



Preventing the Relinquishment of Dogs

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Dear Ms. McAtee:

The attached document "Preventing the Relinquishment of Dogs" is an inquiry into the reasons that people relinquish dogs. This report was written to identify common problems that dog owners experience, to gauge future dog owners understanding of what they should anticipate prior to dog ownership, and to explore reasons that people are actively re-homing their dogs in Washington State. It is my hope that this information might be utilized to decrease the relinquishment of dogs, especially those who have been relinquished in the past.

The results of both a field observation and two surveys explore both human and dog driven issues that can impair the relationship between dog and owner. In some cases, owners feel the problems are irreparable, and decide to relinquish their pets. The research on the following pages will help to identify common issues. This information may guide future practices when re-homing relinquished dogs and decrease the overall rate of relinquishment by addressing the common issues identified in this report.

It is my hope that you find my research valuable within your rescue organization. Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions or comments about this study or if you would like to collaborate on future programs which might benefit your organization.

Sincerely,



Misty Shulman

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Acknowledgments

Poppy the rescued standard poodle was an inspiration for this research.

Abstract

Every year people decide to relinquish their dogs for a variety of both human and dog driven reasons. This report explores common issues that current/previous dog owners experience through a survey. In comparison, future dog owners were also surveyed with similar questions asking them to anticipate issues they can expect upon acquiring their dogs. Both of these groups identified issues that have been noted in previous studies as being reasons for relinquishment in dogs. Housing concerns were found to be a large human driven issue, whereas behavioral issues were a major dog driven problem. This was also supported in a field observation of those who are actively relinquishing their pets. It can be concluded that the common issues noted in the dog-human relationship can cause owners to relinquish their dogs. If future dog owners are able to plan and prepare for these issues prior to obtaining a dog, the rate of relinquishment may decrease.

Introduction

When people obtain a dog, they may lack appropriate planning, dog-specific knowledge, and reasonable expectations regarding dog ownership. This increases the chance of relinquishment which can have lifelong impacts on the dog and over burden shelters. “Studies suggest that 7 to 20 percent of pets entering a home are no longer in that home six months after acquisition. These animals often end up at shelters, contributing to the pet ‘overpopulation’ issue” (American Humane, 2021, p. 1). The under-planning for dogs must be addressed to decrease relinquishment rates.

Both dog driven and human driven causes can contribute to the relinquishment rate of dogs. Having realistic expectations and understanding how to address potential issues are important considerations for preventing relinquishment (Jensen, et al., 2020, p. 11).

A popular way that people obtain dogs is through adoption from a shelter or rescue. Those who wish to adopt dogs should be aware of the 3-3-3 rule (Figure 1) to prepare for and identify potential struggles as the dog settles in to the home. This rule might be extended past the three month mark in some cases. A rescue dog may appear very mild mannered at first which could prevent the owner from sensing behavior issues. Once a dog begins to feel comfortable they might begin to show problem behaviors (McKee, n.d., pp. 12-13). Owners should plan to dedicate time for training classes or personal trainer sessions and socialization opportunities. Training and socialization should include positive proactive exposure and include habituation, counter-conditioning, classical conditioning, and desensitization (Martin, et al., 2016, pp. 3).

Socialization is the process of exposing dogs to new situations, ideally occurring early in life. Taking an active part in socializing a new dog is important. Even non-puppy age dogs should be socialized as this is a “better late than never” principle. Though socialization of non-puppy dogs is achievable, dogs are at a disadvantage when they are not socialized at a young age (Nicholas, 2019, p. 2). Training a dog who has passed the critical socialization period may be challenging however, socialization should still be attempted (Landsberg, 2019, p. 1). New dog owners should be prepared to work diligently to reduce problems that may lead to relinquishment.



A common period for relinquishment begins in adolescence. New pet owners may find this age to be very challenging (Herron, n.d., p. 5). During adolescence, behavior problems may appear. Puppy behaviors that were once tolerated are now less desirable (Herron, n.d., p. 5). These behavior problems become a primary reason that adult and adolescent dogs are re-relinquished (Powell, et al., 2021, p. 14). Once dogs exit puppy hood, they are more likely to be relinquished in general. "Adult dogs were over three times more likely to be returned, followed by young adults and senior dogs who had 2.9 and 2.2 times the odds of being returned compared with puppies" (Powell, et al., 2021, p. 11). To decrease relinquishment in dogs, careful consideration should be made regarding age when choosing to obtain a dog.

The purpose of this study was to identify common issues that current dog owners experience and gather data on future-dog owners anticipated issues. I hoped to identify common problems that could be addressed with future dog owners to reduce relinquishment rates in dogs. This research was conducted online and most respondents were from Washington State. Some respondents may be from other places. The information presented in this study was obtained online and relies on the honest answers of the respondents. The field observation data was gathered as objectively as possible, though some information may have been missed due to the nature of the wording provided by the subjects. This information can be applied to future dog owners in both the local and international population.

This report will present findings of current/previous dog owners, future dog owners, and a field observation will provide data on people in WA state who are actively trying to re-home their dogs. The data may be applied to educate future dog owners acquiring dogs of any life stage. Those acquiring adolescents and older dogs will benefit from understanding common issues that current dog owners report. This study will benefit local animal shelters to educate those rescuing dogs and potentially develop pre-adoption and post-adoption programs and resources to promote successful adoptions. Local breeders might benefit by providing owners with this information to prepare for their puppy and reduce the rate of returns. At the conclusion of this study, I will make recommendations on how this information could be utilized by the aforementioned beneficiaries.

Methods

I obtained primary research through surveys of dog owners (Appendix A) and non-dog owners (Appendix B) to assess levels various concerns and anticipated issues. The surveys were administered through Google Forms to respondents via the Canvas platform and additional surveys were obtained online through a social media site. Respondents consisted of students from a technical writing class at Whatcom Community College and contacts from a social media page. After gathering survey data, I compiled and analyzed the results. The online contacts were on my "friends" list

and though most are from WA state, some are from other places in the world. Therefore, the results obtained from some of the respondents to the survey may be outside my local area.

The survey provided data that was able to draw comparisons between current dog owners and future dog owners. Limitations can be identified such as the respondents were mainly those with at least some college education, indicating that lower education levels may not have been represented.

I completed another form of primary research through a field observation. In this observation, I reviewed member's posts from a social media site that deals with re-homing local (WA state) dogs. The site is theoretically for WA state residents, or those trying to re-home dogs in WA state. The purpose of this research was to identify the reasons people are currently relinquishing their dogs. These results were obtained by going through 50 posts which contained the reason for re-homing. When a reason was given, a tally mark was recorded in which category it fit. As new reasons were reported, new categories were created. After the tallies were added up the data was analyzed and a pie chart was created (Figure 2).

The field observation provided data that was able to identify reasons that dogs are currently being re-homed. Limitations are present as the reasons for re-homing may or may not be complete or true.

Results

I conducted a virtual field observation. Through these observations I was able to discover the reasons that people were actively trying to re-home their dogs. The results showed that the main reasons for re-homing were behavioral issues which accounted for 44% of this sample group. Aggression was included under “behavioral issues” and it should be noted that this particular issue was a common response in this category. Aggression could have been counted in a separate category to differentiate between aggression and other behavior issues. People listed various forms of aggression including aggression towards children, other pets, and other animals. 32% of observations indicated housing issues were another reason people were re-homing their dogs. Owner health, time constraints, and life events were also noted as reasons for re-homing in the field observation.

Field Observation: Reason for Rehoming

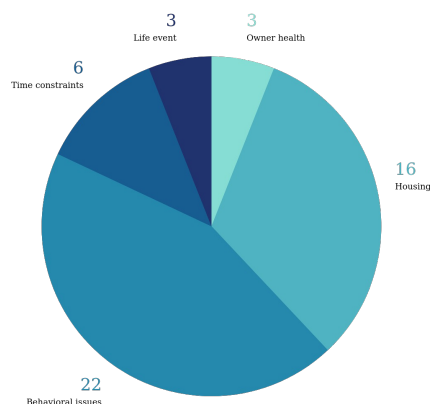


Figure 2

This data collected from the field observations relates to data which was obtained through my surveys. I collected responses from both current/former dog owners and from future dog owners through Google Forms and social media. From this survey we can see human driven issues that dog owners (figure 3) and future dog owners (figure 4) identify as problematic. The number of responses indicate that cost was the highest concern in both groups.

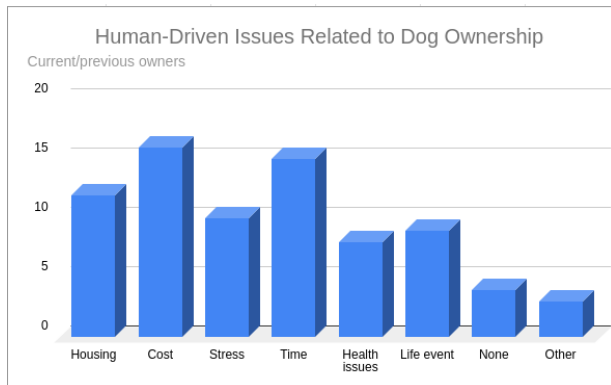


Figure 3

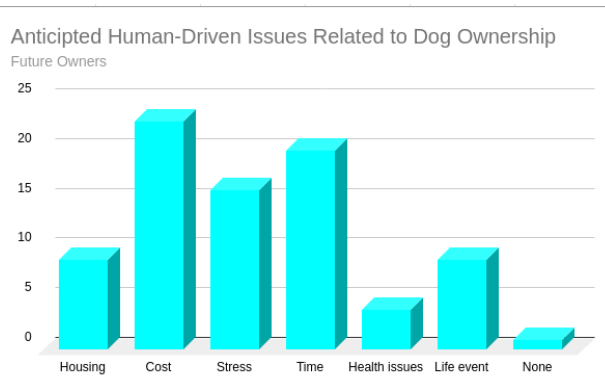
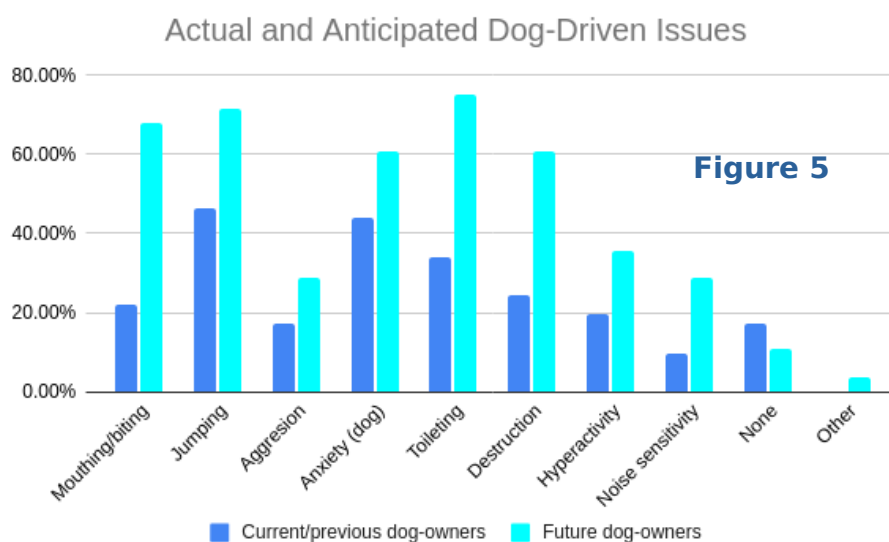


Figure 4

A similar survey question highlighted respondents identification of dog driven issues. Figure 5 shows the differences between dog owners and future dog owners perception of these issues. Figure 5 provides a graph displaying the percent of respondents answers. This survey indicates that the main actual issues that owners are experiencing are jumping at 19.8% followed by anxiety, and toileting issues. For future dog owners the top reported concerns were toileting at 16.9% followed by jumping, and mouthing/biting. The “other” response in this category was a future owner’s concern about the dog being preferential to a certain family member.



Both surveys contained answers for the “none” issues experienced with 7.3% of current dog owners reporting no issues and 2.42% of future dog owners not anticipating dog driven issues.

Discussion

The field observation (figure 2) provided an opportunity to identify reasons that people were currently attempting to re-home their dogs. Housing issues were the most observed reason for re-homing. This finding is supported by a survey question which addressed dog owners reasons that had relinquished dogs. There were five respondents who had reported relinquishing a dog of the 41 surveyed. Of these, housing concerns were reported by two people, behavioral issues were reported by two people, and both time and behavioral issues were reported by one person.

The survey provided data on the actual and anticipated human driven issues that dog owners and future dog owners identified as problematic (Figures 3 and 4). It can be noted that housing was identified as an issue in both groups, along with health issues, life events, and and time constraints. These findings are similar to a study by Jensen, et al., (2020) who reported that owner health was the primary reason for relinquishment followed by behavior issues and housing concerns (p.12). Other issues such as cost was reported in the survey research but was not noted in the field observation. An issue

with the field observations is that it is difficult to get the full explanation on the reason for re-homing through a post on social media. It should be noted that there might be multiple reasons why a dog is being re-homed and the owner can list as many or little reasons as they wish. The surveys provided more specific options for respondents to choose from. The problem with comparing the field observations and the surveys is that one group of people are actively trying to re-home, another group is not looking to re-home, and the final group does not yet own dogs.

Contrary to my hypothesis, future dog owners anticipated more dog driven issues than current dog owners reported experiencing. This might suggest that the individuals who completed the future dog owner survey understand the challenges of owning a dog. Future dog owners identified many human driven issues that could pose potential problems and lead to relinquishment. Failing to address these potential barriers to successful a dog-human relationship could result in relinquishment. Dog ownership realities can differ from the expectations of owning a dog which leads to the relinquishment of millions of dogs every year (Powell, et al., 2018, p. 1). It is critical that future dog owners consider both the human and dog driven issues that may present a problem and decide what needs should be addressed prior to obtaining a dog.

In both groups, socialization was the most common answer to the question: What is important to consider when owning a dog? Socialization is very important to prevent behavioral issues, especially when done during critical times in puppy development (Herron, n.d., p. 1). When puppies are not well socialized it can set them up for future issues that might lead to relinquishment. Behavior issues are a common reason for re-homing adolescent and adult dogs (Powell, et al., 2021, p. 14). With this knowledge it is safe to conclude that prevention is key to reducing relinquishment rates.

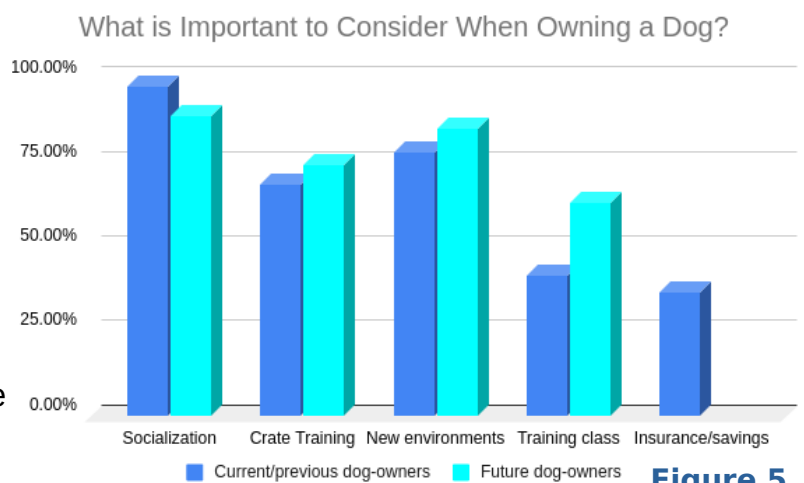


Figure 5

Summary and Recommendations

This research allows us to compare dog owner's experiences to future dog owner's expectations dog ownership. The field observation provides actual examples of the issues that lead people to actually get rid of their dogs. The field observation was a critical piece of this research as it provided a greater representation of those who were re-homing their dogs.

Relinquishment happens when human-dog relationships do not flourish due to a variety of human and dog driven issues. Shelters can become overburdened which in some cases can lead to euthanasia due to overcrowding, among other concerns. Relinquishment can have a detrimental impact on both the owner and the dog. In order to decrease relinquishment rates future dog owners must be educated on the many potential issues they may face. They should also be made aware of resources and corrective measures in order to prevent these issues from leading to the relinquishment of their dogs.

Future research which explores the effect of providing anticipatory guidance to new dog owners. The research could compare new dog owners who were counseled regarding potential dog and human driven issues and provided resources prior to and after acquiring their dogs versus those who are not provided any anticipatory guidance. This might allow the researcher to draw conclusions on how effective guidance is on preventing or decreasing relinquishment of dogs. Alternatively, a study might focus the ability of interventions to repair issues through resources or training in situations where the owner is attempting to re-home. This model would be useful in determining the efficacy of emergency interventions on preventing relinquishment. This scenario may prove difficult as the damage to the relationship may be too advanced for reparation.

Programs who focus on providing anticipatory guidance and resources for both dog driven and human driven issues related to dog ownership may be established. Emergency resources might be made available for people interested in relinquishing their dogs. If effective, they may reduce the rate of relinquishment and decrease the burden on local animal shelters.

References

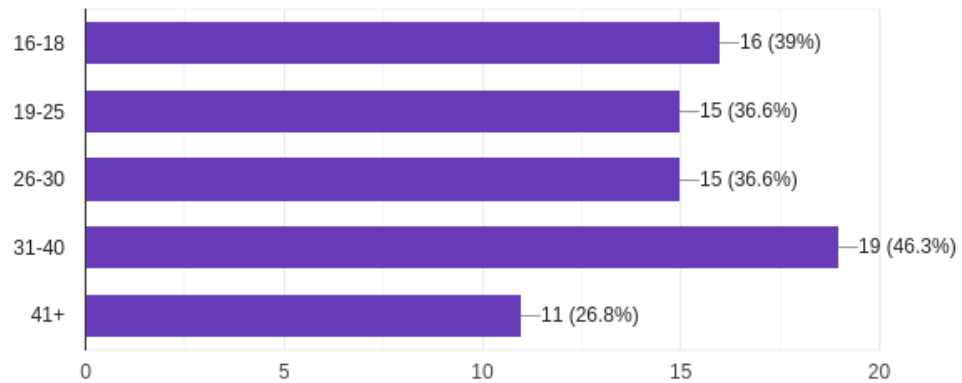
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Appendixes

Appendix A: Survey results current/previous Dog owners

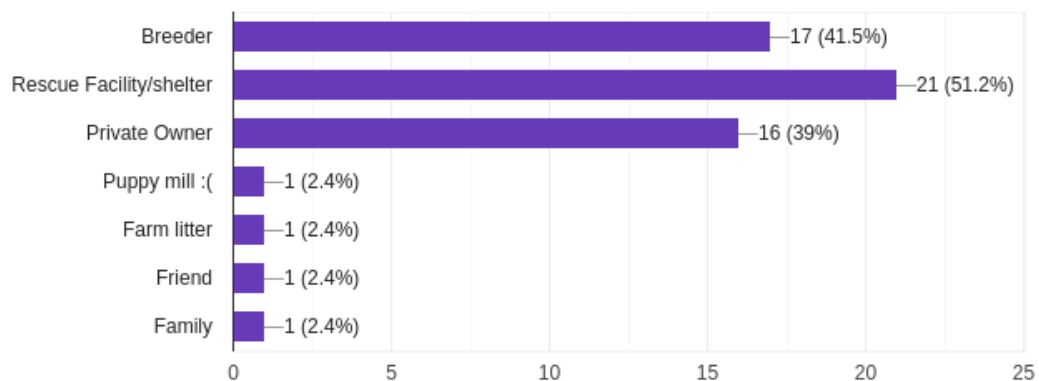
What was your age when you obtained your dog? Choose more than one option if you own multiple dogs obtained at different times.

41 responses



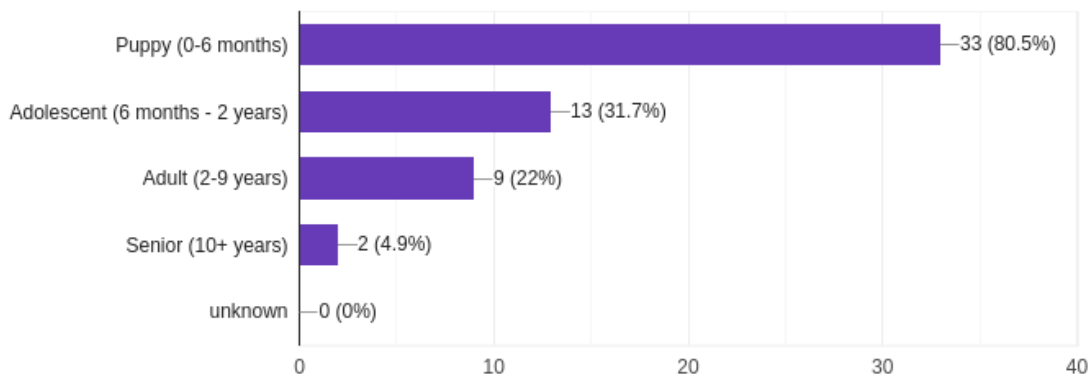
My dog was obtained through (select all that apply for multiple dogs):

41 responses



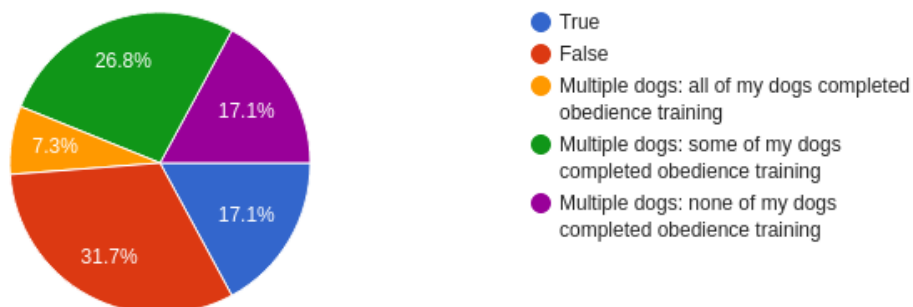
I got my dog when they were at the following life stage (select all that apply for multiple dogs):

41 responses

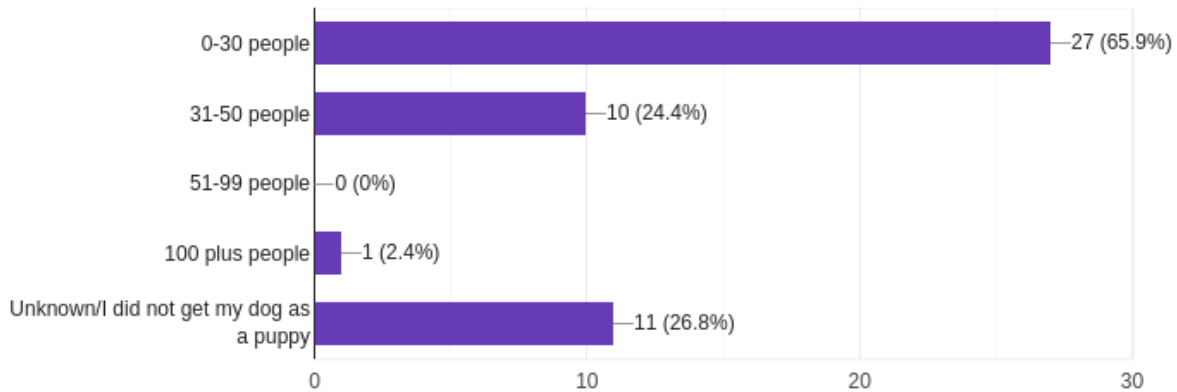


My dog completed obedience training.

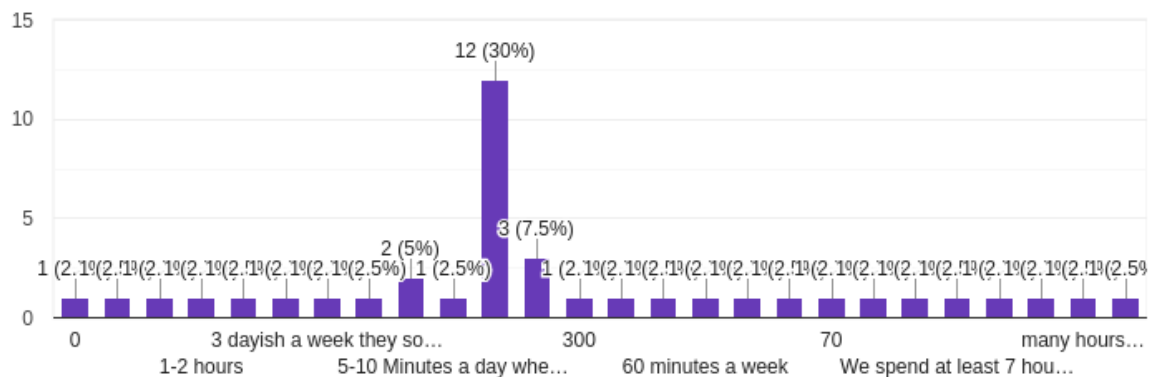
41 responses



41 responses

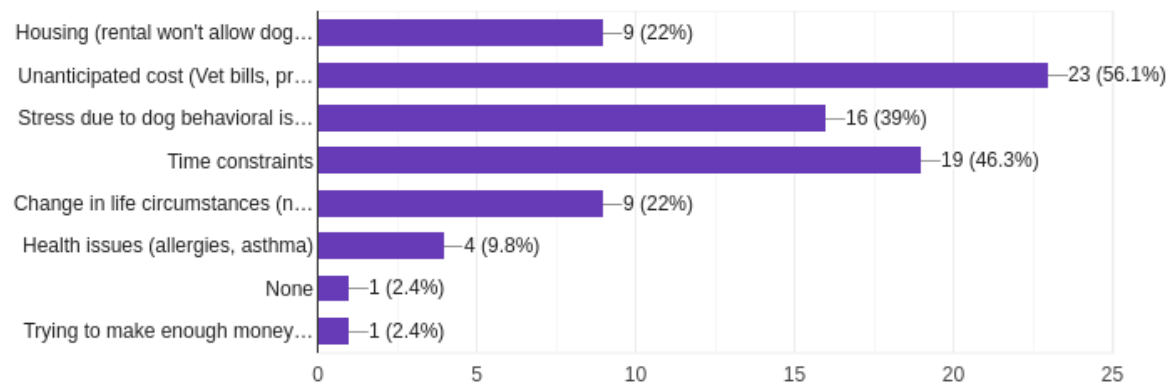


40 responses



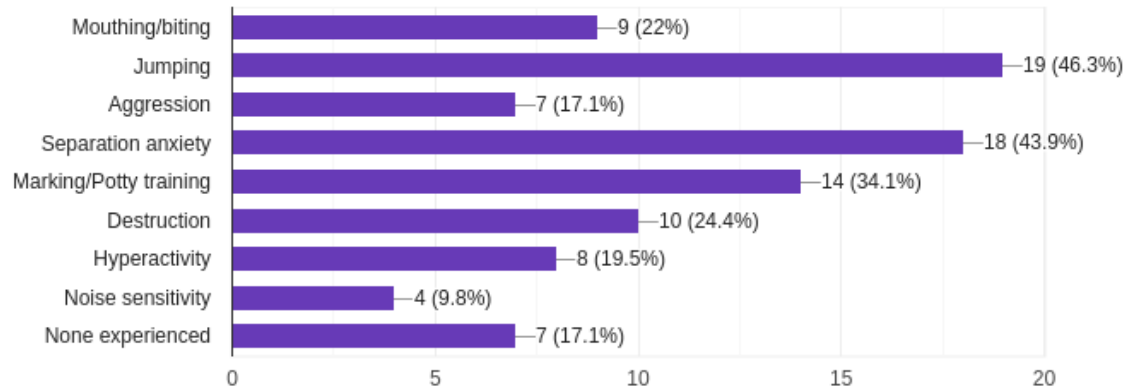
Problems I have encountered related to owning my dog(s)- (select all that apply):

41 responses



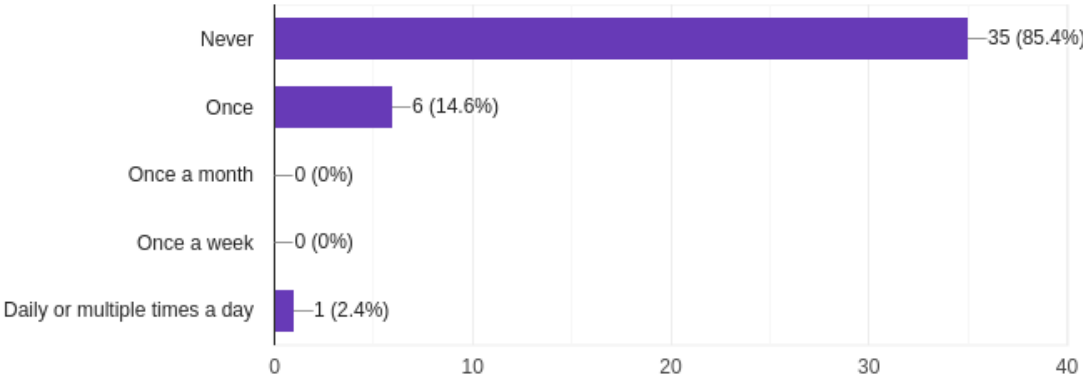
Issues I have experienced with my dog(s) include (select all that apply):

41 responses



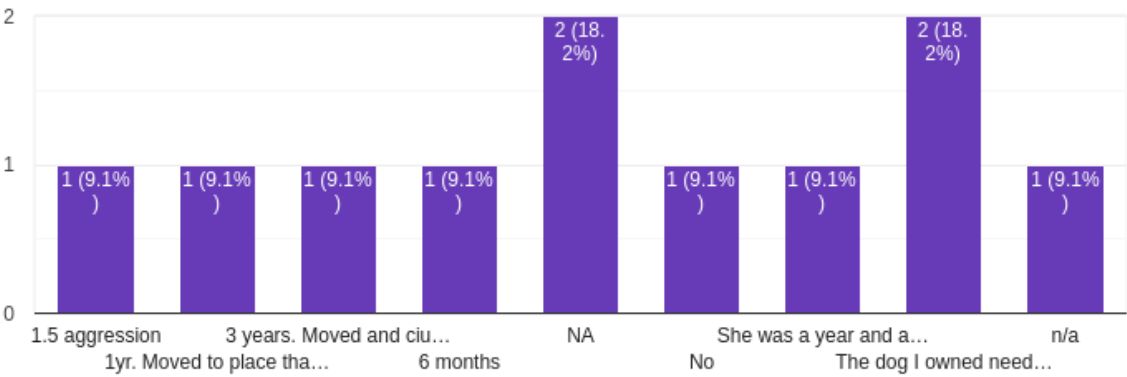
I have considered relinquishing my dog:

41 responses



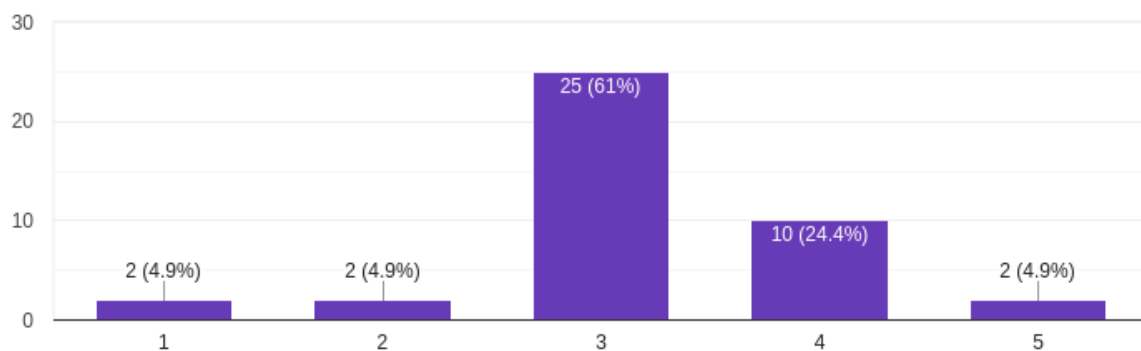
If you have relinquished a dog please indicate age of dog and reason:

11 responses



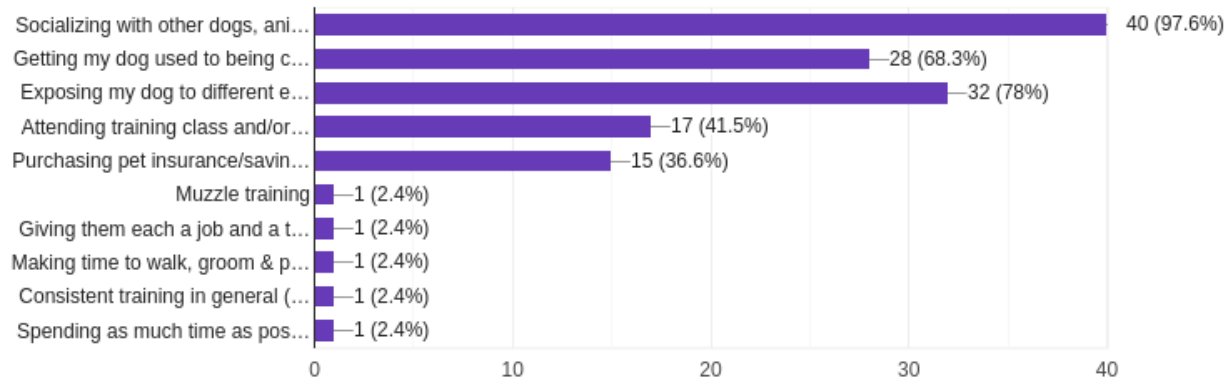
Owning a dog is

41 responses



Things that I consider important for owning a dog (select all that apply):

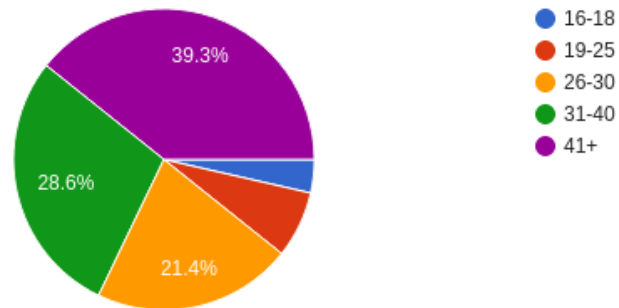
41 responses



Appendix B: Future dog-owner Survey

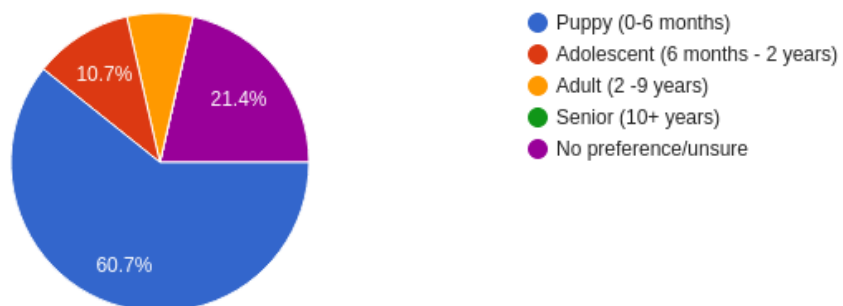
What is your age?

28 responses



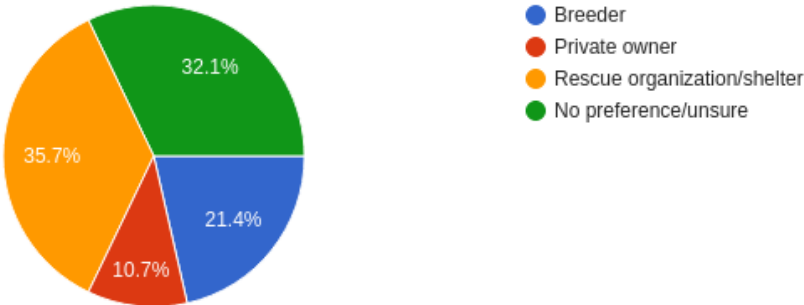
I would like to obtain a dog at this life stage:

28 responses



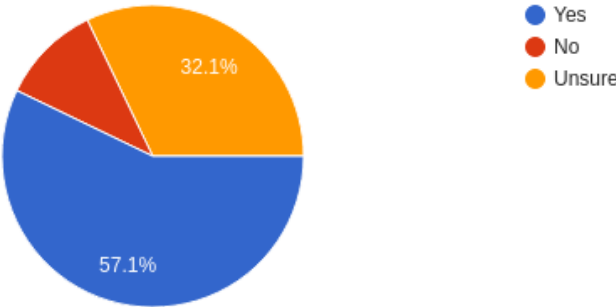
My dog would be obtained through (select one):

28 responses



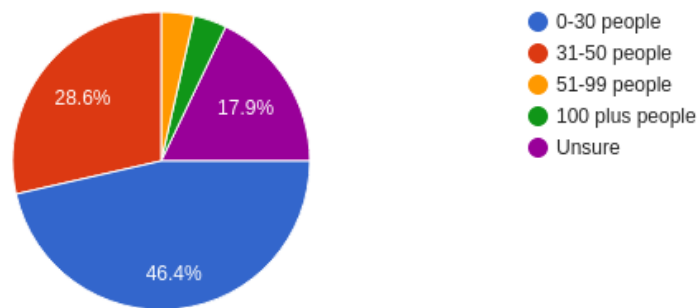
My dog will attend obedience training.

28 responses



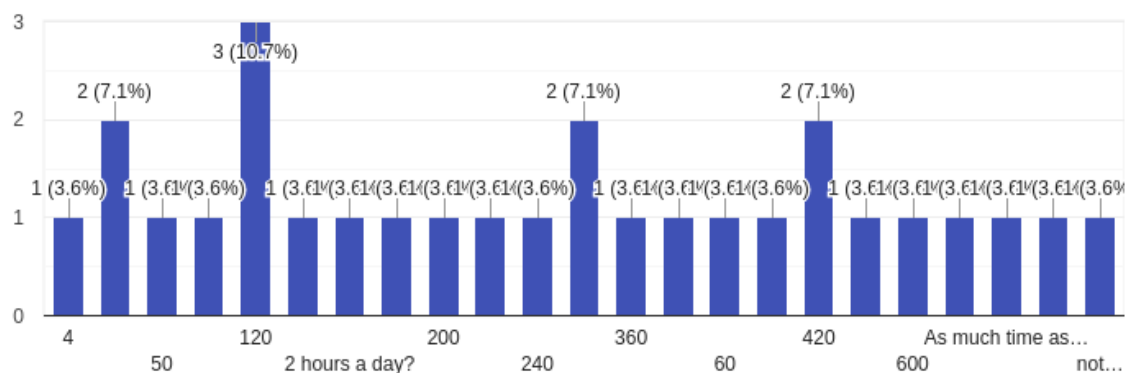
By the time a puppy reaches 16 weeks they should have positive interactions with:

28 responses



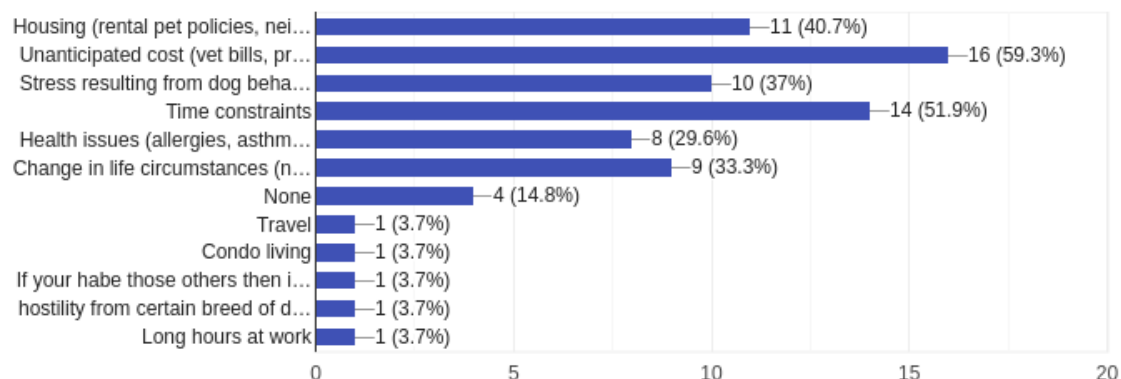
I will expect to spend _____ minutes training or socializing my dog a week.

28 responses



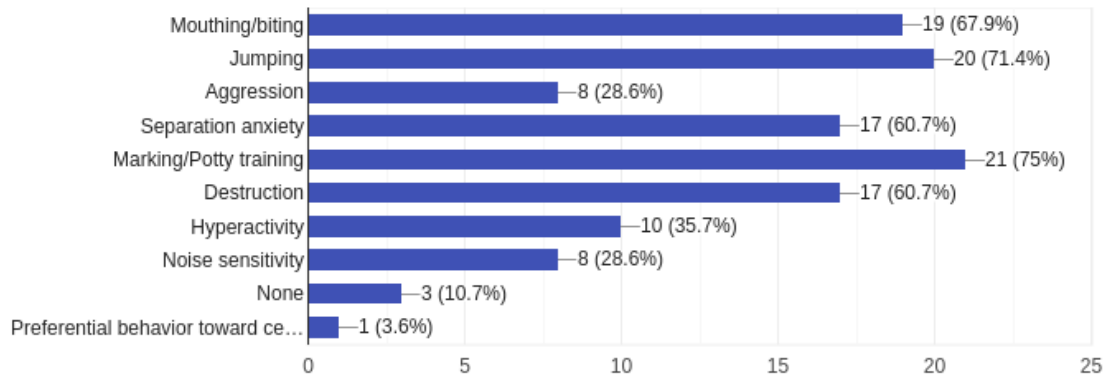
Potential problems that may interfere with caring for a dog include (select all that apply):

27 responses



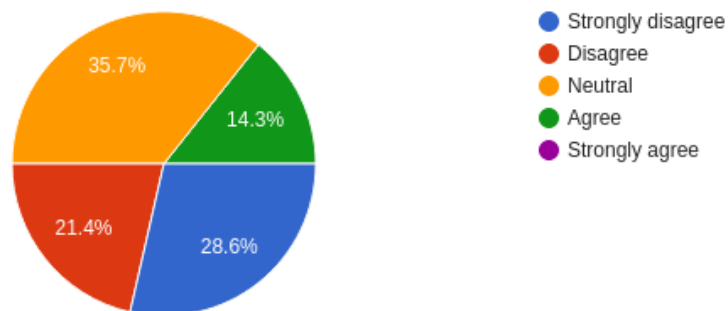
Dog behavioral issues that I anticipate include (select all that apply):

28 responses



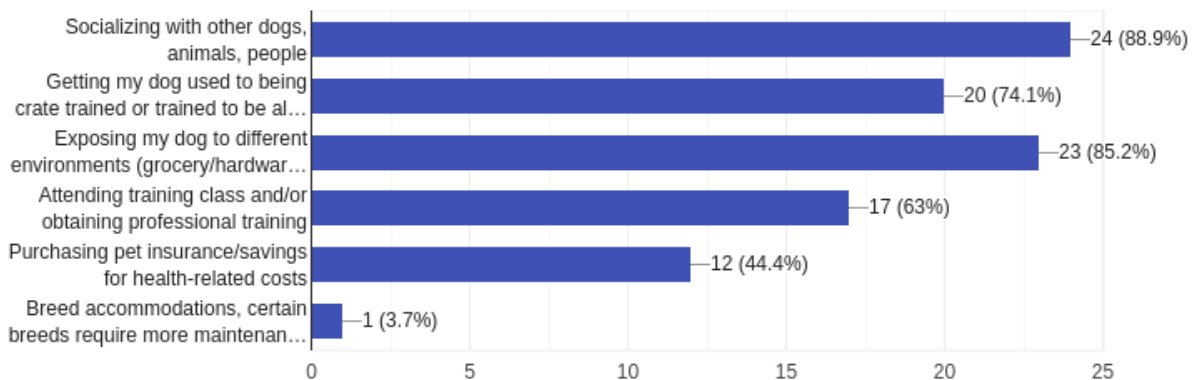
I would give a dog away if I experience issues (personal or animal driven):

28 responses



Things that I consider to be important when owning a dog include (select all that apply):

27 responses



Appendix C: Field Observation tally

Owner health	
Housing	
Behavior	
Time	
Life event	