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New Report Shows How Social Vulnerability Affects Lifesaving

After revealing that the [primary reasons](#) pets end up in shelters are due to human circumstances, it was apparent that a deeper understanding of those circumstances was required if we were going to understand the communities where pets were most vulnerable. We had suspected that in areas where the human population was more vulnerable, pets would be too, and this research confirmed it—though it might not be for all the same reasons we had thought.

A rigorous search for definitions that encompassed population resiliency and vulnerability led our researcher, data and analysis specialist Samantha Hill, to the [CDC's Social Vulnerability Index \(SVI\)](#). The SVI provided the most comprehensive look at demographic factors that indicate resiliency in the face of crisis, whether that crisis be economic, environmental, or an issue of public health, as we saw with the COVID pandemic.

"By understanding pet vulnerability in the context of human vulnerability, I hoped this would show our need as an organization and as an industry that supporting pets is just as much an animal welfare issue as it is a human services issue," Samantha Hill said.

You can see the full results [here](#), but there are a few highlights that caught our attention—some of which were expected, while others were not at all what we anticipated:

- **Although only 29% of the U.S. population lives in high vulnerability counties, a disproportionate 53.4% of the lifesaving gap occurs in these counties.**
 - This statistic isn't surprising. We anticipated that areas of higher need would have a higher lifesaving gap because they are also resource deserts. But when we look at the data around owner-requested euthanasia (ORE) and owner surrenders (see final bullet point), people in those more vulnerable areas seem to have higher pet retention.
 - The animal sheltering industry also has engaged in discrimination (see next bullet point) that perhaps hasn't allowed people in higher vulnerability areas to participate in saving the lives of animals. As opposed to assuming that the public is the problem, animal shelter processes—from putting up multiple hurdles to adoptions to perhaps targeting such neighborhoods for stray animal pickup—are likely the biggest reasons behind these statistics.
- **Adoptions as a percent of intake are over 10 percentage points lower in high vulnerability areas than the national rate.**

- Although there are any number of factors that might be impacting adoption figures, we can't discount the impact of a lack of diversity, equity and inclusion in sheltering and the **systemic racism and discrimination** that exists in the field. For decades, our industry has practiced inequitable adoption processes whereby we screened out "qualified" adopters based on variables such as access to transportation, age or disability. Such practices are obvious to those targeted by them, and they create a chain reaction of negative experiences: someone who has had a negative experience at a shelter is unlikely to return, and possibly will discourage friends and family from doing so, either.
- **Fewer animals are returned to their owners in high vulnerability counties.**
 - Again, transportation and financial issues will impact someone's ability to get to the shelter to search for a lost pet. But we must also bear in mind that our industry's use of the internet to help people find their animals may not be of any help to people who have no access to computers or the web.
 - Operational issues likewise play into this. RTO improves with better promotion of RTO programs, regardless of the level of vulnerability in the community.
- **The rates for owner surrender and ORE are higher in moderate and low vulnerability counties.**
 - This finding was the most surprising, as our industry often assumes that people who are low-income seek out OREs at shelters because they can't afford the service at a vet's office. The data suggests, however, that the people using this shelter resource might not be who we thought they were (though it's true that even low vulnerability areas might not have access to reasonably priced veterinary care). It also begs the question: Are people with fewer resources better at rehoming pets on their own, outside of traditional owner surrender to shelters, and what can we learn from them to help others?

What Do We Do with the Data?

As with any data, we want to use the results to motivate us to either continue investing in programs that work or to make changes where they are indicated. Some shelters might need to change the way they are doing RTOs in the field, for instance. Taking time to evaluate your RTO processes may reveal that animals are not being treated the same way in every zip code. Since the report also showed that stray intake was higher in more vulnerable counties, implementing RTO in the field is even more important in these areas.

If we hope to improve the adoption rates in more vulnerable communities, then we must make pets more accessible and **remove barriers to adoption**. The data validates the need for open adoption processes that don't penalize people for their socioeconomic circumstances and suggests the need for some creative adoption strategies—like taking animals into the community rather than expecting people to come to the shelter. Intentionally marketing shelter services in the areas currently not touched through advertising (by posting bilingual ads on bus stops, for instance) is another way to be more inclusive of the community.

Ultimately, the report demonstrates that we can't separate people from animals; if a family is vulnerable then their animals will be, too. And it's possible that such a tangible connection can drive funding for shelters. After all, if an independent funder or a government body is concerned about closing the economic gaps in their communities, in broadening access to medical care and finding ways to combat resource deserts, they should factor people's pets into the picture. Hopefully, this report can be a tool for shelters around the country to make just such an argument when they are seeking the resources to serve every pet in the community, no matter where they live.

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