

Study “They would never do it” by the Affinity Foundation on the abandonment, loss and adoption of pets in Spain 2020: interpretation of results



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By:

Dr. Jaume Fatjó

Director of the Chair Affinity Foundation Animals and Health, Department of Psychiatry and Legal Medicine of the Autonomous University of Barcelona (UAB)



Chair
Affinity Foundation
Animals & Health

Summary of results

- The abandonment of pets is once again the main pet welfare problem in Spain.
- In 2020, 162,000 dogs and 124,000 cats were taken in by the Companion animal shelters in Spain.
- Dog admissions to companion animal shelters fall by 11.5% compared to 2019.
- The drop in dog arrivals could be mainly due to a lower number of lost dogs in 2020.
- The arrival of cats in companion animal shelters in 2020 is comparable to that recorded in the previous year.
- In spite of the restrictions on mobility and the negative impact of the pandemic on the economy, the adoption of pets by Spanish families increases slightly.

How many dogs and cats were taken in by companion animal shelters in 2020?

- Key Data:

- Last year 286,153 dogs and cats were taken in.
- 162,011 dogs.
- 124,142 cats.

Note: these figures are an estimate based on data from a sample of 428 out of a total of 1,544 companion animal shelters, city councils and county councils across Spain.

- The above data allow us to estimate the rate of abandonment and/or loss of animals at 3.4 dogs and 2.6 cats per 1000 inhabitants (Spanish population: 47,351,567*).
- Abandonment or loss in 2020 affected 2.4% of the estimated 6,733,097 dogs and 3% of the estimated 3,795,139 cats living in Spain**.

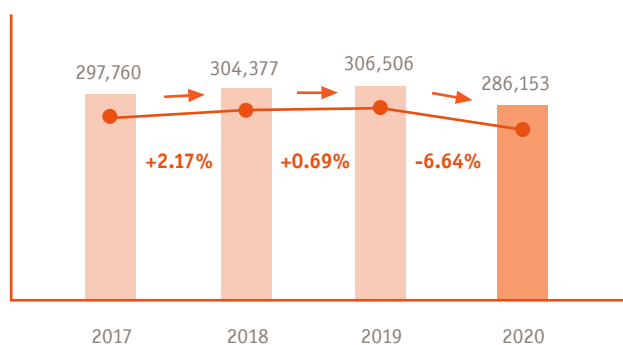


Figure 1 Trend in the number of animals admitted to companion animal shelters each year.

* Source: Spanish Institute of Statistics (Data at July 2020).

** Source: FEDIAF.

Our interpretation:

- Abandonment and loss are once again the main problem for the welfare and quality of life of dogs and cats in our country¹.
- In 2020, 6.6% fewer animals arrived at companion animal shelters than in 2019. (Figure 1). This is undoubtedly the most significant reduction we have seen in recent years.
- However, the situation for dogs is very different from that of cats.

- In 2020, the admission of dogs to companion animal shelters fell by 11.5% (Figure 2). This is the largest annual reduction we have observed in all the years we have conducted our study.

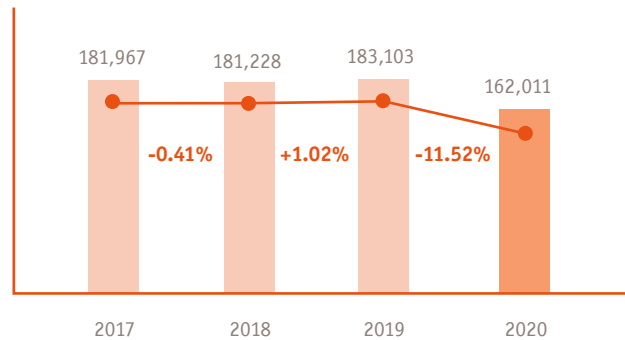


Figure 2 Trend in the number of dogs admitted to companion animal shelters each year.

- Cat arrivals remained relatively stable, increasing slightly but not significantly from the previous year. (Figure 3).

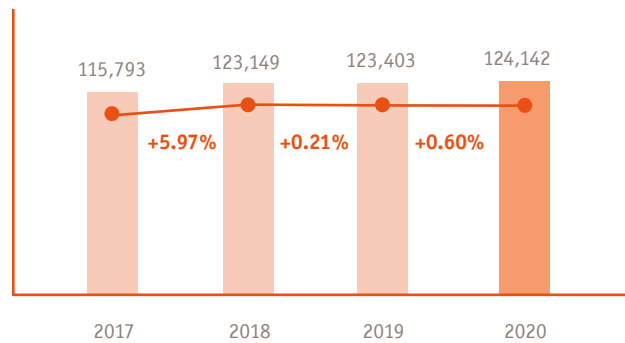


Figure 3 Trend in the number of cats admitted to companion animal shelters each year.

Why was there such a significant reduction in the number of dogs taken in?

Why was the same trend not observed in the number of cats taken in by shelters?

What role might the pandemic have played in the 2020 figures?

In order to be able to answer these questions, we must first examine the outcome of the animals that were admitted to companion animal shelters in 2020.

What was the outcome of the dogs and cats that were taken in by companion animal shelters in 2020?

- Key Data:
 - 15.6% of the dogs taken in by companion animal shelters were returned to their owners (Figure 4). From this percentage, we can estimate that at least 25,112 of the admissions to companion animal shelters were lost dogs (Figure 5).
 - 49.3% of dogs were adopted (Figure 4).
 - 20.2% remained in the companion animal shelter awaiting adoption, 3.2% died or were put down for medical reasons (Figure 4).

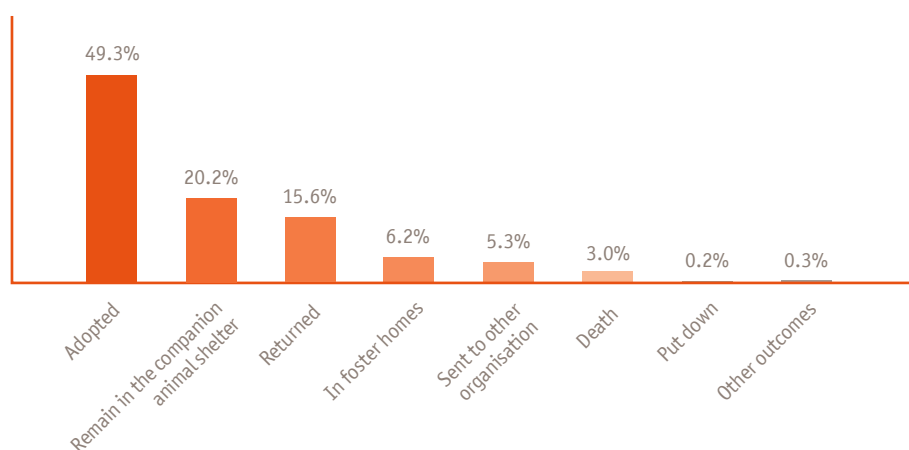


Figure 4 Outcome of dogs admitted to companion animal shelters in 2020.

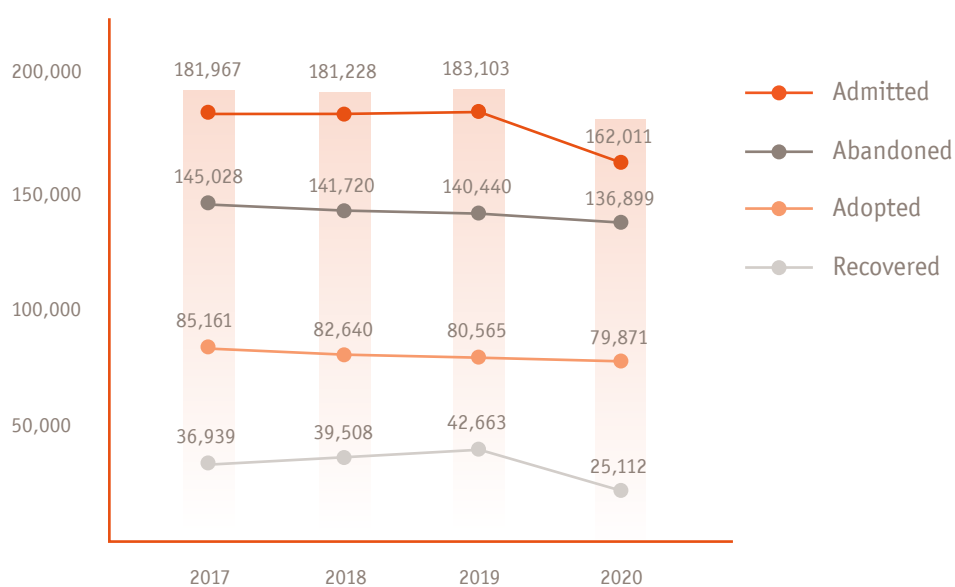


Figure 5 Estimated number of dogs that were admitted to companion animal shelters (orange), that were taken back by their owners (light grey), that could be considered as truly abandoned (dark grey) and that were adopted by a new family (light orange).

- Key Data:

- 2.2% of the cats taken in by companion animal shelters were returned to their owners (Figure 6). From this percentage, we can estimate that at least 2,731 of the admissions to companion animal shelters were lost cats (Figure 7).
- 42.6% of cats were adopted (Figure 6).
- 15.1% remained in the companion animal the shelter awaiting adoption, 10.6% died or were put down for medical reasons (Figure 6).
- 14.4% were relocated to their colonies of origin (Figure 6).

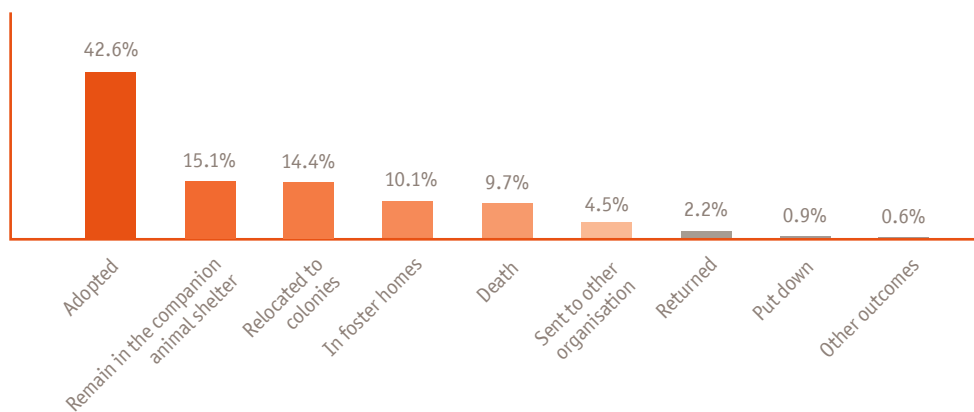


Figure 6 Outcome of cats admitted to companion animal shelters in 2020.

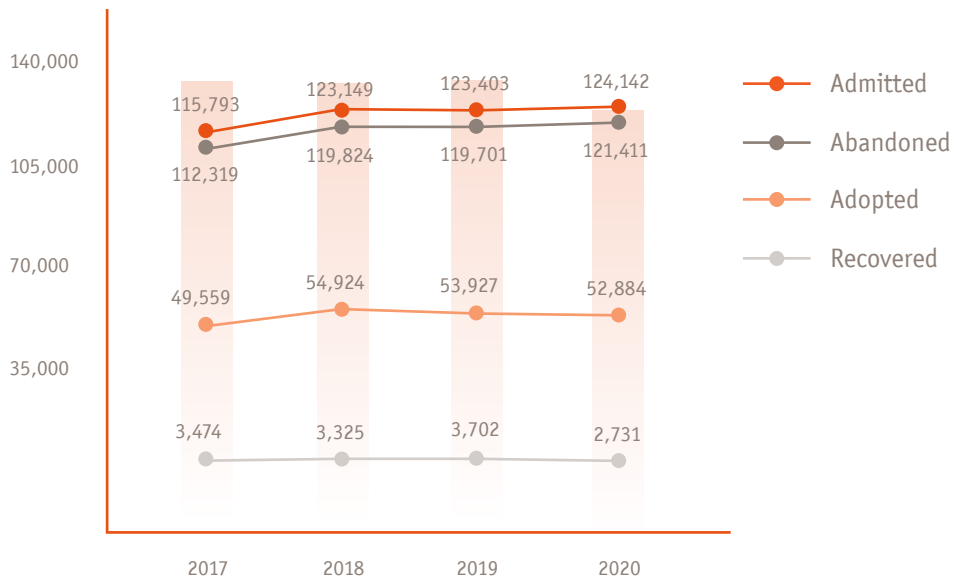


Figure 7 Number of cats that were admitted to companion animal shelters (orange), that were taken back by their owners (grey), that could be considered as truly abandoned (grey) and that were adopted by a new family (light grey).

Our interpretation:

- The annual turnover of a companion animal shelter is related to 3 key indicators:
 - Total number of admissions.
 - Returned to the family.
 - Adoptions.

In 2020, there is a parallel reduction in the total number of dogs arriving at the companion animal shelters and those that are taken back by their families. Assuming that, firstly, the animals taken back tend to be mostly lost and, secondly, the proportion of animals identified in 2020 is comparable to that of 2019 (Figure 8), the data suggest that fewer dogs were lost in 2020 than in previous years.

The reduced mobility of the population resulting from the implementation of the national lockdown periods (state of emergency) would reduce the likelihood of losing a dog. In this regard, our study on the impact of the pandemic on pets indicates that, contrary to popular belief, dogs were walked less during lockdown periods (Figure 9)².

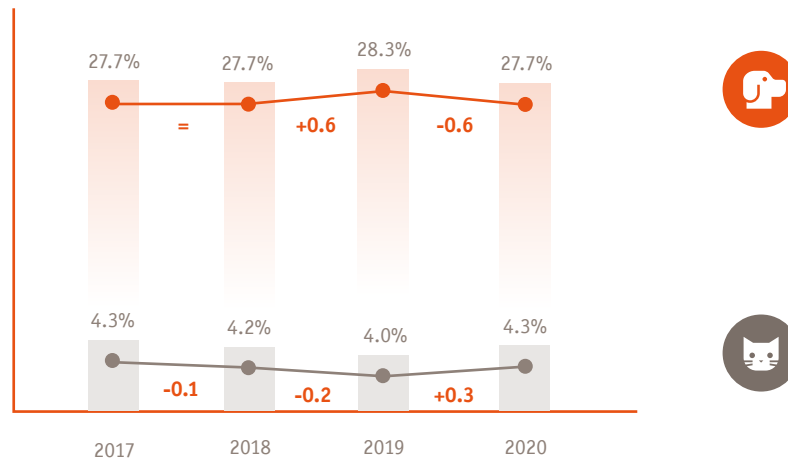


Figura 7 Proportion of microchipped dogs and cats arriving at companion animal shelters.

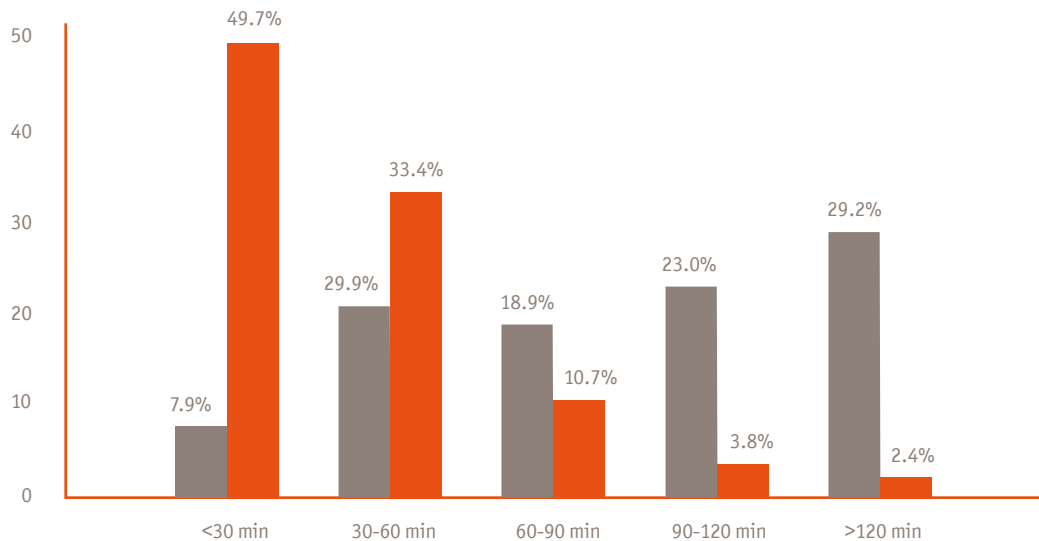


Figure 9 Total walking time of dogs during the first 2 months of lockdown (orange) and the period before the national lockdown periods (grey).

Adapted from: Bowen J, García E, Darder P, Argüelles J, Fatjó J (2020) The effects of the Spanish COVID-19 lockdown on people, their pets, and the human-animal bond. *Journal of Veterinary Behavior*, 40, pp 75-91. doi:0.1016/j.jveb.2020.05.013

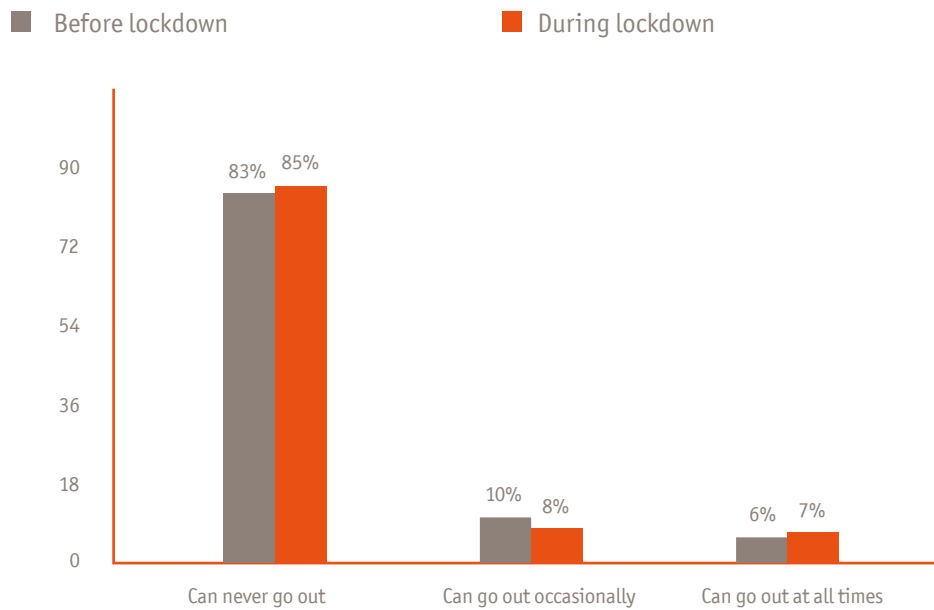


Figure 10 Percentage of cats allowed out of the home.

Adapted from: Bowen J, García E, Darder P, Argüelles J, Fatjó J (2020) The effects of the Spanish COVID-19 lockdown on people, their pets, and the human-animal bond. *Journal of Veterinary Behavior*, 40, pp 75-91. doi:10.1016/j.jveb.2020.05.013

If the main impact of the pandemic on the dynamics of abandonment and loss of animals had to do with restrictions on mobility, should we observe differences between the different national lockdown periods?

Our interpretation:

- The dynamics observed for dogs are consistent with the estimates made for cats.
The number of cats taken back by their families is always very low and in 2020 remains at a comparable level to that of 2019. (Figure 7). This could be due to a combination of 3 factors:
 - The proportion of cats with outdoor access is very low. According to data from our study on the effects of the pandemic on the behaviour and quality of life of pets, more than 80% of cats never have home outdoor access (Figure 10).
 - Not all stray cats arrive at companion animal shelters. This phenomenon is more significant in rural or semi-rural areas.
 - The proportion of identified cats is significantly lower than that of dogs, both in the overall population and in the population of animals taken in by companion animal shelters (Figure 8).

How was abandonment and loss affected by lockdowns?

- Key Data:

- In 2020 there were significant variations over the year in the number of dogs taken in by companion animal shelter organisations (Figure 11). There was a significant slowdown in the number of animals taken in during the periods of strictest lockdown and especially during the first wave of the pandemic, from March to June. After even higher numbers in January and February than in 2019, the number of admissions slowed down until the arrival of the partial raising of lockdown restrictions in June. At that time, a recovery in the number of arrivals is observed.

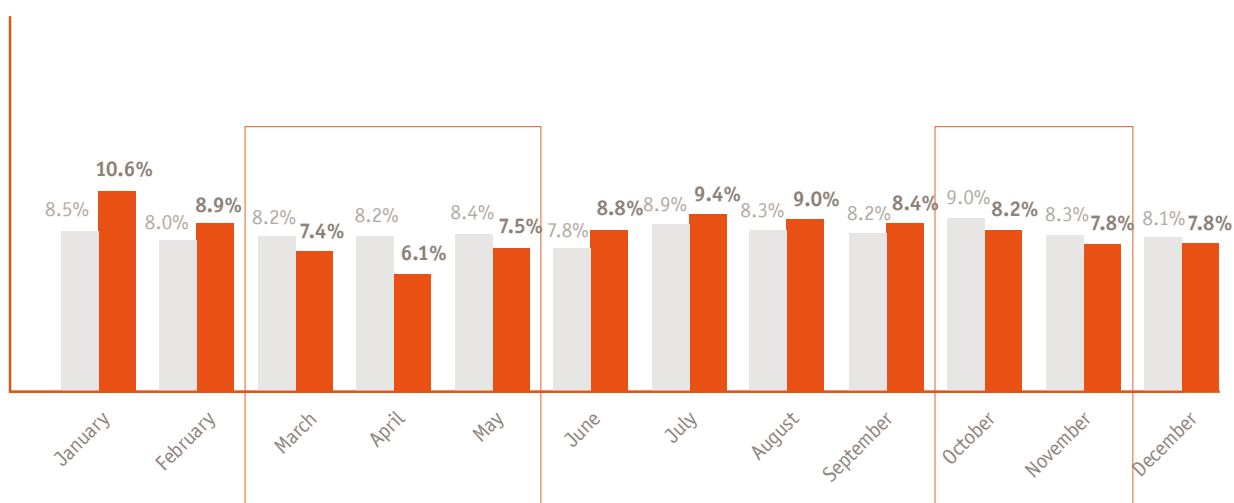


Figure 11 Distribution by month of the total number of dogs taken in by companion animal shelter organisations in 2020 (orange) and 2019 (grey) (expressed as a percentage of the annual total). The periods March-May and October-November are the periods of greatest mobility restrictions.

- The arrival of cats in companion animal shelters also varies throughout the year (Figure 12). As with dogs, arrivals in companion animal shelters slow down during the first lockdown.

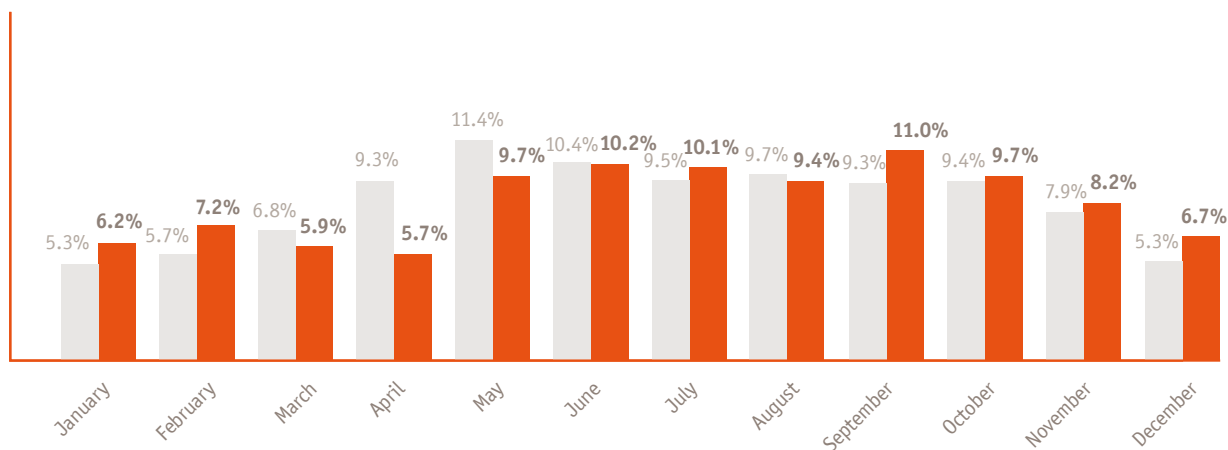


Figure 12 Distribution by month of the total number of cats taken in by companion animal shelter organisations in 2020 (orange) and 2019 (grey) (expressed as a percentage of the annual total). The periods March-May and October-November are the periods of greatest mobility restrictions.

Our interpretation:

- The mobility and lifestyle restrictions resulting from the COVID-19 emergency status appear to have had a significant impact on the rate of animal arrivals at companion animal shelters throughout 2020.
- The effect is particularly significant for dogs. In previous years we had never observed significant differences between the different months of the year in the number of dogs admitted to companion animal shelters. However, in 2020, abandonment and loss fall during the first lockdown and also, although to a lesser extent, in the last quarter.
- These data suggest, firstly, that the restrictions imposed by the national lockdown periods created a temporary barrier effect against loss and abandonment of pets. Secondly, we should not forget that the standstill that the country experienced during the first months of lockdown affected and limited the normal operation of many companion animal shelters.
- In cats we also observed a decrease in arrivals at companion animal shelters during the early months of the year, which later recovered. However, we should bear in mind that in previous years the second four-month period has always seen the highest number of cat arrivals in companion animal shelters. It in addition to the impact of the national lockdown periods, we must be remembered that the seasonal nature of cat reproduction means that the number of arrivals at companion animal shelters is higher in the central months of the year.

Has pet adoption increased in 2020?

- Key Data:
 - As mentioned above, 49.3% of dogs managed by companion animal shelters in 2020 were adopted (Figure 4). Of these, 85.5% were adopted by Spanish families and 14.5% by families from other countries (Figure 13). Compared to previous years, there is a proportional increase in domestic adoptions compared to adoptions abroad.
 - 42.6% of cats managed by companion animal shelters were adopted (Figure 6). Of these, 92.9% were adopted by Spanish families and 7.1% abroad (Figure 14). There has been a proportional increase in domestic adoptions compared to those from abroad, albeit of a lesser magnitude than that observed for dogs.

Our interpretation:

- Assuming that the absolute number of reported adoptions in 2020 remained stable compared to previous years (Figures 5 and 7), there is an increase in the number of adoptions by Spanish families.
- The 2020 data confirm the slow but progressive rise in adoptions by Spanish families that we have observed in recent years.
- The proportional reduction in international adoptions is most likely due to the difficulties that the pandemic has imposed on international transfer.
- In short, we can affirm that pet adoption in Spain has been reinforced in 2020, despite the difficulties of access to companion animal shelters during many months of the year and the serious economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

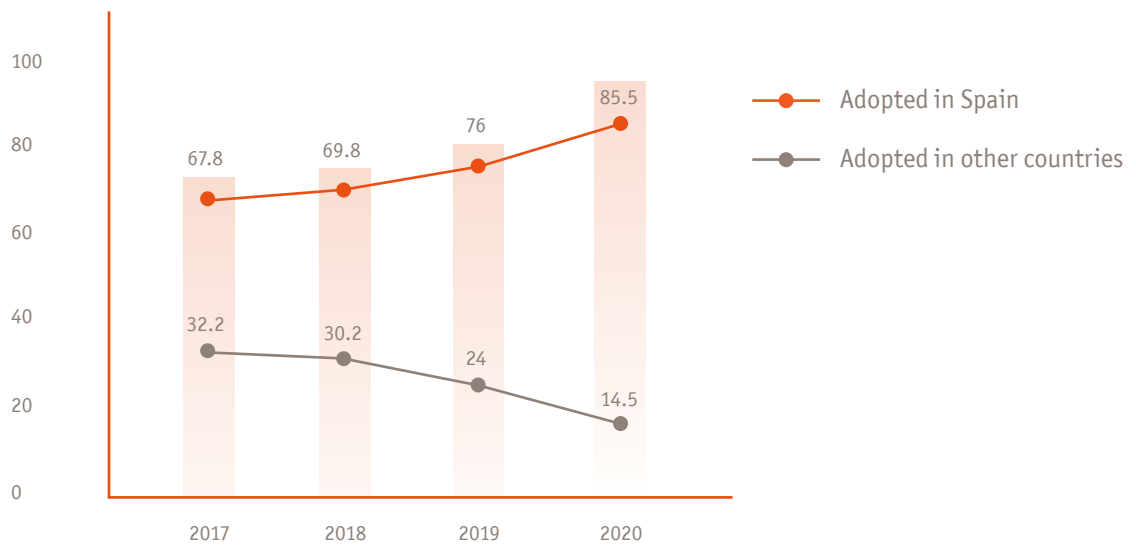


Figure 13 Percentage of dogs adopted by Spanish families and those from other countries.

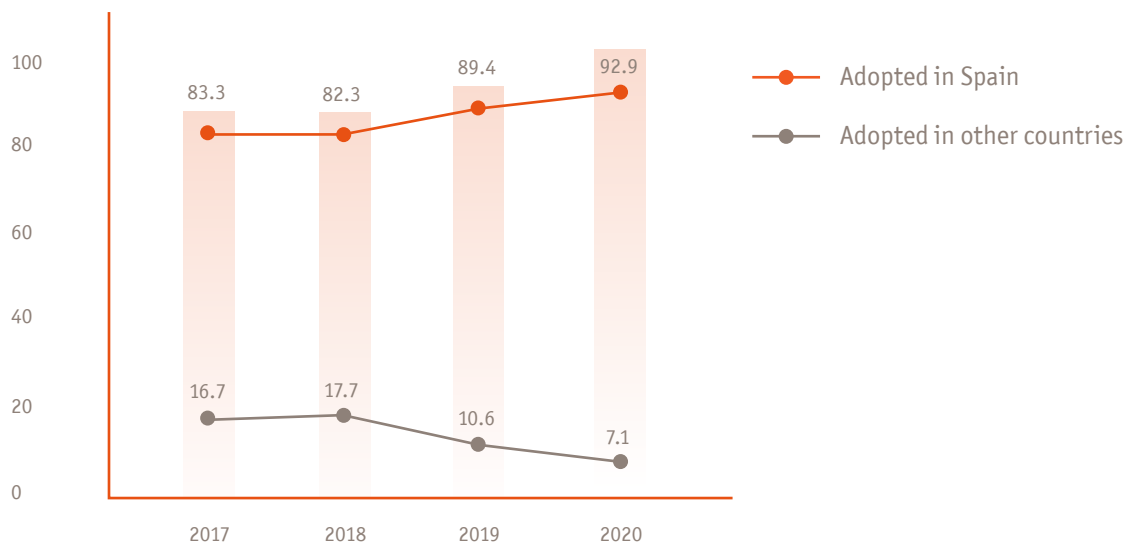


Figure 14 Percentage of cats adopted by Spanish families and those from other countries.

So far we have seen the overall picture of abandonment, loss and adoption of animals in 2020. However, not all companion animal shelters will necessarily have experienced this situation in the same way.

How do the dynamics of abandonment, loss and adoption of animals vary between companion animal shelters?

- Key Data:
 - Figure 15 allows us to assess how the different companion animal shelters that participated in our study have experienced the pandemic year.
 - In general, we can see that for most of the indicators that we have assessed, the most common perception among the organisations is that the situation in 2020 did not differ significantly from that experienced in 2019. In addition to this central trend, there are also centres that either observed an improvement or a worsening of the different indicators.
 - In relation to abandonment, 57% of entities estimated that the number of animals arriving at their companion animal shelter was similar to that of the previous year. 26% of companion animal shelters experienced a decrease in abandonment, while 18% reported a worsening of this indicator.
 - In relation to adoptions, 35% of companion animal shelters reported similar rates as in 2019.
 - 39% reported giving up more animals for adoption, while 26% reported a decrease in their numbers compared to 2019.
 - 42% of companion animal shelters reported a negative impact of the pandemic on the shelter's economy.

Comparison vs. 2019 ● Much less ● Somewhat less ● Equal ● Somewhat more ● Much more

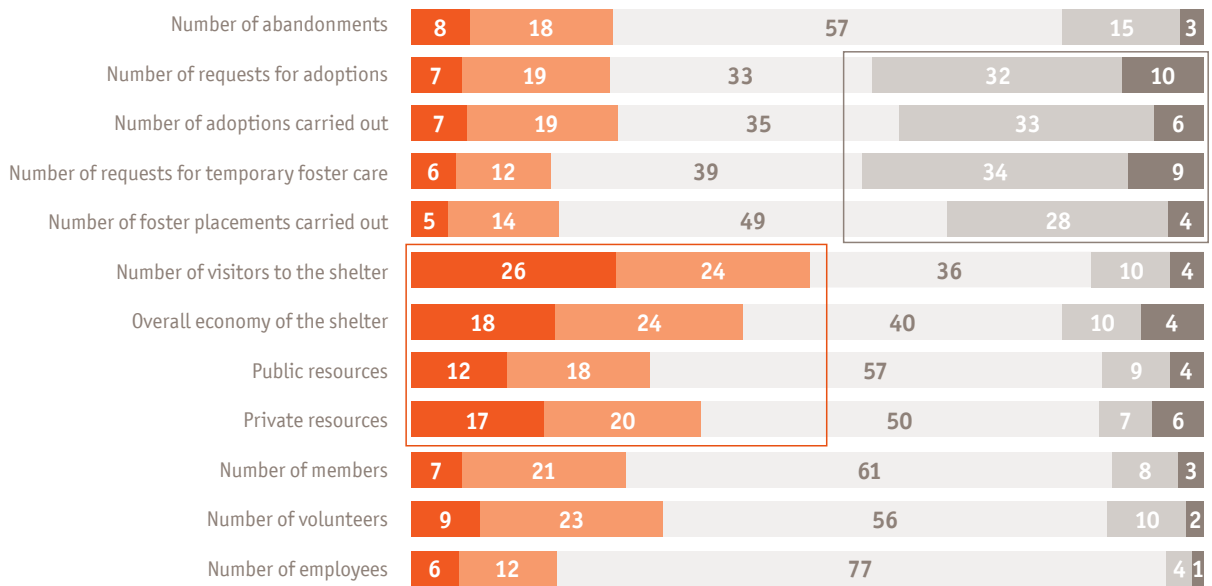


Figure 15 Assessment of the impact of the pandemic by the people in charge of the companion animal shelters that participated in the study. The numbers indicate the percentage of companion animal shelters that have observed an increase or decrease in the magnitude of the different indicators.

Our interpretation:

- The profound social and economic effects of the COVID-19 pandemic have not been experienced in the same way by the different companion animal shelters participating in the study.

The differences observed probably result from a combination of many factors related to both the characteristics of each institution and the environment in which it is located.

- The pandemic seems to have had a negative impact on the financial and other management indicators of the companion animal shelters. This is of particular concern to us, as it could be aggravated in the future, reflecting the medium and long-term effects of the pandemic on the economy.

What were the most common reasons for handing over an animal to a companion animal shelter?

- Key Data:
 - 71% of the animals admitted to a companion animal shelter were found by the organisation (51.5%), by the police (14.1%) or brought to the shelter by the police due to interventions in cases of animal abuse or dysfunctional animal hoarding syndrome (5.4%). 29.1% of the animals were brought to the companion animal shelters by private individuals who had found them.
 - Only 11.1% of the animals were brought to the companion animal shelter by the family with whom the animal was living up to that time (Figure 16).

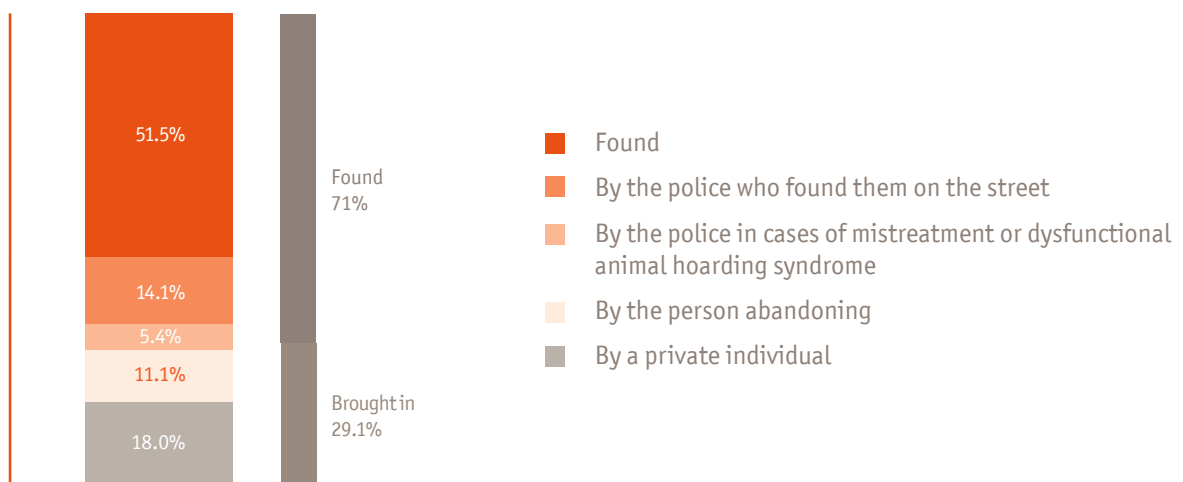


Figure 16 Origin of animals admitted to companion animal shelters in 2020.

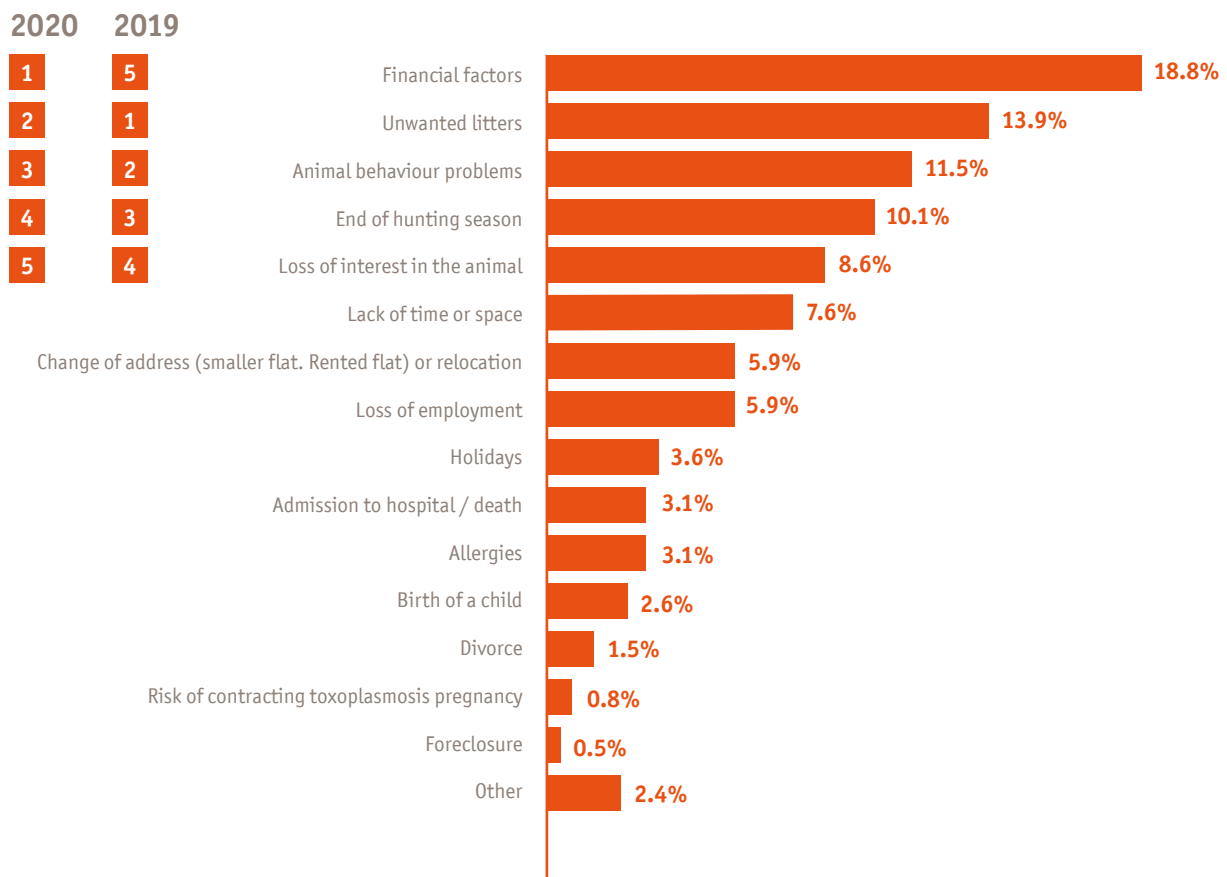


Figure 17 Declared reasons for handing over a pet to a companion animal shelter. We also include the relative position in 2019 of the 5 reasons identified as most important this year.

Our interpretation:

- For the first time in recent years, economic factors are the top reason for giving up a pet. In 2019, financial reasons ranked fifth among the reasons for giving up a pet (Figure 17). These figures reflect the severe impact the pandemic has had on the finances of many families.
- In 2021, unwanted litters appear as the second reason for abandoning pets.
This figure is yet another reminder of the importance of spaying pets as one of the best strategies for reducing the population of abandoned animals.
- Behavioural problems are the third leading cause of abandonment. In this regard, it should be noted that most behavioural problems can be prevented and successfully treated by veterinarians.
- Once again, the companion animal shelter organisations that participated in the study indicate that the end of the hunting season is one of main reason for the abandonment of pets.
- It is very important to note that the information available on the reasons for abandonment is provided in most cases by the people who personally take their pet to a companion animal shelter or by the companion animal shelter itself. As we have already said, most of the animals that enter the companion animal shelters have been found on the street or brought there by people who are not their owners. Therefore, we still do not know the specific reasons for many of the pet abandonments that occur in our country.

Main conclusions

- Abandonment is still a major animal welfare problem in our country. The observed decrease in the number of dogs arriving at companion animal shelters in 2020 compared to the previous year is likely to be cyclical, reflecting the impact of the pandemic on the mobility and lifestyle of families.
- Neutering, identification and adoption are the 3 most important strategies to prevent and minimise the impact of pet abandonment.

Sterilisation and identification are part of a broader concept of responsible pet ownership, which encompasses the obligations and responsibilities of every person who undertakes a commitment to care for an animal. Citizen participation is therefore essential to fight the problem of pet abandonment, as it is the basis for the effective implementation of the three strategies mentioned above (sterilisation, identification and adoption), which have proven to be key factors in combating the problem of abandonment.

It is important to highlight the importance of citizenship education about everything that involves responsible care for their pets, as a fundamental pillar to prevent abandonment in the medium and long term.

- Beyond simply raising awareness of the need to adopt, we must educate the public about the benefits, but also the obligations, of adopting a pet, and how its arrival can influence our lifestyle.

Literature references

1. Fatjó J, Bowen J, García E, Calvo P, Rueda S, Amblás S, Lanza JF (2015) Epidemiology of Dog and Cat Abandonment in Spain (2008–2013). *Animals*, 5(2), 426-441; doi:10.3390/ani5020364
2. Bowen J, García E, Darder P, Argüelles J, Fatjó J (2020) The effects of the Spanish COVID-19 lockdown on people, their pets, and the human-animal bond. *Journal of Veterinary Behavior*, 40, pp 75-91. doi:10.1016/j.jveb.2020.05.013



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