

Study: Florida Shelter Animal Census

A snapshot of statewide shelter animal intake and outcome trends

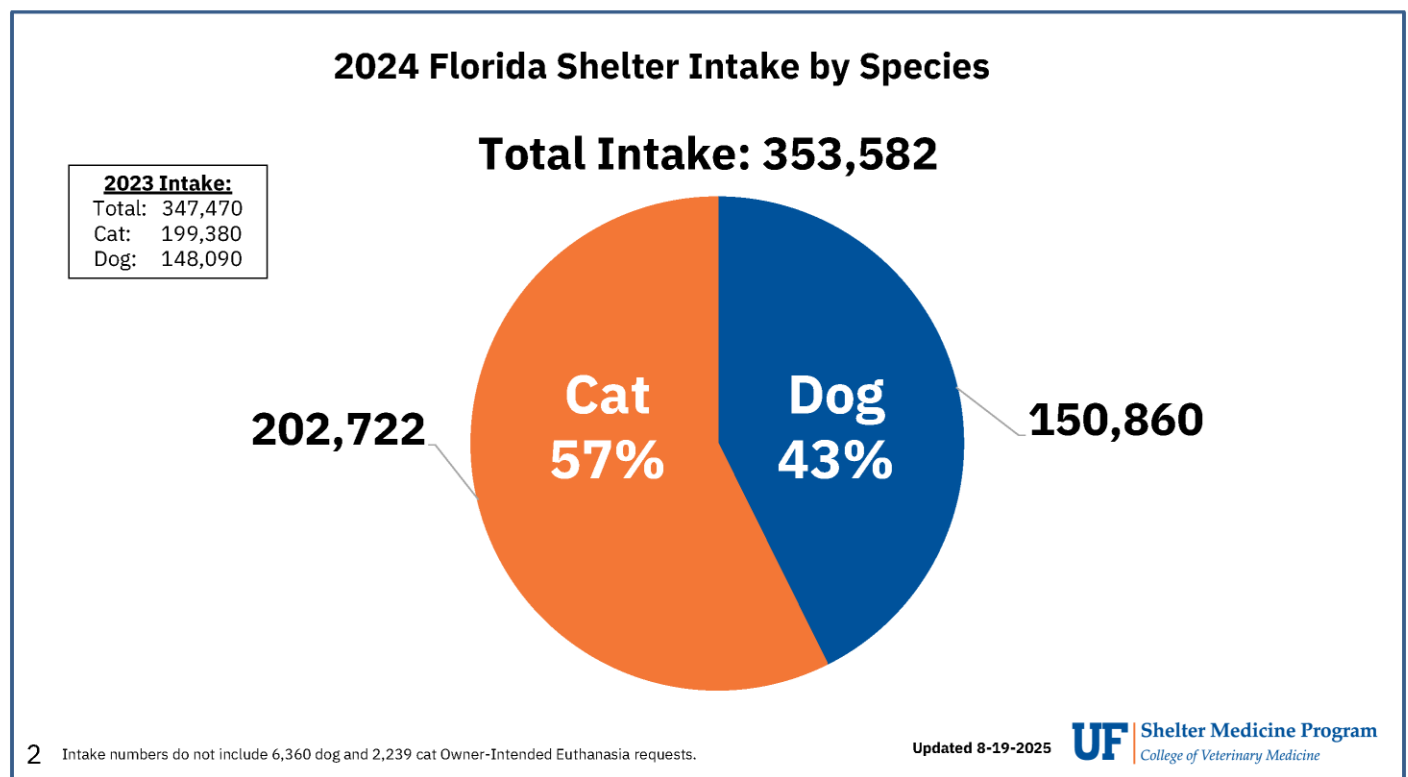
The Shelter Medicine Program at the University of Florida is frequently asked, “How many cats and dogs are admitted to shelters each year and what happens to them?” To answer this question, the program periodically conducts a statewide census of dogs and cats that pass through more than 150 animal shelters across the state. In 2024, for the first time ever, shelter animal intake and outcome data were collected from 100% of the state’s 153 shelters, making it the most complete assessment of the state of Florida animal sheltering ever completed.

Are Florida Shelters Turning the Corner on the Post-Pandemic Slump?

A new study by the University of Florida revealed that in 2024 the state’s 153 animal shelters increased admissions of both dogs and cats over 2023, while simultaneously decreasing euthanasia and increasing the overall proportion of animals leaving the shelters alive. Florida shelters collectively saved 88% of the 353,582 animals they took in throughout the year, up from 85% the year before. While the changes were small, they represent a reversal of worrisome trends that have plagued shelters in Florida and across the country since the pandemic.

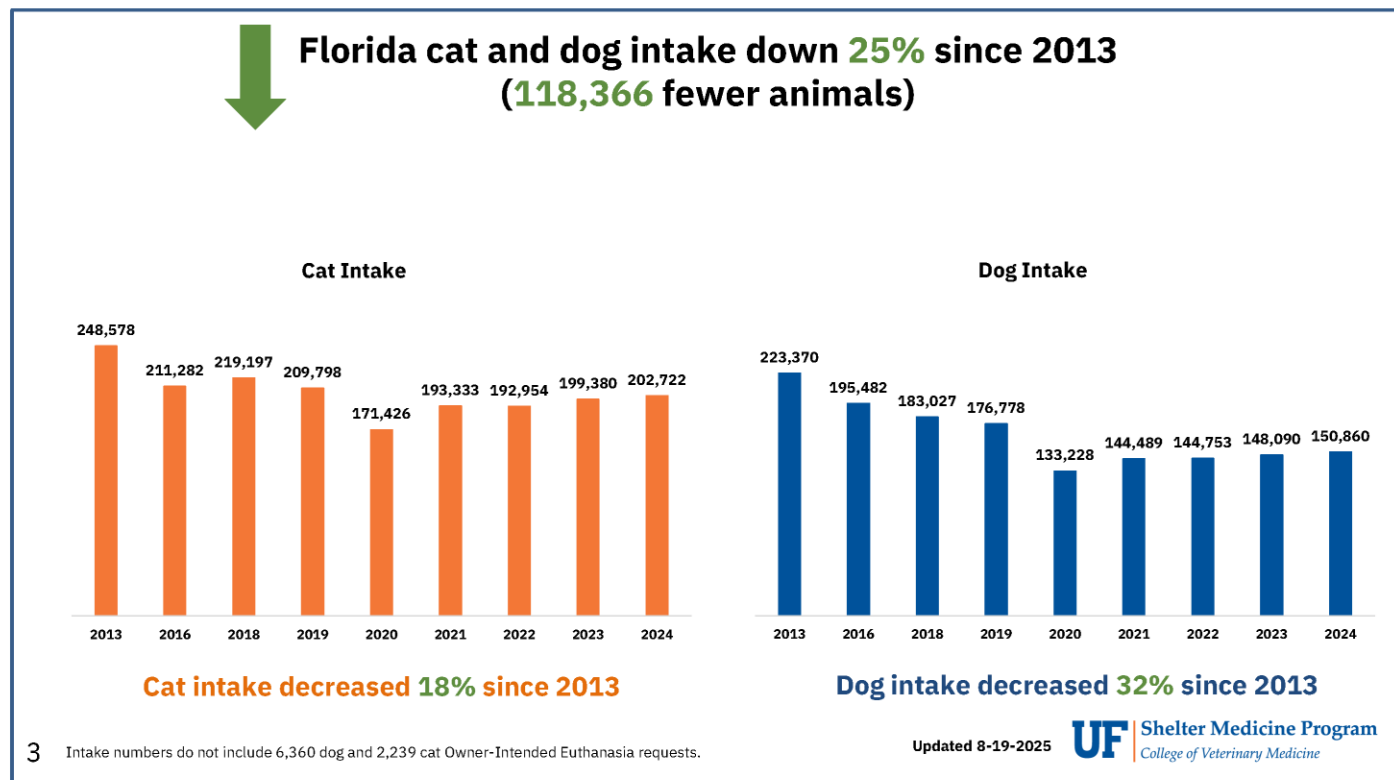
“The challenges faced by Florida shelters following the pandemic reflect those of shelters nationally, including pressure to take in more animals, declining local adoptions, and decreased transports to regions with historically more adoption capacity. As a result, animals are staying in shelters longer — often in crowded and stressful conditions — and euthanasia increased. It’s a relief to see some signs that positive change may be on the way.”

— Dr. Julie Levy, Fran Marino Endowed Distinguished Professor of Shelter Medicine Education



A newly released study from the Shelter Medicine Program at the University of Florida revealed the state’s 153

animal shelters took in more cats than dogs, a persistent trend since the statewide Florida Shelter Animal Census first collected data in 2013.



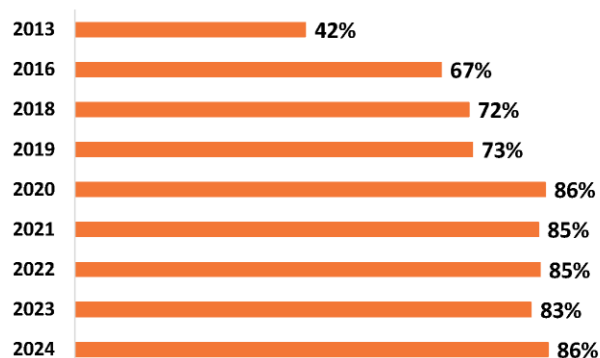
While intake of both cats and dogs continued to climb since 2020, cat intake has outpaced dog intake since the first statewide statistics were first compiled in 2013.

Despite continuing challenges with increased length-of-stay, strained capacity issues, and diminished access to spay-neuter as a result of a national veterinary workforce shortage, shelters in the state euthanized 110,579 fewer cats and 39,432 fewer dogs in 2024 than in 2013 when UF first started tracking statewide statistics. The shelter animal census does not include pets brought to shelters by owners requesting euthanasia in its shelter intake and outcome statistics. Live outcome rates (live outcomes divided by live intakes) for both cats (86%) and dogs (89%) increased slightly in 2024. This reverses a progressive decline in live outcome rates since 2020, the year shelters implemented pandemic shutdown-related reductions in nonemergent animal intakes. Shelters across the country recorded peak numbers of adoptions and foster placements that year, resulting in record increases in the live outcome rate in Florida of 90% in 2020.

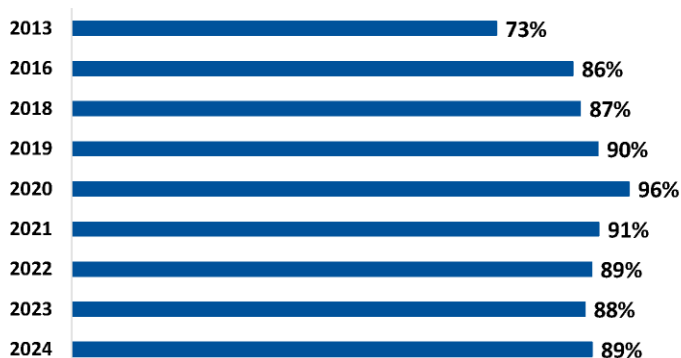


Total Live Outcome Rate increased from 57% in 2013 to 88% in 2024

Cat Live Outcome Rate by Year



Dog Live Outcome Rate by Year



6 Live Outcome Rate = Total Live Outcomes / Total Live Intake

Updated 8-19-2025

UF Shelter Medicine Program
College of Veterinary Medicine

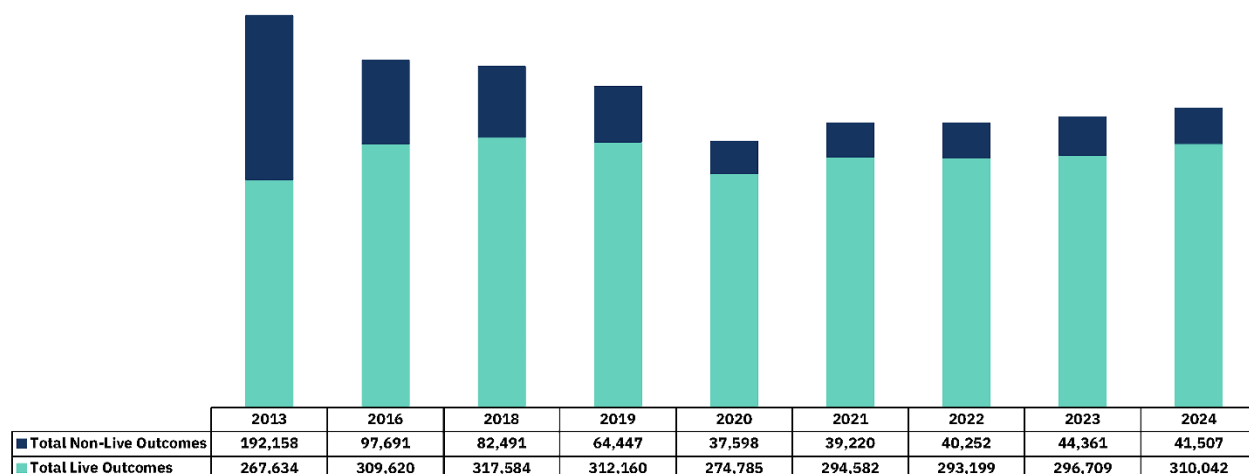
Cats have made the largest improvement in live outcome rates since 2013 but still trailed dogs in every year of data collection. Live outcome rates ticked up slightly in 2024 after 3 consecutive years of decline following the pandemic shutdown in 2020.

A difficult region, a false hope, and the pandemic's cruel aftermath

As a state, Florida's shelter trends have [long tracked with the rest of the South](#), with higher animal intake per capita and higher euthanasia rates than other parts of the country. Warm climate, high poverty rates, large rural communities, and veterinary care deserts all contributed to a pet overpopulation problem that overwhelmed the capacity of many shelters. Prior to the pandemic, coalitions of animal welfare organizations worked effectively to promote aggressive spay/neuter campaigns, community engagement, and state-wide collaboration among shelters and rescue groups to bring down shelter intake and euthanasia rates.

The pandemic shutdown brought an initial outpouring of support for shelters as homebound families adopted new pets and responded to shelter appeals to quickly reduce shelter populations through temporary fostering. These actions literally "emptied the shelters" and increased live outcome rates to record levels, raising hopes for a new era of community engagement that would serve lost and relinquished pets without crowding them into shelters. That hope was short-lived, however, as the post-pandemic era was marked by decreases in pet adoption demand, spay/neuter capacity, and pet-inclusive housing, simultaneously with rising costs of pet care, especially veterinary services. The usual relief valves of transferring shelter animals to foster-based rescue groups and to shelters in regions with more capacity for adoptable pets closed off as those agencies also experienced dwindling demand for pets. The positive trends achieved prior to the pandemic from 2013 to 2020 were followed by a progressive increase in shelter crowding, length of stay, disease outbreaks, staff burnout, and reduced capacity to respond to community needs. Euthanasia of shelter pets increased, most notably of large dogs.

Total Live Outcomes increased 16% from 2013 to 2024
Total Non-Live Outcomes decreased 78% from 2013 to 2024



Live Outcomes include Adopted, Transferred Out, Returned to Owner, Returned to Field (not TNR), and Other Live Outcomes that do not fit into these categories.
 Non-Live Outcomes include Died in Care, Lost in Care, and Shelter Euthanasia. They do not include 6,637 dog and 2,371 cat Owner Intended Euthanasia outcomes.

Updated 8-19-2025

UF Shelter Medicine Program
 College of Veterinary Medicine

4

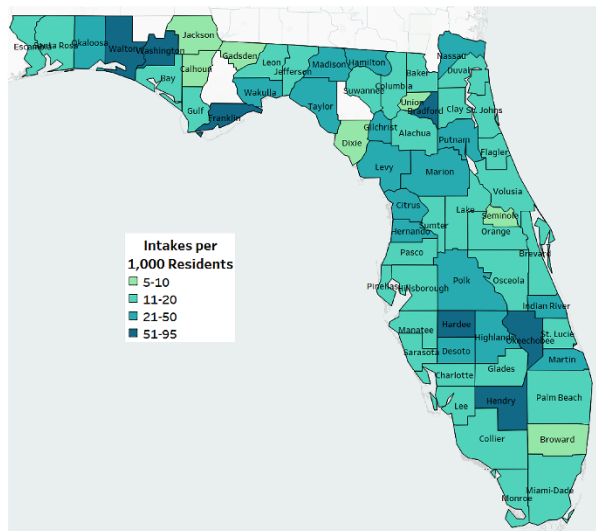
2024's decreasing non-live outcomes tallied from euthanasia, deaths in care, and lost from shelters, combined with increasing live outcomes from adoptions, transfers, Return-to-Owner and Return-to Field resulted in an increased overall live outcome rate of 88% in 2024, 3 points higher than the previous year.

2024 – a pivotal year?

[Shelter Animals Count](#), a national shelter data collection hub, reported a national slump in adoptions, transfers, and other positive outcomes for shelter animals beginning in 2021 and continuing through 2023. Florida shelters reversed this trend in 2024. When compared on a per capita basis, the state fared better than average for controlling shelter intake and reducing euthanasia. In 2024, intake was 15.4 animals per 1,000 residents in Florida, compared to the [national average of 16.1](#). Florida shelter euthanasia was 1.8 animals per 1,000 residents, compared to the national average of 2.0.

However, even within the state, there is marked regional variation. Rural shelters tended to have lower per capita funding, while also experiencing higher per capita animal intake than shelters located in more populous areas.

2024 Cat & Dog Intakes per 1,000 Residents by County

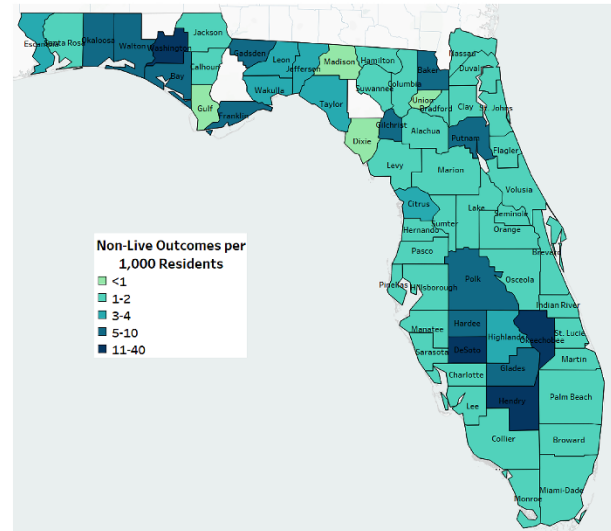


The statewide intake rate for Florida is 15.4 cats and dogs per 1,000 residents compared to 16.1 for the national rate.

Intake numbers do not include 6,360 dog and 2,239 cat Owner-Intended Euthanasia requests.

Non-live outcome numbers do not include 6,637 dog and 2,371 cat Owner-Intended Euthanasia outcomes.

2024 Cat & Dog Non-Live Outcomes per 1,000 Residents by County



The statewide non-live outcome rate is 1.8 cats and dogs per 1,000 residents compared to 2.0 for the national rate.

Updated 8-19-2025 **UF** Shelter Medicine Program
College of Veterinary Medicine

Per capita shelter animal intakes (left) and non-live outcomes (right) were highest in rural counties, especially in the Panhandle and central interior counties.

Rural areas are also often impacted more severely by veterinary care shortages. As a result, the highest euthanasia rates were found in the state's rural counties. To counter this trend, rural shelters are increasingly partnering with their urban counterparts to move homeless pets into shelters where there is more demand for adoptable pets and to provide more essential veterinary services to rural residents. These partnerships help to eliminate regional lifesaving disparities and support a statewide safety net for pets and families in crisis.

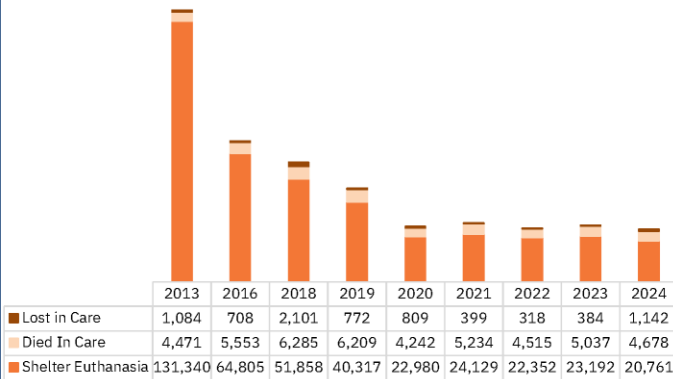
Welfare of cats continues to lag

However, the good news was not spread evenly across all shelter animals. In 2024, shelter intake of cats remained stubbornly high (202,722) compared to dog intake (150,860). The live outcome rate for cats (86%) still trailed that for dogs (89%). Shelter Animals Count found that in 2024 euthanasia numbers were higher for dogs nationally, but Florida shelters struggled with more euthanasia and other non-live outcomes — such as lost or died in care — in cats. Return-to-Field (RTF), the practice of spaying and neutering cats and returning them to their neighborhoods, was responsible for one in five live outcomes for cats in Florida, helping to offset lower numbers of adoptions and transfers. The Return-to-Owner (RTO) rate for cats (3%) was far below the Return-to-Owner rate for dogs (18%), a persistent trend across the country and a gap that should be addressed by the animal welfare community. Perhaps most alarming is the persistently high numbers of cats that die on their own while in shelter care. In 2024, more than 4 times as many cats died in shelters as dogs.



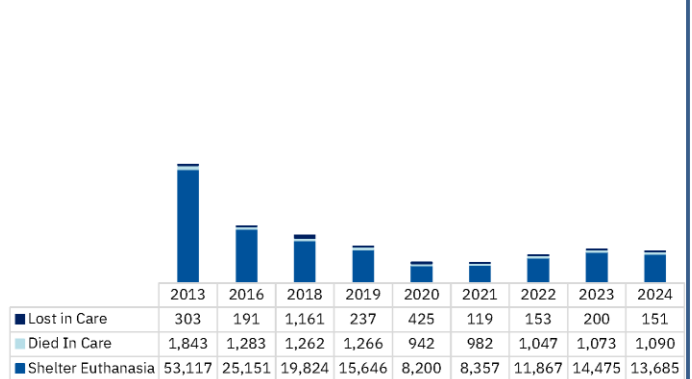
Florida non-live outcomes down **78%** since 2013 (**150,651** fewer animals)

Cat Non-Live Outcomes by Year



Cat non-live outcomes decreased **81%** since 2013

Dog Non-Live Outcomes by Year



Dog non-live outcomes decreased **71%** since 2013

5 Non-Live Outcomes do not include 6,637 dog and 2,371 cat Owner Intended Euthanasia outcomes.

Updated 8-19-2025

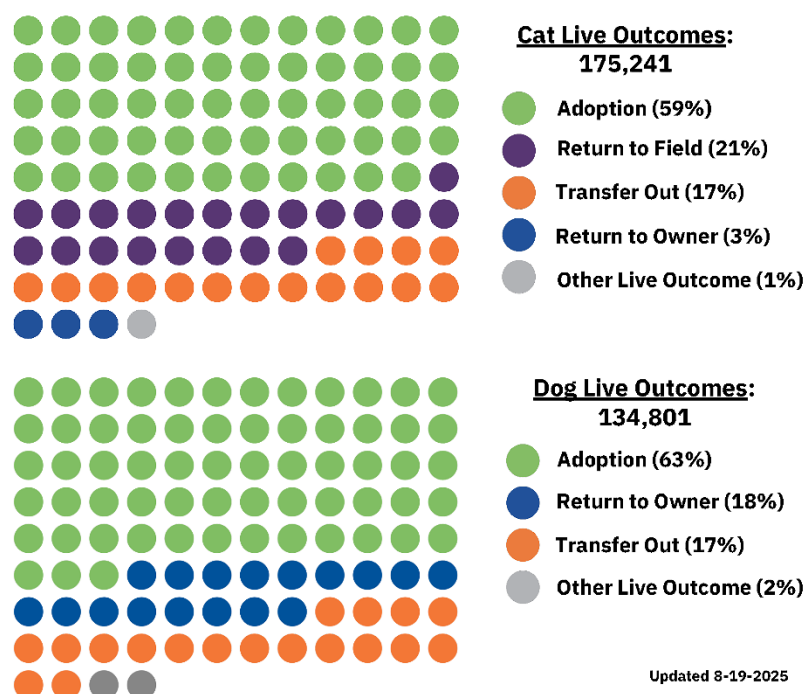
UF Shelter Medicine Program
College of Veterinary Medicine

Non-live outcomes for cats have remained relatively stable since the pandemic year of 2020, whereas non-live outcomes for dogs increased each year until a small dip in 2024. Despite similar live outcome rates as a percentage of intake, 7,076 more cats were euthanized than dogs in 2024.

This is likely due to the large number of neonatal kittens brought to shelters during the spring and summer kitten season. Shelter teams often lack the technical knowledge, round the clock care, and veterinary expertise required for successful neonatal kitten rearing. Outbreaks of fatal feline panleukopenia virus and other infectious diseases are also common in overcrowded shelters. Kittens under 8 weeks of age were the subpopulation of shelter animals most at risk for non-live outcomes. These findings illustrate the need for more focus on kittens as a high-risk group and for better recognition of conditions for which humane euthanasia is called for in terminal conditions.

Adoptions still topped the list of live outcome pathways (61%). RTF was the second most common live outcome for cats (21%), whereas Return to Owner was the second most common live outcome for dogs (18%).

2024 Live Outcome Types as Percentage of Live Outcomes



8

Updated 8-19-2025

UF Shelter Medicine Program
College of Veterinary Medicine

Adoptions accounted for more than half of all live outcomes for both cats and dogs in 2024. The second most common avenue to live outcome was Return-to Field for cats and return to owner for dogs, both of which resulted in returning animals to their original location.

Transfer of animals from shelters to other organizations was close behind at 17% of live outcomes for both cats and dogs, but this lifesaving activity has remained stagnant since 2020 as shelters across the country filled up and length-of-stay has increased.

Florida shelters, data transparency, and terminology

The researchers defined a “shelter” as a continuously occupied “brick-and-mortar” physical facility that houses cats and dogs temporarily for the purposes of animal control and protection. Common examples include shelters operated by municipalities, humane societies, and SPCAs, but can also include private businesses. Foster-based animal rescue organizations and sanctuaries with a permanent population were not included within this definition.

The Florida legislature passed a [transparency statute in 2013](#) requiring shelters to provide data about their animal intake and outcome numbers upon request. However, there is no central collection point for the state’s shelter data and no enforcement of the statute’s reporting requirements. Furthermore, there is no requirement for shelters or rescues to register with the state, so no inventory or contact list of sheltering organizations exists for Florida.

This lack of statewide animal welfare data and information regarding how many and where Florida shelters existed was the impetus for the Shelter Medicine Program at the University of Florida to set about creating its own shelter list and data repository known as the Florida Shelter Animal Census in 2013. As new shelters regularly emerge, others close, and staffing turnover is high, the list of shelters and the mechanism for collecting their data changes over time. Data collection methods include sharing of data through a Shelter Animals Count Florida data coalition, submission directly from the shelters, and on-site shelter visits to harvest data from paper records. The shelter intake and outcome data required in the state statute mirrored that

of [Shelter Animals Count](#) and was the template used for [Florida Shelter Animal Census](#) data categories, definitions, rates, calculations, and other metrics collected.

A total of 153 animal shelters were known to be operating in 64 of Florida's 67 counties in 2024. The rural counties of Holmes, Liberty, and Lafayette do not have brick-and-mortar shelters. All 153 shelters provided their data in 2024, representing the first time 100% of shelters and all of their animals were counted in the census.

Some of the positive changes can be attributed to the work of UF's Shelter Medicine Program, which provides pro bono consultation services to Florida shelters and community cat management programs throughout the year. Expert faculty and veterinary students visit shelters to provide a fresh set of eyes on operations and to assist in the implementation of best practices and innovative programs emerging at shelters across the country. The shelter consultations are part of an intensive training program for veterinary students who plan for futures as shelter veterinarians and animal welfare leaders. Shelters can request consultations through UF's [Maddie's® Million Pet Challenge](#) program.

Limitations

This method of data collection has limitations. Self-reported data is subject to human and software errors and differences in data definitions. Not all shelters use shelter software to tally animal intakes and outcomes and may rely on spreadsheets or paper tallies of variable detail. Transfers between shelters can result in double-counting some animals, whereas transfers to foster-based rescue groups obscure the ultimate outcomes of individual animals. When comparing the UF data aggregation, rates, and statistics shown to data that is presented by other organizations or on shelters' websites, there likely *will be differences* due to the limitations of data collection, the variance in formulas used by organizations to generate "Rates," and differences in terminology. While UF collects calendar year data, some organizations report data based on a fiscal year.