



ALLEY CAT RESCUE

An Alliance for Cat Protection



CATS IN THE UNITED STATES

2020



**A report by
Alley Cat Rescue**

**The Status of Cats
in the United States**



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INTRODUCTION

Cats hold a paradoxical place in American culture, being simultaneously revered and reviled. For every funny cat video on YouTube, there is an unseen feline tragedy. This report will illuminate the realities – good and bad – facing American cats and will also make recommendations for reducing those tragedies and improving the lives of cats and humans alike.

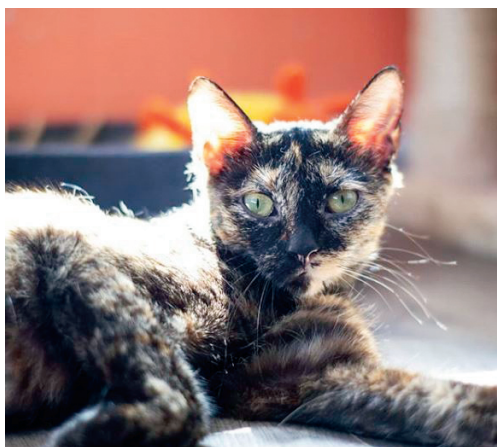
Pet homelessness and overpopulation remains perhaps the paramount welfare issue for cats, but these terms are overbroad and can be misleading. The notions that cat welfare concerns can be adequately addressed by simply increasing the number of available homes for cats, or by decreasing the number of available cats, are entirely too simplistic. A detailed look at the available data relating to cats in homes, in animal shelters, on farms, and in managed or unmanaged colonies, reveals biological and societal truths which require consideration and action. In some cases, the action required may be as simple as providing veterinary care, brushing, and treats. Other cases will require significant shifts in public policy.

In all cases, actions should be based on the best available information. Unfortunately, reliable data relating to cats is still, even in this information age, woefully lacking. Using the data that is available, however, will allow the best possible decision making with respect to those biological and sociological matters over which modern society has significant control.

PET CAT DEMOGRAPHICS

The United States does not have a reliable national system for collecting or analyzing data regarding cat populations. While pets are accepted as “members of the family” in most American households, the U.S. Census bureau does not collect information on those family members. Fortunately, leading veterinary and pet industry groups whose professions function based on reliable data conduct significant research to that end. The American Pet Products Association (APPA) derives its data from internet-based Household Panel surveys, while the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) utilizes the services of international market research giant Kantar TNS. In 2018, Andrew N. Rowan, Ph.D. published a comprehensive analysis of the numbers collected by APPA in 2016 and those obtained by AVMA in 2011. New AVMA data released in 2018 provides the most current information available today.

Cats in Households

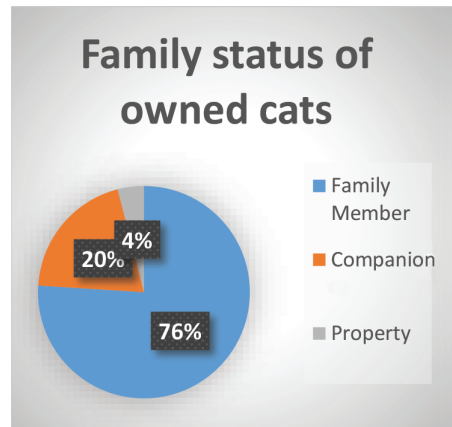
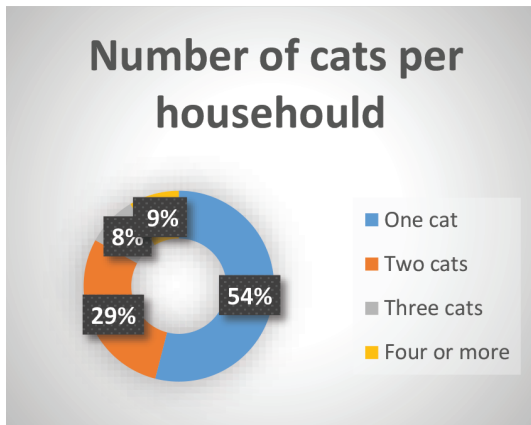


In 2016, one in four American households included at least one cat (AVMA, 2018). While this number is down from just over 30% in 2011 and more than 32% in 2006, the AVMA reports that it is “...within the range of cat ownership observed in recent decades.” Similarly, estimated total cat numbers have dropped from more than 80,000,000 in 2011 to fewer than 60,000,000 in 2016. The AVMA speculates, however, that this decline may be due to increased accuracy in survey methodology.

AVMA data over a 10 year period			
Year	2006	2011	2016
Households with at least one cat	37,500,000	36,100,000	31,896,000
Percentage of households with cats	32.4%	30.4%	25.4%
Total number of cats in households	81,721,000	74,059,000	58,385,725

Fifty-three percent of cat-owning households have just one cat, with nine percent keeping four or more. The per-household average of 1.8 cats per home is the lowest reported since AVMA began its surveys in 1982 (AVMA, 2018).

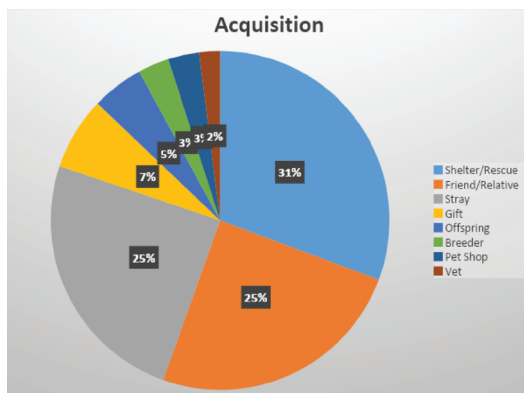
In 2016, seventy-six percent of cat owners consider their cats to be family members, twenty percent call them companions, and three percent regard them as owned property. Sixteen percent of household cats were reported as being purebred (84% other). Fifty-four percent of cat-owning households report taking their cat(s) to a veterinarian, while forty-six percent do not. Forty-eight percent of household cats receive routine annual care. Cat owners averaged 2.4 veterinary visits per year (1.3 visits per cat), spent an average of \$335 per year and \$144 per visit. The most common reason for veterinary visits was preventative care, followed by vaccinations, illness, new cat exams, injuries, and behavioral issues, respectively. One encouraging trend is that 89.1 percent of cat owners report having a regular vet, a number which has increased steadily from 73.7 percent in 1996 (AVMA, 2018).



Sterilization

Eighty percent of household cats are sterilized (spayed/neutered). Of those cats, thirty-eight percent were already sterilized when they were acquired, with sixty-two percent sterilized by their current caretaker. Forty-one percent of spays/neuters were performed by shelters. The average cost of a cat spay was \$95 at private veterinary clinics and \$43 at shelters. Male cat neuters averaged \$75 at private veterinarians and \$43 at shelters. Thirty-two percent of shelter-provided surgeries were provided at no cost, as were an impressive twenty-eight percent of sterilizations at private veterinarians (AVMA, 2018).

Acquisition of Household Cats



Nearly a third (31%) of household cats in 2016 were acquired from animal shelters or rescue groups, with 25% coming from friends or relatives and another 25% found as strays. Only 3% were purchased from breeders and 3% from pet shops. Of cats who left a household, 25% were given away, 23% died at home, 19% were euthanized, 6% were relinquished to animal shelters, 2% were sold, and 24% left for other reasons including lost/ran away (AVMA, 2018).

Cats in Underserved Communities

The Humane Society of the United States reports that approximately 19 million dogs and cats (of these we can extrapolate approximately 10 million cats) in the United States reside with families whose incomes are below the poverty line, which is triple the number of dogs and cats entering shelters each year (Arrington & Markarian, 2018).

These families typically reside in underserved communities which lack affordable, accessible pet care. In many such neighborhoods, veterinary practices simply do not exist. Given that residents often do not own vehicles with which to transport their pets to veterinary offices to neighboring communities, it should come as no surprise that veterinary care levels in these communities are low. APPA numbers suggest that among the general population, 93% of owned cats are spayed/neutered and that households spend between \$890 and \$1,200 per year on veterinary care for their cats. By comparison, in low-income communities, 88% of owned pets remain unaltered and 69% of owned pets have never received veterinary care of any kind (Arrington & Markarian, 2018).

It is important to note that failure to provide veterinary care, including spaying/neutering, does not occur because of a lack of desire to provide top-level care within low-income, pet-owning households. Nor is it based on any form of ethnic bias, cultural preference, or other readily identifiable sociological factor. The HSUS' Pets For Life Program (PFL), which has served nearly 100,000 animals in 39 locations nationwide, reports that members of low-income communities and/or communities of color care deeply about the welfare of their pets, and that the lower levels of veterinary care provided to their pets is directly attributable to the lack of available, affordable services within their communities. Race and ethnicity were found to be a non-issue with respect to provision of veterinary care. Specifically, researchers found that decision making by Latino and African-American pet owners in 39 low-income communities served by the program across the United States is consistent with that of non-Hispanic white pet owners (Decker Sparks, et al, 2018).

When HSUS/PFL makes veterinary services geographically and financially available in the communities they serve, the number of animals in low-income homes who are spayed/neutered rises to nearly 90%, which tracks with overall national figures.

The HSUS/PFL rightly labels the lack of affordable, available vet care in impoverished communities as a social justice issue. Focusing strictly on the numbers, however, it becomes clear that underserved communities must be a critical point of focus for any realistic attempt to increase the number of owned cats who receive adequate veterinary care, are spayed/neutered, and who remain in homes for life.

ANIMAL SHELTER DEMOGRAPHICS

Cats in Animal Shelters

Just as with owned and free-roaming cats, statistics regarding cats in animal shelters vary. The ASPCA estimates that approximately 3.2 million cats enter animal shelters each year in the United States. Of those, they estimate that 1.6 million are adopted into homes, and 860,000 (or approximately 27 percent) of those cats are euthanized (Pet Statistics, 2019).

Dr. Andrew Rowan provides more accurate numbers in his research. Dr. Rowan looked at the actual intake and disposition data reported by shelters using PetPoint - a free shelter software program used by over a thousand shelters and rescues across the country. Extrapolating this data to represent the approximately 3,350 shelters and 1,650 rescues across the country, it suggests that in 2015, 3.6 million cats entered shelters. Of those, just over two million were adopted and just over one million were euthanized. These numbers are down incrementally and fairly significantly from 2010, when 4.6 million cats entered shelters, 1.8 million were adopted, and just over 2.2 million were euthanized. Critically, Dr. Rowan's numbers show euthanasia rates declining and adoption rates increasing for shelter cats every year (Rowan, 2018).

Cats in animal shelters, Rowan 2018

	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
Intake	4,589,000	4,319,000	4,088,000	3,945,000	3,725,000	3,636,000
Adopted	1,791,000 39%	1,832,000 42%	1,818,000 44%	1,841,000 47%	1,904,000 51%	2,010,000 55%
Euthanized	2,221,000 48%	1,983,000 46%	1,679,000 41%	1,470,000 37%	1,225,000 33%	1,021,000 28%

Risk factors for relinquishment

In the last two decades, little research has been conducted on the risk factors for cats being relinquished to animal shelters. However, there is little reason to believe that those risk factors have shifted in a meaningful way since the release of studies in the late 1990's. In the landmark study, "Human and Animal Factors Related to the Relinquishment of Dogs and Cats in Twelve Selected Animal Shelters in the United States," the authors found that "Human Lifestyle" reasons were cited for just over a third of cat relinquishments. Housing issues - mostly rental properties that did not allow pets - accounted for 26 percent of cat relinquishments, followed by behavioral issues reported by just over one in five people who relinquished a cat to a shelter (Salman et al, 1998).

Top Ten Behavioral Reasons for Relinquishment of Cats to Shelters

Soils House	43.2%
Problems between new and existing pets	18.9%
Aggressive towards people	14.6%
Destructive inside home	12.4%
Aggressive toward animals	12.4%
Bites	9.2%
Disobedient	5.9%
Euthanasia request for behavioral reasons	5.4%
Unfriendly	5.4%
Afraid	3.8%

A follow up study in 2000 looked at the specific behavioral reasons given by people relinquishing cats and the author found that inappropriate elimination was by far the most commonly given reason (Salman et al, 2000).

CATS LIVING OUTSIDE OF HOMES (FERALS AND STRAYS)

Not surprisingly, calculating the number of feral and stray cats in the U.S. is an even more daunting proposition. Ecologist Eric McLamb estimated the number at "at least 60 million" in 2013 (McLamb, 2013). The Humane Society of the United States puts the estimate at 30-40 million (Pets by the Numbers 2019). Outdoor cat populations appear to be significantly higher in states with mild winters than those with more severe winter weather (Rowan, 2010).

Stray or Feral?

The National Animal Control Association (NACA) differentiates between stray and feral cats as follows: "A feral cat is defined as a cat that has been born in the wild or forsaken by the original owner for an extended period of time. A stray cat is one that is at large or escaped from an owner" (NACA Guidelines, 2019). From a practical standpoint, the difference is purely behavioral. Stray cats should be, wherever possible, returned to their homes. If attempts to find the cat's original home fail, options include adding the cat to your own family, or working with a cat rescue or animal sheltering organization to find a new home for the cat. For feral cats, in most cases the preferred action will be to provide veterinary care including sterilization and vaccinations but allow the cat to remain in her colony/area.

Rehoming stray cats and pet loss prevention



The American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA) published a report in 2012 indicating that 15% of pet cats had been lost within the preceding five years, and that 75% of those cats were eventually recovered. Of the cats who were recovered, 59% returned on their own and 30% were found by the owner by searching the neighborhood. Only 2% were found by visiting animal shelters, and only 2% were returned because of a tag or microchip identifying the cat's name and address (Weisse et al, 2012).

Of people who found lost cats and attempted to find the owner by contacting an animal shelter or placing an ad in the local newspaper, only 3% were able to reunite the cat with their owner (Lord et al, 2007).

The best way to increase the likelihood of a lost cat being returned is to ensure that your cat is readily identifiable as yours. Identification methods include collars and tags, microchips, and tattoos. Tags are the most reliable method because they are most likely to provide current information. Microchips and tattoos, while highly recommended, are only useful if the information associated with the chip or tattoo is kept up to date. Nevertheless, a 2009 Ohio State University study of stray cats in animal shelters reported that the returned-to-owner rate for cats was an astounding 20 times higher for microchipped pets than for those without microchips (Lord et al, 2009). Twenty-two percent of cats in American households in 2016 have a registered microchip or tattoo (AVMA, 2018).

Outdoor Cats and Wildlife

Some wildlife advocates believe that because some outdoor cats kill birds and small mammals, cats therefore represent a threat to biodiversity and should be removed from ecosystems entirely. Typically, these conservationist arguments are supported by any one of a handful of research papers of questionable scientific rigor. And it is questionable whether those sounding the charge for eliminating cats even believe their own research. Perhaps the leading proponent of outdoor-cat extermination is Smithsonian Migratory Bird Center Director Peter Marra, who co-authored a book suggesting that society should, "...remove (cats) once and for all from the landscape...by any means necessary" (Marra & Santella, 2016). But in the final chapter of the book, the authors concede that, "...it is abundantly clear that free-roaming cats are not the primary threat to the future of birds and other wildlife." As an indicator of the authors' antipathy towards cats, the book also includes the provocatively titled "Zombie-Makers: Cats as Agents of Disease." In this chapter, the authors focus on a case where a woman was bitten by a feral cat and contracted fatal rabies. But the case was from the year 1913. And true to form, the authors concede that, "Thankfully, the development of rabies infections in humans is extremely rare in the United States."

A 2019 paper in the scientific journal *Conservation Biology* appropriately titled "A Moral Panic over Cats" states, "There are good conservation and public-health reasons and evidence to be skeptical that free-ranging cats constitute a disaster for biodiversity and human health" (Lynn et al, 2019).

Attempts to protect wildlife by killing cats are misguided for two main reasons. First, so-called "culling" programs are not effective in reducing cat populations (see section on TNR below), and secondly because the public opposes killing cats - particularly when more effective, humane options are available. A 2007 national survey conducted by Harris Interactive found that more than 80% of respondents thought it was preferable to leave a community cat to fend for herself than to trap and euthanize the cat. More than 70% thought it was still best to let the cat remain in the community even if it meant the cat would die within two years from an accident, such as being hit by a car (Chu & Anderson, 2007).



A 2019 essay in the journal *Frontiers in Veterinary Science* posits that the very fact that Trap-Neuter-Release programs are increasingly favored over lethal controls of cats is down to changing societal ethics that increasingly recognize the intrinsic value of animals beyond any value to humans and to a growing acceptance that compassion for cats deserves to be a consideration in any management decision (Wolf & Shaffner, 2009). A study released in 2018 by Bird Life International found that unsustainable agricultural practices, not cats - is the primary threat to birds. The authors concluded that, "...human industry is at the core of declining bird populations" (Bird Life International, 2018).

TNR

Trap-Neuter-Return, or TNR, refers to the management of community cat populations through trapping, sterilizing (neutering), and releasing cats, typically back into the same area from which they were trapped. When vaccinations are provided to the cats this can be referred to as TNVR. For the purposes of this report, the term TNR is used to include TNR and TNVR based programs.

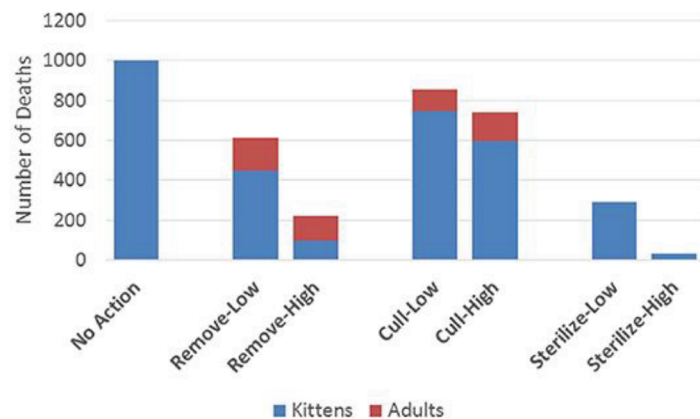
An impressive and growing body of research now exists to demonstrate that TNR is the most effective and desirable method of managing free-roaming cat populations. In 2017, ACR conducted the largest national survey to date on cat rescue and sterilization programs. The results showed a reduction of 72% in kitten births at monitored colonies since the introduction of TNR. Additionally, the data suggests that more than half the cats who have been

sterilized through TNR programs were done so between 2012-2017; more in those five years than the previous 20. Furthermore, according to the study, only 9% of community cats are in colonies of 30-plus, and only 30% (including the 9%) live in colonies of 20-plus. The percentage of cats in colonies of fewer than 10 has also decreased, from 31% in 1992 to 22% 2017. This decrease appears to point to the success of TNR in diminishing colonies of all sizes (Clifton, et al. 2017).

In 2012, 120 TNR programs responded to the ACR survey, and had TNR'd approximately 618,000 cats with an average of 45,000 cats a year. And these respondents represented merely 17% of the TNR programs active in that year. As of 2017, ACR determined that that 204 responding programs TNR'd at least 1.3 million cats, at approximately 100,000 cats a year (Clifton, et al. 2017).

Most recently, a comprehensive 10-year study on the impacts of a variety of management methods found that high-intensity TNR, in which 75% of intact cats in a population were sterilized, not only reduced the initial population by approximately half over time but also resulted in 31 times fewer preventable cat deaths over the 10-year period, compared to taking no action (Boone et al, 2019).

Similarly, a 2019 study funded by Best Friends Animal Society found that targeted, high-intensity TNR programs in six diverse U.S. communities reduced cat euthanasia at municipal shelters by an average of 83% across all six shelters, and reduced shelter intake of cats by a means of 32% (Spehar & Wolf, 2019).



TNR resulted in an 82% decline in overall population in 20 colonies within a Chicago neighborhood, with eight of the 20 colonies disappearing entirely (Spehar & Wolf, 2018).

Data from the Albuquerque Animal Welfare Department found that, over a three-year period, TNR efforts were a significant factor in reducing feline euthanasia by 84%, with shelter intake of cats declining by 37.6% (Spehar & Wolf, 2018a).

Commercial Breeding and Pet Shop Sales

While the AVMA's data reveals that only six percent of owned cats are acquired from breeders and pet shops, that still accounts for roughly 3,600 cats.

In 2006, Albuquerque, NM became the first city in the country to ban the sale of cats (and dogs) in pet shops. As of August 28, 2019, a staggering 315 localities in 25 different states have enacted similar ordinances (HSUS, 2019).

While these ordinances were predominantly enacted to combat the cruel puppy mills that typically supply commercial pet shops, the inclusion of cats in ordinance language makes it clear that community leaders see no value in importing cats into neighborhoods while so-called "surplus" cats are being euthanized using public funds.

Declawing

Declawing is the surgical amputation of a cat's toe bones and the attached claws. Veterinarians disagree on the ethics of declawing, but the American Association of Feline Practitioners, Canadian Veterinary Medical Association and the American Animal Hospital Association all oppose declawing as an elective procedure, and the AVMA says that all other methods of controlling scratching behavior should be exhausted before declawing is considered (Welfare Implications of Declawing of Domestic Cats, 2019).

A 2014 survey of more than 3,000 veterinarians found that roughly one in four veterinarians refuse to declaw (Ruch-Gallie et al, 2016).

In April 2003, the city of West Hollywood, California passed the nation's first ordinance banning onychectomy of domestic cats. In 2019, New York State became the first state to outlaw the practice.

Cats in Research Labs

In 2017, 18,186 cats were held in nearly 300 U.S. laboratories, down approximately 10% from 20,305 cats in 2008 (Ryan, 2019). Many were used in experiments that caused them pain and distress. The majority of these cats were purchased from facilities that purposefully bred them for sale to be used for research (Cats: Animals in Science, 2019). The callous nature of this research was exposed in 2018 when it became known that the USDA was euthanizing perfectly healthy kittens simply because they did not need the animals after collecting a stool sample. Fortunately, Congress intervened, and in February 2019, the USDA was directed to stop euthanizing the cats and to make them available for adoption (Ryan, 2019). On September 10, 2019, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) announced plans to significantly reduce animal testing by 2025, and to end animal testing entirely by 2035 (Block & Amundsen, 2019).

In addition to the cats in research labs, tens of thousands of cats are killed and sold to schools for classroom dissection (Cats in Laboratories, 2019). Again, these cats are acquired from so-called “biological supply houses,” where animals are bred to be sold and killed. Computer models, simulators, and other humane teaching tools are an effective replacement for live animals in classrooms and their use is encouraged.

Shockingly, many research labs and vet schools still acquire cats from animal shelters. In 2019, emails obtained through a public records request showed that Louisiana State University School of Veterinary Medicine routinely purchased cats and dogs - dead and alive - from the nearby Companion Animal Alliance, a private shelter which has subsequently re-located to a building on the LSU campus (Ulkins, 2019). In one email from October 2018 LSU staff told the shelter that they wanted, “...at least 15 cat bodies from which we would need the heads from...They do not need to be alive when they get here and we can also put them down here if needed.” Other emails appear to indicate that when the vet school placed an “order,” the shelter would euthanize animals that would otherwise have been candidates for adoption. In response to the controversy, the Louisiana State Legislature enacted a law in 2019 that prohibits shelters from selling live animals to research facilities, prohibits shelters from euthanizing animals solely for the purpose of sale for research, and says if a shelter sells deceased animals to a research facility it must post signage in the shelter informing the public that it does so. Sadly, only about half of the states have any laws at all governing the sale of shelter animals for research.

Conclusion

While many cats are in loving homes, many other cats still face tremendous hardships. Even cats in homes face numerous struggles; many do not receive adequate vet care and many are relinquished for various, often preventable, reasons. However, it is encouraging that 76% of people consider their cats as family members, and that the majority of cats are adopted from shelters. Furthermore, 80% of owned cats are sterilized, which is encouraging. However, the outlook is not as positive for stray and feral cats in the United States. Estimates put the number of feral cats between 30-40 million, and many states and counties do not have active TNR programs, or worse, they are illegal. Many of these feral cats who are caught and placed in shelters, because of their fear of humans, are unadoptable and ultimately euthanized. Another obstacle facing feral cats is the myth that they threaten local wildlife, particularly birds. However, there is no concrete evidence to support this claim. Cats used in research is also a tremendous and horrific problem facing cats today. In 2017, over 18,000 cats were in laboratories and used in experiments then euthanized. However, despite the horrendous experiments conducted on these cats, Congress stepped in and now the cats are placed up for adoption once they are done in the laboratory. Encouragingly, though not soon enough, Congress has pledged to end animal testing by 2035.

Ultimately, both pet cats and feral cats face an uphill battle in today’s climate. However, so long as there are advocacy groups who give a voice to these voiceless animals, there is hope for a brighter future.

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ALLEY CAT RESCUE

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