

U.S. Residents' Perceptions of Dogs, Their Welfare and Related Information Sources

By Courtney Bir (birc@purdue.edu), Dr. Candace Cronney (ccronney@purdue.edu) and Dr. Nicole Olynk Widmar (nwidmar@purdue.edu)



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Executive Summary

Researchers conducted an online survey of 1,523 U.S. residents in Fall 2015 in an effort to understand how people characterize dogs and perceive current dog welfare issues. They also explored opinions related to dog usage and perceived levels of trust in various sources of information on dog welfare/humane treatment. U.S. residents typically characterized dogs as family members and felt people had a duty to provide the best standard of care for which they were capable. Few survey participants thought that dogs should have rights similar to people. Overall, many respondents agreed that there is a dog overpopulation problem in the United States, but they were neutral regarding whether spay/neuter of all dogs should be mandatory. Most respondents were also neutral to the idea that all shelter dogs are adoptable and that the only responsible way to obtain a dog is via a shelter or rescue. Respondents were most concerned about dogs being used in laboratory settings and those in breeding facilities/programs. They also indicated concern for laboratory animals other than dogs and circus animals. Researchers found that many respondents could not point to a specific source of information on dog welfare/humane treatment. Veterinarians, the Humane Society of the U.S. (HSUS) and local humane societies/shelters were the most frequently selected resources for people who did identify a source; however, respondents appeared to distrust many of the organizations presented as potential sources for information about dog welfare. The most highly trusted sources included the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), Petco and PetSmart.

Further analysis of demographic and other factors that may be associated with the responses are needed before many specific conclusions can be drawn. Given that the results presented here are preliminary and absent of statistical analysis that might provide greater insight and clarity, they should be interpreted cautiously. Further analyses are pending.

Keywords: perceptions, dogs, welfare, information sources, trust

Introduction

In the United States, dogs have become a widespread companion animal found in many households. Unsurprisingly, public views and social constructs related to dogs have evolved. Factors such as experience, cultural background, religion, ethnicity and age can influence these views and constructs. Increasingly, many people identify familial relationships with their dogs. For example, people have described dogs as family members and friends since at least the 1980s (Cain, 1983; Stallones et al., 1988). For some, pets such as dogs are even viewed as surrogate children or grandchildren, resulting in expenditure of significant resources on their care and well-being (Holbrook and Woodside, 2008).

Despite these trends, given the United States' cultural, ethnic and socioeconomic diversity, disparate beliefs about how to treat dogs are inevitable – sometimes even occurring within families. How people characterize dogs may, therefore, become central to understanding future values and beliefs about the acceptable treatment of dogs.

A 2015 Gallup Poll indicated that almost a third of the U.S. public surveyed felt that animals should have the same rights as people. More than 60 percent believed that, while still deserving protection, animals should remain useful to humans. It is unclear the extent to which these views reflect public sentiment about dogs. However, Blouin (2013) explored the implications of people's views of dogs, their affiliations to them and the corresponding implications for their treatment. Contrary to the popular, simplistic depiction of dog owners as either abusive or attached along a one-dimensional spectrum, Blouin identified three human-animal relationships – humanistic, dominionistic or protectionistic. People with a

humanistic orientation perceived their dogs as having elevated status — akin to that of surrogate people — and valued them for their close, shared bonds. In dominionistic relationships, people had low regard for dogs, but valued them for their usefulness. A protectionistic orientation included showing high regard in general for animals and valuing them as companions, as well as individuals with their own interests.

According to Blouin (2013), these relationships reflected varying social and cultural constructs of dogs between which people switch depending on different situations and over time. Additionally, Blouin (2013) suggested that such analyses help to explain how U.S. dog owners can hold similar views of dogs, yet differ in their perceived obligations to them. For example, people will indulge their companion dogs, while simultaneously treating them as disposable entities (based on high U.S. euthanasia rates of unwanted dogs). He further noted that tradition, as well as various organizations and institutions, reinforce these different views.

While the latter statement hints at sources that may inform the public's views on animal welfare, little has been published specifically on which sources are routinely used and trusted by the public on companion animal welfare. Heleski et al. (2005) reported that consumers looked to veterinarians as the most trusted experts for farm animal welfare. However, McKendree et al. (2014) found that most of the U.S. public surveyed had no source of information for animal welfare, while those who did identified organizations — namely, the Humane Society of the United States (HSUS) and People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) — as their main sources on the topic.

Given the relationships between the social constructs of animals, their implications for perceived obligations to animals, and their potential reinforcement by the information sources on which people rely, the current study aimed to 1) understand how U.S. residents characterized dogs, 2) examine participants' views on current dog welfare issues, and 3) identify the sources of information pet owners/guardians use to inform themselves on companion animal welfare.

Research Methods and Data

Survey Instrument

The Purdue University research team used Qualtrics, an online survey tool, to gather the U.S. public's perspectives on dog welfare and dog welfare sources in October 2015. Online surveys have become a popular method of study administration due, in part, to the increasing Internet availability in the U.S. (Fricker, R. D., & Schonlau, M., 2002). More than 93 percent of the population lives in areas offering wired broadband service, and about 98 percent have access to either wired or terrestrial wireless connectivity at speeds of at least 3 megabits per second for download and 768 kilobits per second for upload (NTIA & FCC, 2013).

Lightspeed GMI, a New Jersey-based company that specializes in online data collection, administered the survey and used a double opt-in panel to obtain a representative sample of the U.S. population based on gender and age (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010 Census, Revised 2014); education and income (U.S. Census Bureau, 2008-2012); and resident region of the United States. Participants had to be at least 18 years old.

Sample Summary Statistics and Demographics

The national-scale survey sample contained 1,523 responses. **Table 1** shows respondent demographics compared with the census statistics for gender, age, education, income and resident region of the United States. **Table 2** illustrates respondents' political affiliation and race. As seen in **Table 1**, the sample had slightly more respondents from the 25- to 34-year-old category and the Midwest region than desired. Additionally, there were fewer respondents from the south than desired. All other categories were similar to the census data.

Results and Discussion

Views of Dogs in Society and Dog Welfare

The research team asked participants questions related to how they characterize domestic dogs and what level of care dogs should receive to better understand respondents' perceptions of welfare. Respondents completed the sentence "Dogs are..." by choosing from the listed options as seen in **Figure 1**. The most frequently chosen option (57 percent) was "Dogs are a member of the family." Twenty-eight percent chose "Dogs are a pet."

Table 1. Summary Statistics (n=1,523)

| Variable Descriptions | Survey | Census |
|---|---------------|---------------|
| | Frequency (%) | Frequency (%) |
| Gender | | |
| Female | 49% | 49% |
| Male | 51% | 51% |
| Age | | |
| 18 to 24 years | 13% | 13% |
| 25 to 34 years | 14% | 18% |
| 35 to 44 years | 15% | 17% |
| 45 to 54 years | 19% | 19% |
| 55 to 65 years | 19% | 16% |
| 66 to 88 years | 20% | 17% |
| Annual Pre Tax Income | | |
| Less than \$25,000 | 25% | 25% |
| \$26,000-\$50,000 | 25% | 25% |
| \$51,000-\$75,000 | 18% | 18% |
| \$76,000-\$100,000 | 12% | 12% |
| \$101,000 or more | 20% | 20% |
| Educational Background | | |
| Did not graduate from high school | 2% | 2% |
| Graduated from high school | 29% | 30% |
| Attended college, no degree earned | 25% | 25% |
| Attended college, bachelor's (BS or BA), associate or trade degree earned | 27% | 27% |
| Attended college, advanced (MS, PhD, law school) degree earned | 16% | 16% |
| Region of Residence | | |
| Northeast | 18% | 18% |
| South | 22% | 22% |
| Midwest | 38% | 38% |
| West | 22% | 22% |

Table 2. Summary Statistics (n=1,523)

| Variable Descriptions | Survey |
|-------------------------------------|---------------|
| | Frequency (%) |
| Political Affiliation | |
| Democratic Party | 32% |
| Republican Party | 27% |
| Independent | 28% |
| None of the above | 13% |
| Race | |
| White or Caucasian | 82% |
| Black or African American | 7% |
| Asian | 4% |
| Hispanic or Latino | 5% |
| American Indian or Alaska Native | 1% |
| Pacific Islander or Native Hawaiian | 2% |
| Other (please describe) | 1% |

Figure 1. Dogs are (select the answer you feel is most appropriate):

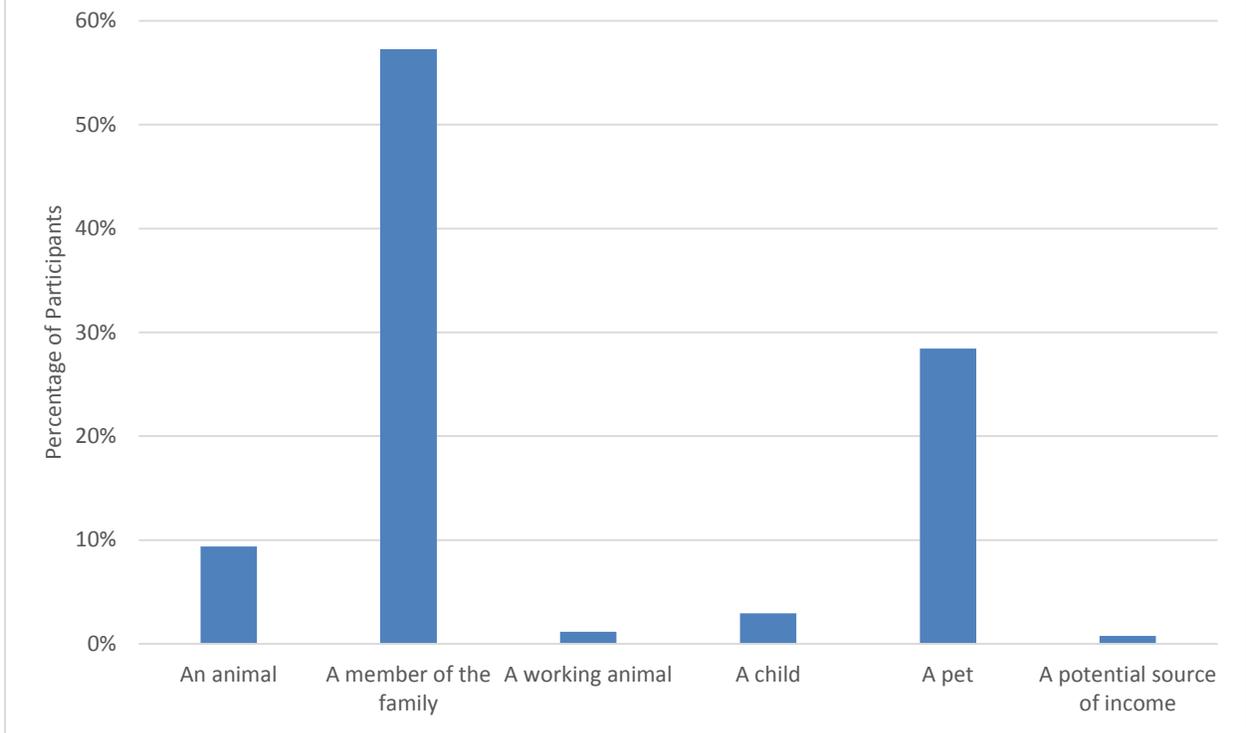
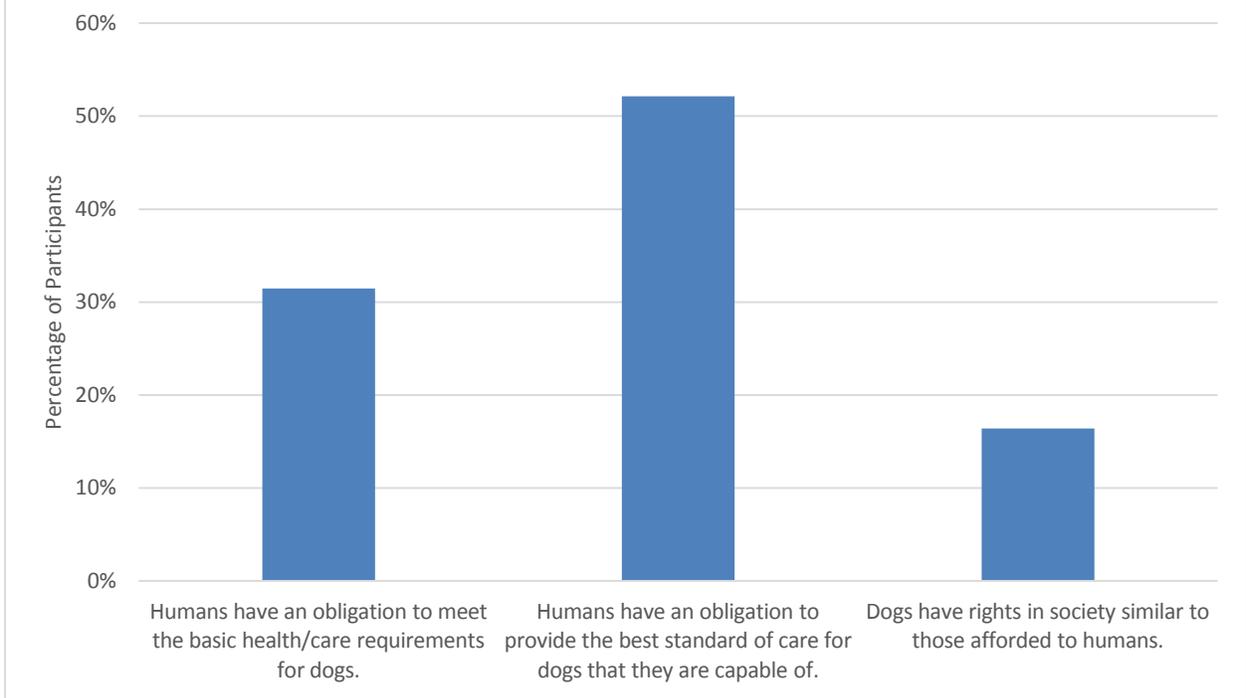


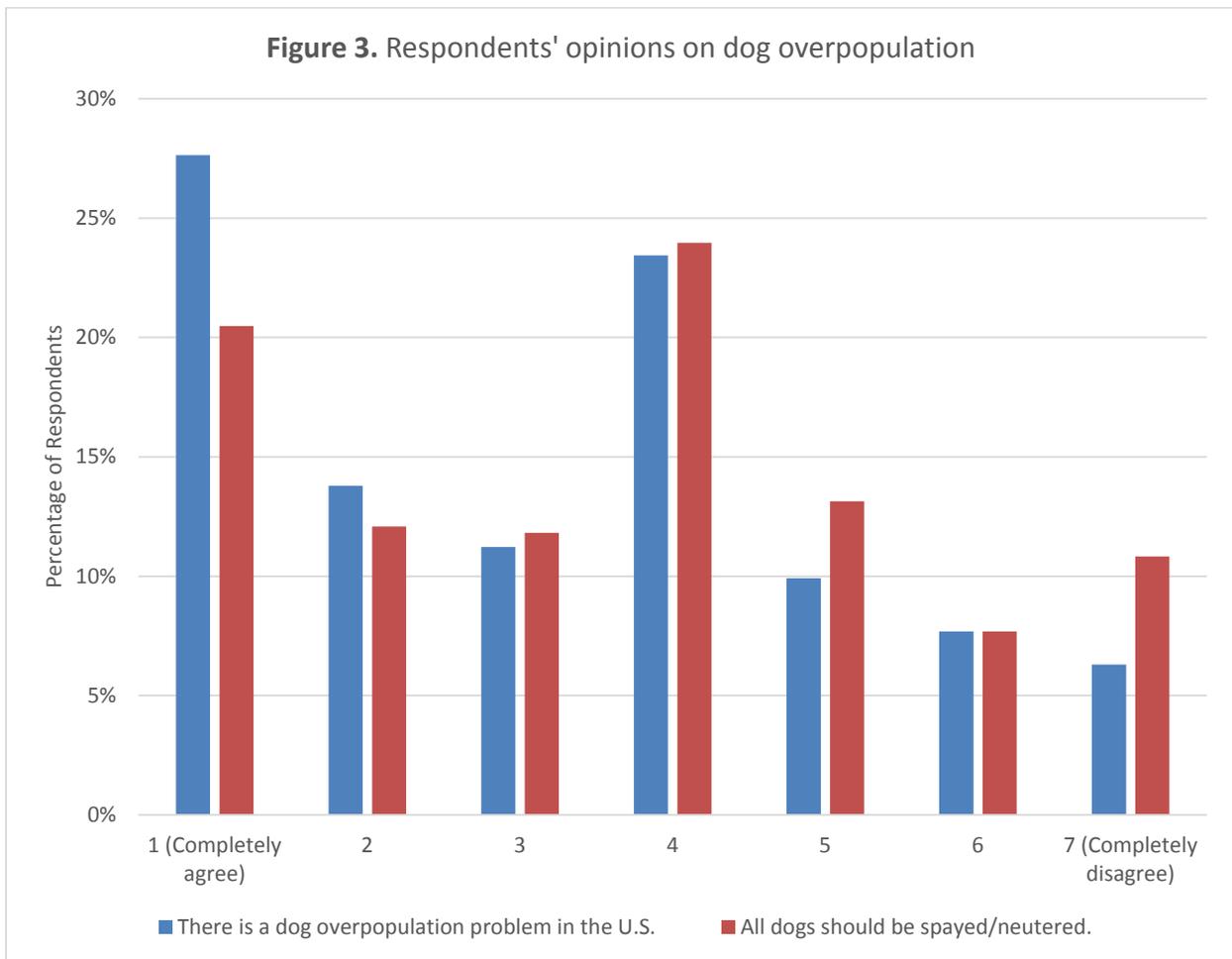
Figure 2. Statement that most closely represents beliefs regarding dogs in society



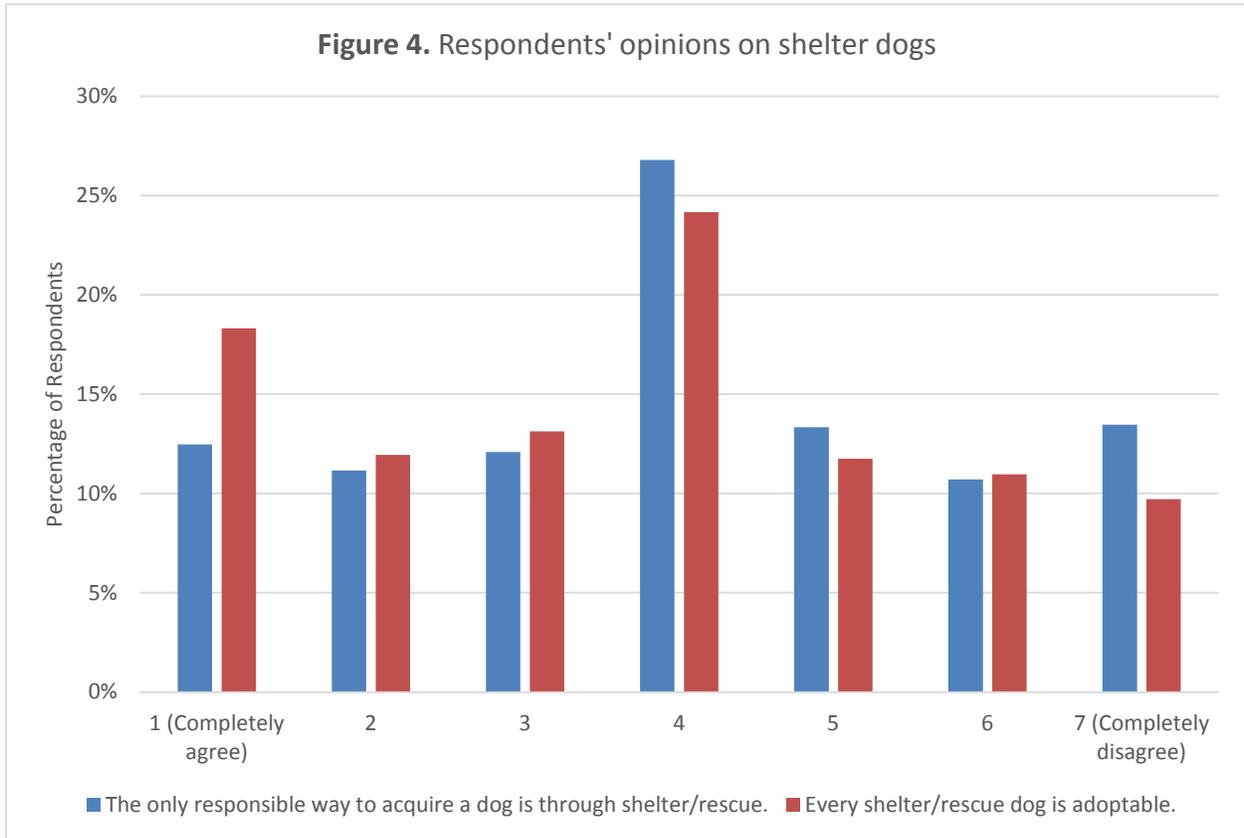
Respondents also chose the statement that most closely represented their beliefs regarding societal obligations to dog care and welfare as seen in **Figure 2**. The most commonly selected choice, with 52 percent, was “Humans have an obligation to provide the best standard of care for dogs that they are capable of.” With only 16 percent, the least-selected choice was “Dogs have rights in society similar to those afforded to humans.”

The researchers wanted to determine how participants’ views of dogs influenced their opinions on current dog welfare issues. Consequently, the survey asked participants questions related to dog overpopulation in the United States.

Using a Likert scale ranging from “completely agree” to “completely disagree,” respondents indicated their level of agreement with the statements “There is a dog overpopulation problem in the U.S.” and “All dogs should be spayed/neutered.” As seen in **Figure 3**, participants most frequently selected “completely agree” to the dog overpopulation statement (38 percent). The statement about mandatory spay/neuter, however, most commonly elicited a neutral response from the group (24 percent). This finding could be a result of participants believing the population could be reduced through controlled breeding, thus objecting to the phrase “all dogs.” This might have been particularly concerning if people connected universal spay/neuter with an end or dramatic decrease in access to companion dogs, which would inevitably occur if indeed all were rendered incapable of breeding.

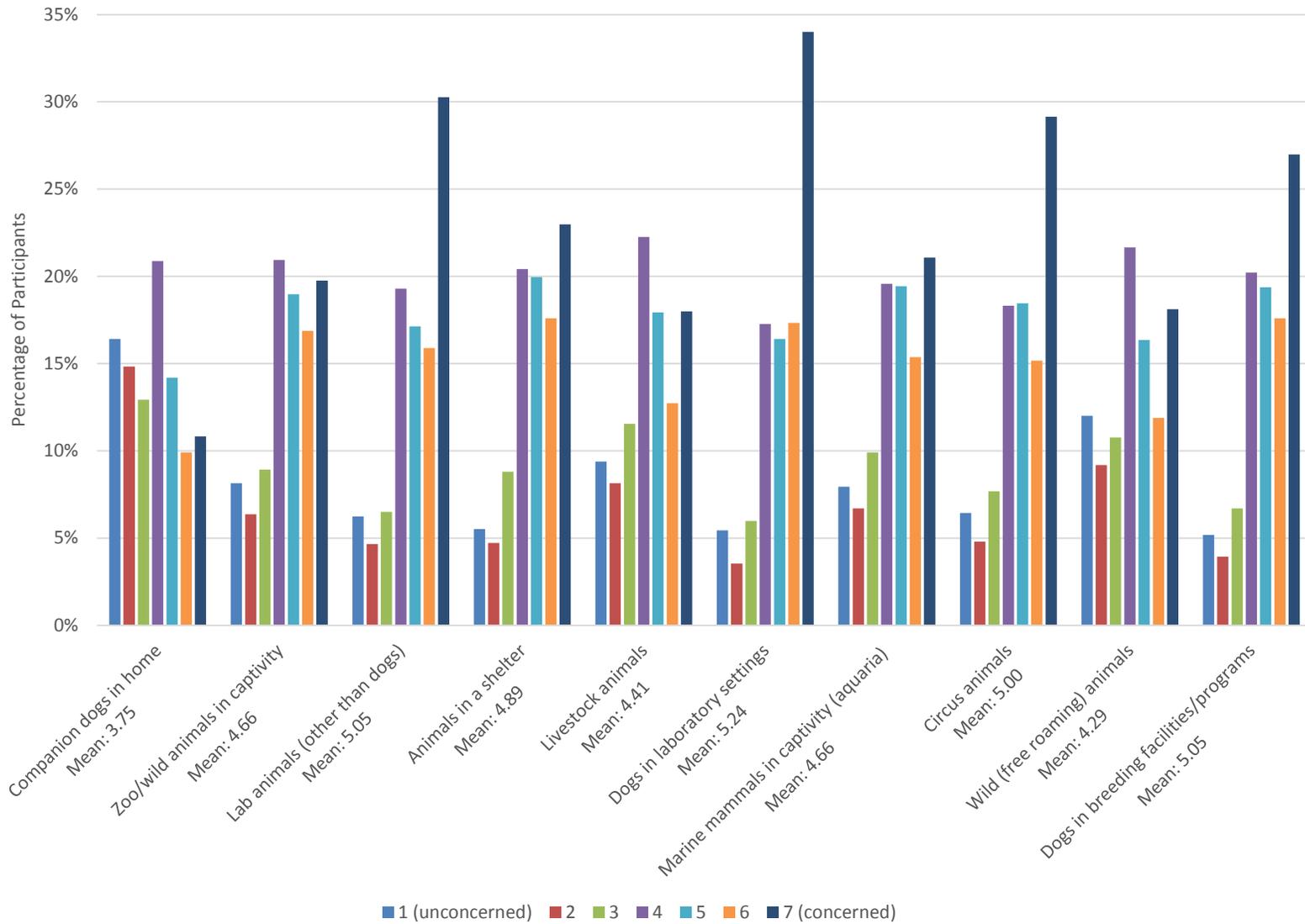


Many homeless dogs end up in shelters, so the study asked respondents their opinions on shelter dogs and adoption. Again using a Likert scale ranging from “completely agree” to “completely disagree,” participants indicated their level of agreement with the statements “The only responsible way to acquire a dog is through shelter/rescue.” and “Every shelter/rescue dog is adoptable.” As seen in **Figure 4**, the most commonly selected answer for both statements was 4 (neutral) – an unexpected finding considering the campaigns by many U.S. animal welfare/protection groups promoting dog adoption from shelters and rescues as the answer to perceived canine overpopulation problems.



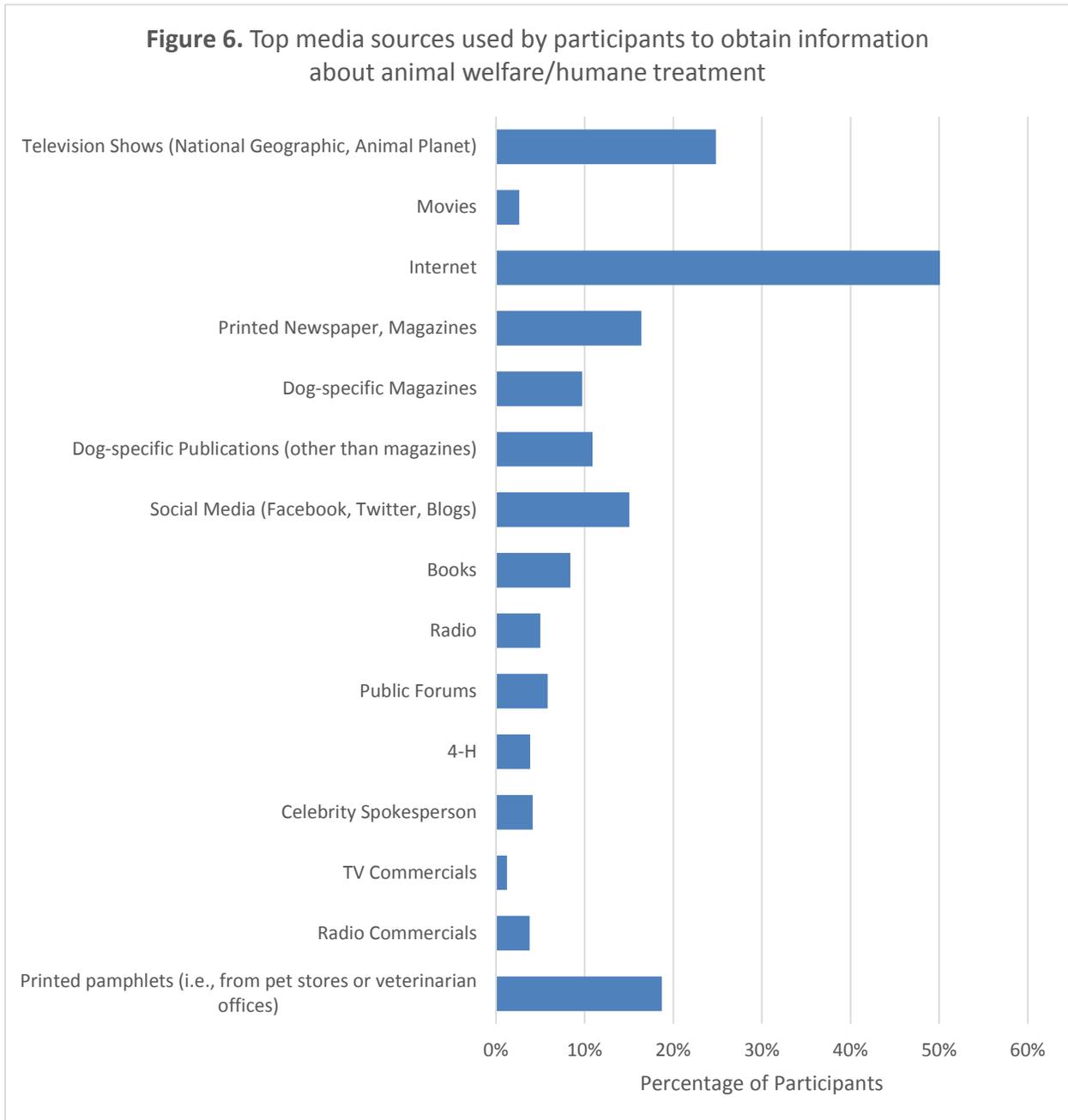
Respondents also indicated their overall concern for dog welfare relative to other animals. They most often selected “unconcerned” (16 percent) for companion dogs in homes when compared to the other animal choices (**Figure 5**). Dogs in laboratory settings were of the most concern to the group (34 percent), followed by other laboratory animals (30 percent). Circus animals (29 percent) and dogs in breeding facilities/programs (27 percent) were the next highest regarding level of concern.

Figure 5. Levels of concern about current animal welfare/humane treatment/handling practices

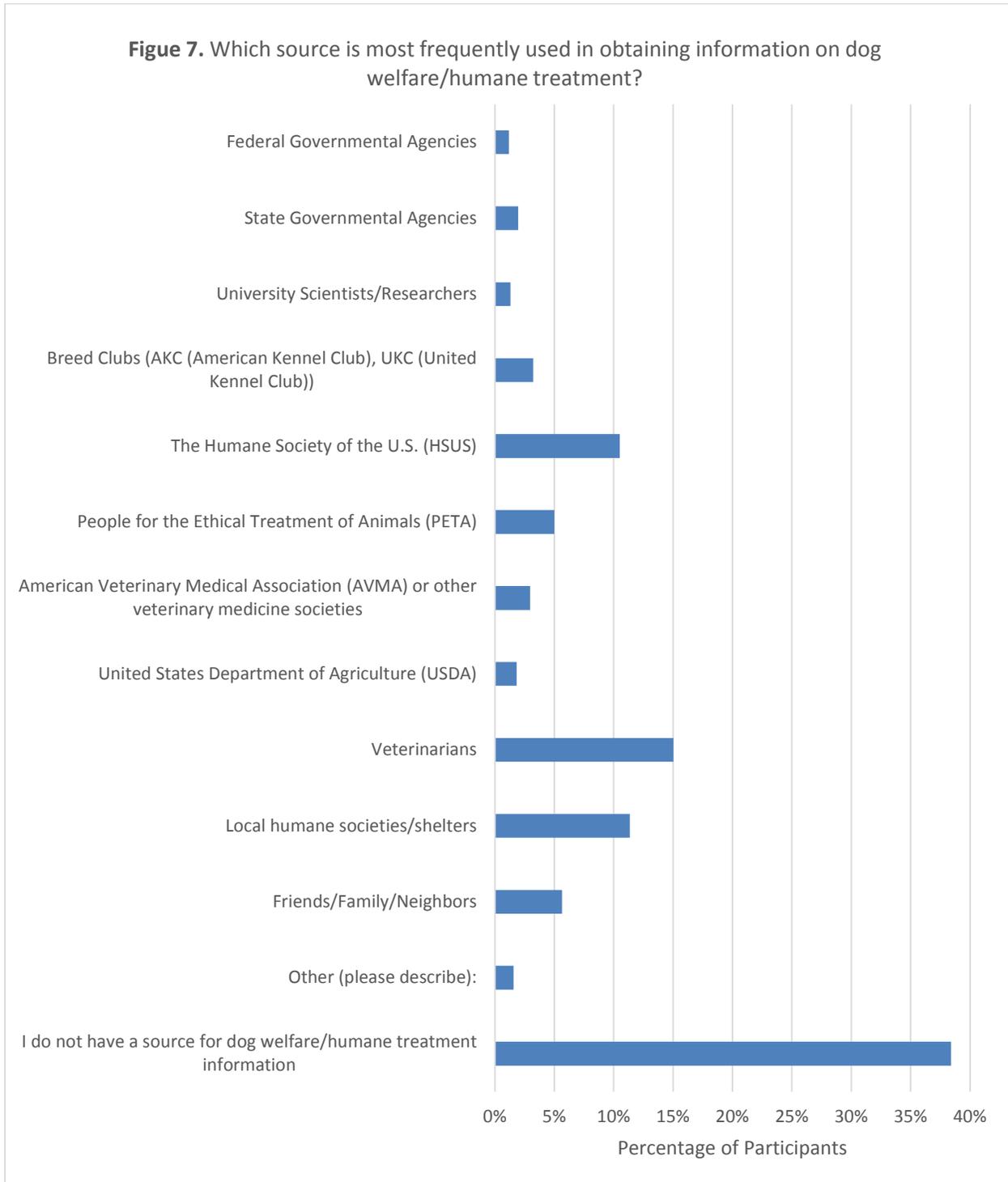


Sources of Dog Welfare Information

In addition to asking respondents about dogs in society and their welfare, the research team asked about information sources related to dog welfare. Respondents selected their two most frequently used media sources from a list of 15 options. As seen in **Figure 6**, the most commonly selected media source was the Internet (50 percent). The next most commonly selected media source, with 25 percent, was television programming (National Geographic, Animal Planet).



Respondents also selected their most frequently used source for information on dog welfare/humane treatment. **Figure 7** shows that 38 percent of respondents did not have a source. Veterinarians (15 percent), HSUS (11 percent) and local humane societies/shelters (11 percent) were the most commonly selected sources of information on dog welfare/humane treatment.

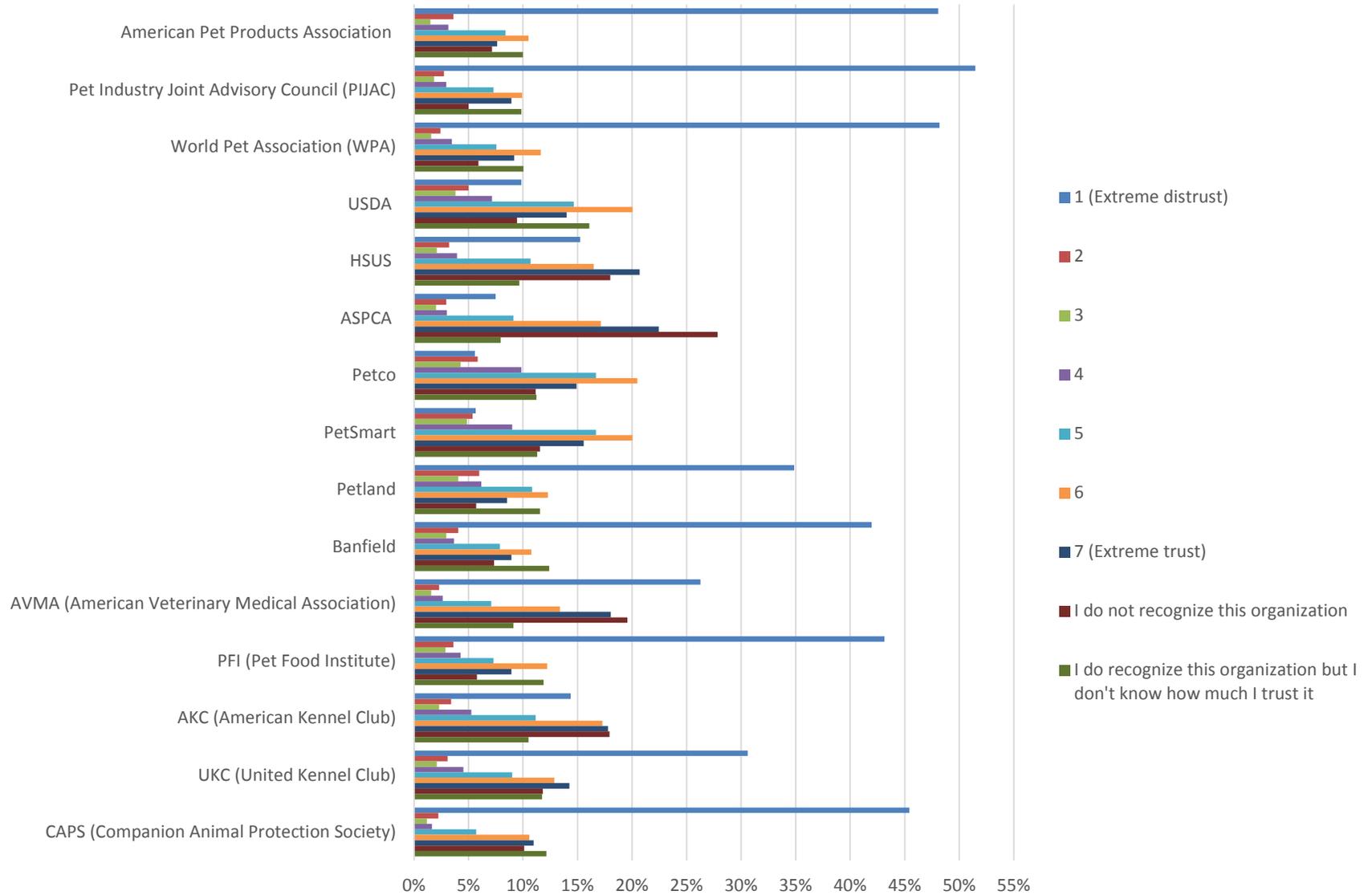


In addition to identifying specific sources, the research team was interested in respondents' level of trust in different sources offering information and assurances to dog/pet owners about animal care. For this section, the study used a scale ranging from 1 (extreme distrust) to 7 (extreme trust). Participants could also choose to select one of these statements: "I do not recognize this organization." or "I do recognize this organization but I don't know how much I trust it." **Figure 8** indicates respondents most frequently selected "extreme distrust" for the majority of sources. Respondents distrusted the following sources the most: Pet Industry Joint Advisory Council (PIJAC) (51 percent), American Pet Products Association (APPA) (48 percent), World Pet Association (WPA) (48 percent), Companion Animal Protection Society (CAPS) (45 percent), Pet Food Institute (PFI) (43 percent), Banfield (42 percent), Petland (35 percent), United Kennel Club (UKC) (31 percent) and American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) (26 percent).

Respondents most frequently chose 6 (high trust) for the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), Petco and PetSmart, all with 20 percent of respondents. When presented with the HSUS, participants most frequently selected "extreme trust" (21 percent). The most common selection for the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA) was "I do not recognize this organization" (28 percent). However, compared to other sources, ASPCA had the highest percentages indicating high and extremely high trust, with 15 percent and 28 percent, respectively. Participants typically made one of three selections when considering the American Kennel Club (AKC): "I do not recognize this organization." (18 percent), extreme trust (18 percent) or high trust (17 percent).

Overall, respondents expressed high distrust in several sources providing animal welfare information. Few selected "I do not recognize this organization." or "I recognize but am not sure how much I trust this organization." for any of the groups studied, which is somewhat surprising given the limited scope of public interaction typically associated with some of the listed organizations.

Figure 8. Trust in organizations that seek to provide information and assurances to dog owners/pet owners about animal care



Conclusion and Impacts

This study found that U.S. residents most frequently characterized dogs as family members, thus reinforcing recent trends reporting similar concepts and social constructs of dogs in developed western nations. The most commonly selected response to questions about the level of care and protection dogs deserve revealed that more than half the participants (52 percent) felt people had a duty to provide the best standard of care for which they were capable. In contrast to the 2015 Gallup poll, far fewer respondents (16 percent) thought that dogs should have rights similar to people. These findings suggest that the majority of respondents viewed obligation to animals from a pro-animal welfare orientation, rather than a rights-based perspective.

When considering specific dog welfare issues, 38 percent of study participants completely agreed that there is a dog overpopulation problem in the U.S. The research team expected this result given people's exposure to similar statements by various animal protection, welfare and veterinary groups promoting mandatory spay/neuter as a solution. It was, however, surprising to find that the most common response to questions about mandatory spay/neuter of all dogs was neutral, suggesting a level of public reticence to a singular approach to controlling dog breeding. Likewise, respondents were neutral when asked whether all shelter dogs are adoptable and that the only responsible way to obtain a dog was via a shelter or rescue. Reluctance to support blanket statements such as these may explain the responses. It is also likely that people felt retention of choice was important, an idea supported by the researchers' findings in an associated report where most respondents felt people should have choices as to where to obtain dogs (Bir, Croney and Widmar, 2016).

When presented questions about animal use, respondents were most concerned for dogs in laboratory settings (34 percent), laboratory animals other than dogs (30 percent), circus animals (29 percent) and dogs in breeding facilities/programs (27 percent). These findings suggest that respondents were indeed aware of animal uses that may have been perceived as potentially risky to their well-being. Further exploration is needed to determine which demographics are associated with the species and usage concerns identified.

Participants most commonly identified the Internet as their media source for dog welfare information. Television programming (such as that offered by National Geographic or Animal Planet) was the second most popular source. This study, similar to that of McKendree et al. (2014), found that a relatively high percentage of respondents (38 percent) had no source of information for dog welfare/humane treatment. For those who could identify an information source, they most frequently selected veterinarians (15 percent), HSUS (11 percent) and local humane societies/shelters (11 percent).

The research team identified a high level of distrust in most of the organizations presented as potential information sources on dog welfare. However, 20 percent of respondents did select the USDA, Petco and PetSmart as highly trustworthy. An odd dichotomy surfaced for the ASPCA and AKC. Participants either trusted them to a high degree or did not recognize them at all. Without further analyses of the demographics and other factors associated with these responses, it is difficult to draw many specific conclusions. It is plausible that some combination of skepticism/distrust and level of familiarity with the pet industry and other organizations that work with pets influenced some responses. Regardless, these observations suggest that researchers should further analyze efforts to engage the public in the domains of recognition and trust for almost every organization listed in this study.

Interpret the results presented here cautiously. They are preliminary and absent of statistical analysis that might provide greater insight and clarity. Further analyses are pending.

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