of community intakes (all intakes minus transfers in) nationally while brick-and-mortar shelters take in 85%.

When it comes to community intakes for foster-based rescues, cats are more likely to enter as strays to this organization type than dogs are. Dogs are primarily transferred to rescues (51% of all intakes) followed by owner relinquishment (25%).

Intake Sources by Species and Org Type Group – Shelter Animals Count

	 Shelters Dogs 2024	 Rescues Dogs 2024
Strays	57%	15%
Relinquished	25%	25%
Other	11%	10%
Transfers In	10%	51%




	 Shelters Cats 2024	 Rescues Cats 2024
Strays	57%	36%
Relinquished	28%	23%
Other	8%	9%
Transfers In	11%	32%




Outcomes: High Adoption Success

According to Shelter Animals Count's 2024 analysis, foster-based rescues report a 75% adoption rate (total adoptions as a percentage of total intakes), compared to 56% for brick-and-mortar shelters. This indicates that rescues predominately depend on adoptions as their main source of outcomes, whereas shelters can see a higher distribution of services such as returning pets home, transferring out, and more.

Dogs: 80% adoption rate in foster-based rescues vs. 50% in shelters. **Cats:** 75% adoption rate in foster-based rescues vs. 61% in shelters.

Outcome Rates by Species and Org Type – Shelter Animals Count

	 Shelters Dogs 2024	 Rescues Dogs 2024
Adoptions	50%	80%
Return to Owner	19%	2%
Return to Field	0%	0%
Other Live Outcomes	2%	0%
Transfers Out	15%	15%
Non-Live Outcomes	13%	3%

	 Shelters Cats 2024	 Rescues Cats 2024
Adoptions	61%	75%
Return to Owner	3%	1%
Return to Field	9%	5%
Other Live Outcomes	2%	1%
Transfers Out	11%	9%
Non-Live Outcomes	13%	4%





Length of Stay

Length of Stay: Longer-Term Care in Foster Homes

Length of stay (LOS) remains one of the most distinct differences between foster-based rescues and traditional shelters. According to Shelter Animals Count's (SAC) 2024 Annual Report, the national median LOS to adoption was 16 days for dogs and 20 days for cats. The 2024 Annual Report noted that LOS has continued to rise in shelters, creating increasing capacity strain across the country. Foster-based rescues, however, operate under a more flexible model - one without the daily limitations of kennel capacity. This allows foster organizations to provide animals the time and environment needed to decompress, recover, and receive behavioral or medical care prior to adoption.

Within the foster-based rescue sample provided by Pawlytics, both dogs and cats experienced shorter median stays in 2024 compared to 2023. In the dataset, we noted that dogs have shorter stays in rescues than cats, and both species have seen decreases in lengths of stay.

Median Length of Stay to each outcome type – Pawlytics:

	 2023	 2024	 2023	 2024
Adoption	36	32	64	56
Return to Owner	9.5	12	52	4
Return to Field	0	0	0	30
Transfer Out	30	28	32	16.5
Died-in-Care	12.5	10	21	19
Euthanasia	54	22	32	33

Length of Stay to Adoption by Intake Type (Dogs) – Pawlytics:

	2023	2024	Year-Over-Year Change
Transfer In	34	33	-1 Day
Owner Surrender	34	35	+1 Day
Stray	33	32	-1 Day
Other Intake	40	31	-9 Days

Dogs showed little variation in LOS to adoption by intake type or year-over-year, with the exception of those in the “Other Intake” category, which saw a notable decrease of nine days between 2023 and 2024.

Length of Stay to Adoption by Intake Type (Cats) – Pawlytics:

	2023	2024	Year-Over-Year Change
Transfer In	52	55	+3 Days
Owner Surrender	56	51	-5 Days
Stray	66	54	-12 Days
Other Intake	78	72	-6 Days

Cats displayed more variation in LOS to adoption based on intake type, primarily due to “Other Intake” including animals born in care. Foster-based rescues saw a three-day increase in LOS for cats transferred in during 2024 but experienced decreases across most other intake types, particularly for stray cats, whose LOS dropped by 12 days year-over-year.

These findings demonstrate that while foster-based rescues continue to provide longer-term care than shelters, they consistently place a higher percentage of animals into homes through adoption—particularly for cats.

Transfers: Who and Where

Transfers: Who and Where

The transfer network is a critical pipeline for foster-based rescues, who often transfer animals into their programs from overwhelmed, crowded shelters. Transfers into foster rescues are most often:

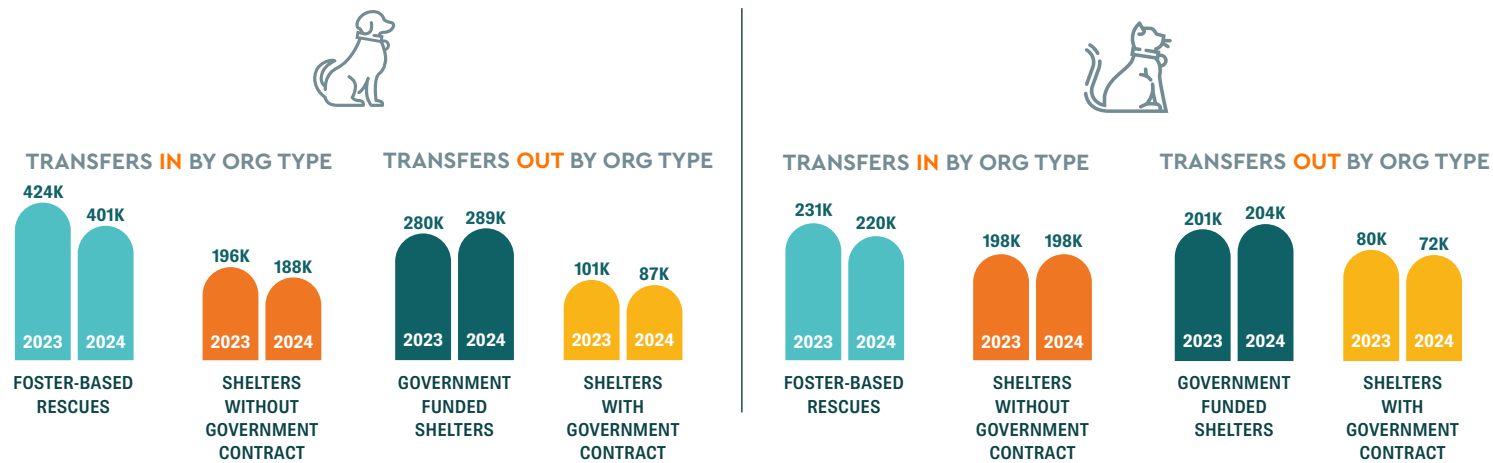
- Dogs (65%), especially small, adult dogs according to Shelter Animals Count national data.
- According to Pawlytics data, top breeds transferred in were Mixed (21%) followed by the following single-breed labeled dogs: Chihuahuas, Labrador Retrievers, Pit Bull Terriers.
- According to Pawlytics data, 68% of transfers in to foster-based rescues are from brick-and-mortar shelters. Transfers also come from other rescues (18% for dogs, 13% for cats) and other sources such as veterinary clinics, boarding facilities, community service providers (13% for dogs and 19% for cats).

This highlights the interdependence between shelters and rescues in balancing capacity.

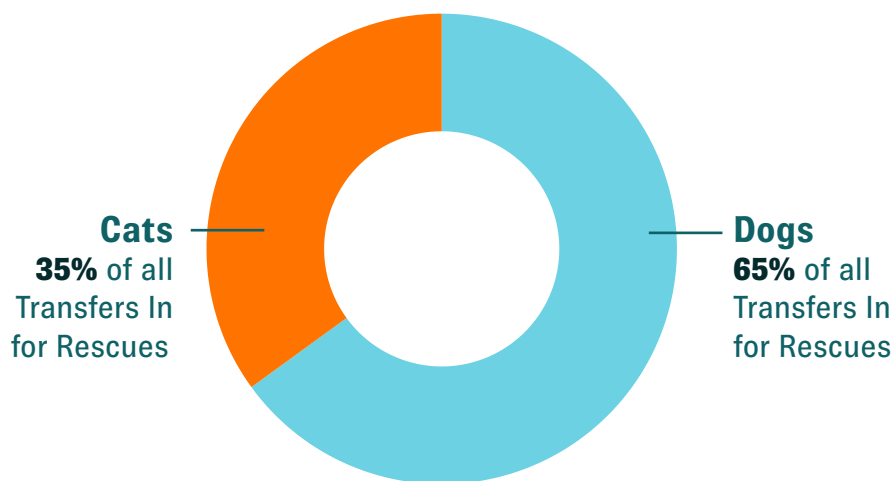
According to the 2024 Annual Data Report from Shelter Animals Count:



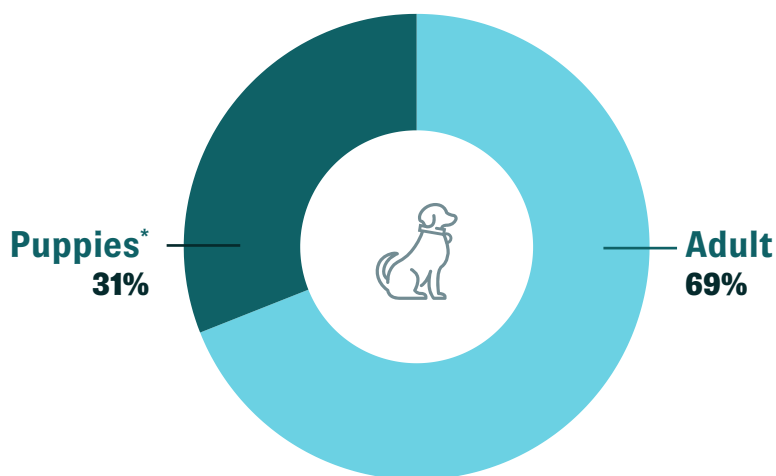
Transfers play a vital role in balancing shelter capacity and increasing live outcomes for animals. Shelters and rescues rely on strong transfer partnerships to move animals between organizations based on space availability, adoption demand, and specific care needs. The main transfer-in partners for dogs and cats have historically been rescues without government contracts and shelters without government contracts. Transfer numbers have declined, while the main transfer out partners - government funded agencies and shelters with government contracts - have seen shifting data year-over-year. In 2024, both transfer-in and transfer-out numbers dropped by approximately 4% compared to 2023. While government-funded shelters remain the largest source of transfers out, rescues, and private shelters - often the key transfer-in partners - are taking in fewer animals.



Transfers In by Species – SAC National Data:

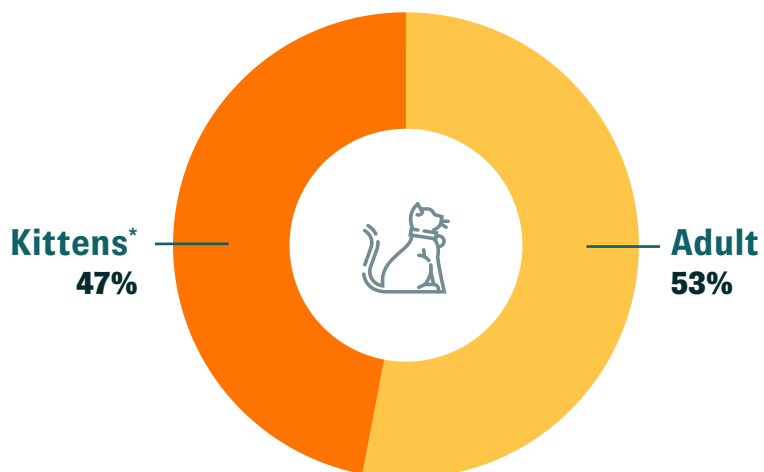


Age of Dogs Transferred In – Pawlytics:



**5 months old or younger*

Age of Cats Transferred In – Pawlytics:



**5 months old or younger*



According to data from Pawlytics, of dogs transferred in, 69% are adults/seniors and 31% are puppies. Cats transferred in are 53% adults/seniors and 47% kittens.

Top Ten Dog Breeds Transferred In – Pawlytics

79% of dogs transferred into foster-based rescue care are given a single breed label, while 21% are given a mixed breed label. Of the dogs that have one breed label, the top breeds are:

Top Ten Dog Breeds Transferred In

- 1

Chihuahua – 11.5%
- 2

Labrador Retriever – 5.7%
- 3

American Pit Bull Terrier – 5.7%
- 4

German Shepherd – 3.6%
- 5

Alaskan Husky – 3.1%
- 6

Great Pyrenees – 2.2%
- 7

American Staffordshire Terrier – 2.0%
- 8



Beagle – 1.8%
- 9

Shih Tzu – 1.7%
- 10

Siberian Husky – 1.6%

Transferred From by Org Type – Pawlytics

This chart highlights transferred from data for dogs and cats by organization type.

	 Dog	 Cat
Shelters	69%	68%
Rescues	18%	13%
Other Org Types	13%	19%



Seasonal Trends

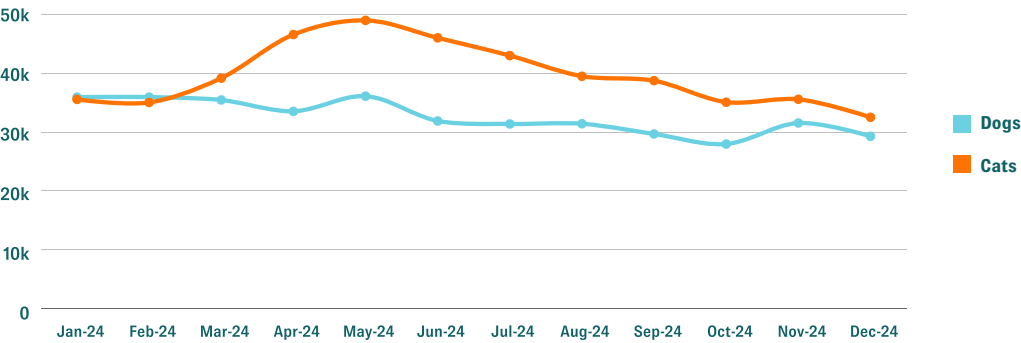
Seasonal Trends: Surge in Spring and Summer Intakes

Both foster-based rescues and shelters experience a spring and summer surge in intakes, driven by kitten season. For rescue groups in particular, community intakes spike for cats but remain consistent for dogs across the year.

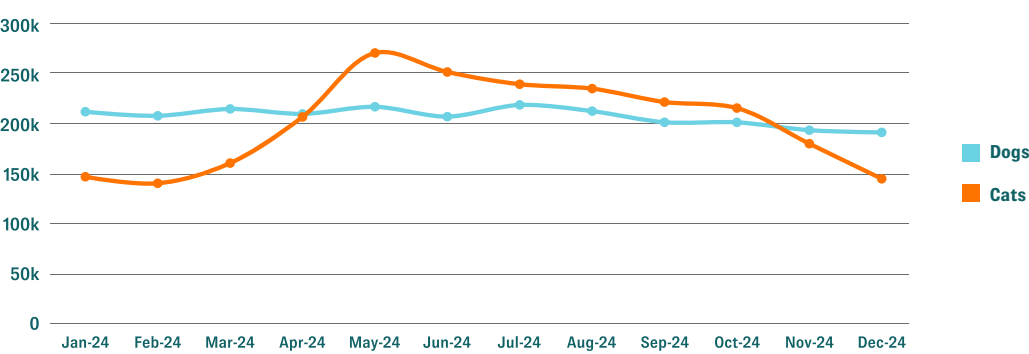
- Intakes peak between April and August, largely cats.
- Adoptions mirror this seasonality, with peaks in July and December.
- Dog intakes and outcomes remain relatively stable year-round.
- There is a distinct peak in dog adoptions during winter months, suggesting a tie to the holiday season. SAC data points to high adoption rates in November and December.



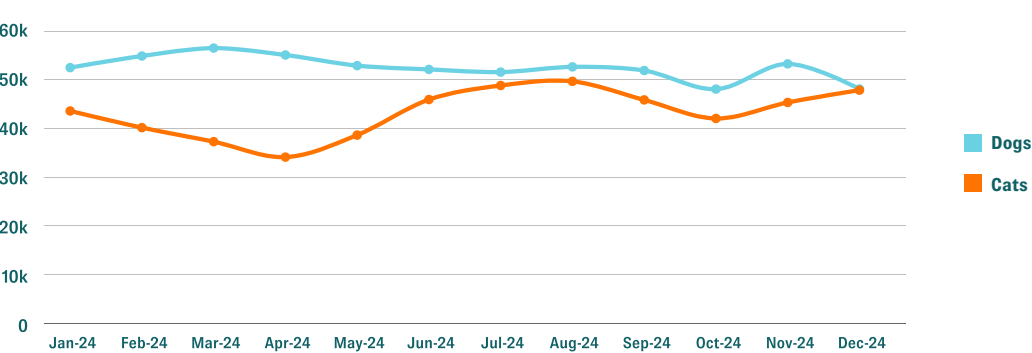
National Foster-Based Organization Community Intakes By Species – SAC:



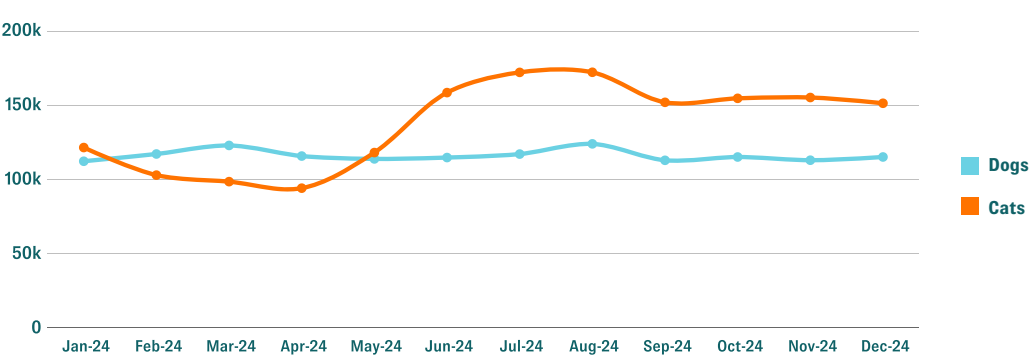
National Brick-and-Mortar Organization Community Intakes By Species -SAC:



Foster-Based Organization Adoptions By Species – SAC:



Brick-and-Mortar Adoptions by Species – SAC:



Conclusion

The findings presented in this report highlight how foster-based rescues function as a distinct, yet complementary, part of the animal welfare system. While foster-based organizations account for a smaller share of national intakes - approximately 15% compared to 85% for brick-and-mortar shelters - they have a higher adoption rate at 75% as a percentage of their share of intakes - which means more animals have an adoption outcome compared to other organization types. . Their operations reflect a model focused on individualized care, supported by distributed capacity through foster homes rather than physical facilities. The success of these organizations lies in their ability to:

- Achieve higher adoption outcomes than the national average, especially for dogs (80% vs. 50%) and cats (75% vs. 61%).
- Absorb animals requiring longer care, especially cats, through a foster-based model that supports decompression and recovery - providing home-based care for neonate kittens and other vulnerable populations.
- Relieve shelter overcrowding through intake of strays and transfers while maintaining much lower non-live outcome rates (3–4% in rescues vs. 13% in shelters).
- There is a distinct peak in dog adoptions during winter months, suggesting a tie to the holiday season. SAC national data points to high adoption rates in November and December.
- Rescues maintain the ability to manage their intakes based on the number of available foster homes they have available to them. The more active homes available to foster, the more animals can potentially be placed into their care.

Overall, foster-based rescues contribute meaningfully to national animal welfare outcomes by expanding placement capacity, supporting shelters through transfers, and sustaining high outcome rates. Continued collaboration and consistent data reporting across organization types will help the field better understand these relationships and identify where resources and support can have the greatest impact.

Acknowledgment

Shelter Animals Count extends sincere appreciation to Pawlytics for providing access to de-identified foster-based rescue data that made this analysis possible. Pawlytics' animal management software is designed specifically for foster-based organizations, enabling more efficient data collection, foster coordination, and outcome tracking - empowering rescues to manage operations and measure impact with clarity and confidence.

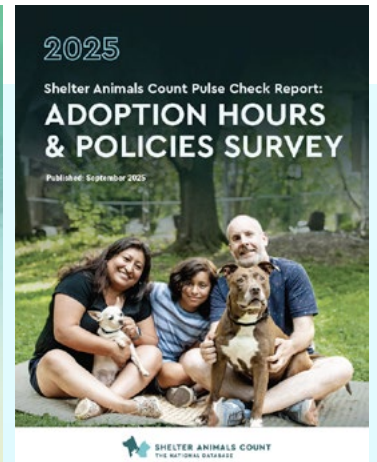
Shelter Animals Count

Shelter Animals Count is a national nonprofit organization dedicated to collecting, sharing, and analyzing standardized data to help animal shelters, rescues, and communities better understand the state of animal welfare. With data from thousands of organizations across the country, Shelter Animals Count provides the trusted numbers the field relies on to monitor trends, measure impact, and guide sound decision-making.



About Shelter Animals Count

Shelter Animals Count is a neutral, independent non-profit organization entrusted with analyzing and sharing animal sheltering data to provide crucial information and insights to improve the lives of pets and the people who love them. Each month, 200+ data points are collected on all organization types and all species, for both sheltering and community services organizations in all 50 U.S. states, Puerto Rico, the Virgin Islands, and Canada.



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