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OKLAHOMA ANIMAL TRANSPORT STUDY

A research project from the
University of Oklahoma

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PROJECT BACKGROUND

What is animal transport?

As recently as the 1990s, most animals that entered US shelters lost their lives there. Shelter animal transport has helped change that. Every year, tens of thousands of shelter animals (primarily dogs) travel across the US in search of their “forever homes.” Animal transport has become widespread within animal sheltering and rescue as a way to address shelter overcrowding, especially in southern states, and has made it possible for some Oklahoma shelters to reach “no-kill” status [\[1\]](#).

Why study animal transport?

In 2021, we met Kay Stout, an animal advocate interested in learning how many animals are transported out of Oklahoma. Knowing how many animals leave Oklahoma is important for understanding animal overpopulation problems in the state, since without transport even more animals would die in shelters due to lack of space. In addition to numbers, we also wanted to learn more about the organization, benefits, and challenges of shelter animal transport.



METHODS & DATA

What did we do?

We calculated Oklahoma transport numbers for 2022 by combining state health certificate records [\[2\]](#), Shelter Animal Counts survey data [\[3\]](#), and information directly from shelters and rescues. To better understand the benefits and challenges of transport, we interviewed more than 60 people involved with animal transport. We also observed transport and rescue work in action, both in Oklahoma and out-of-state destination locations [\[4\]](#).



Transport data from secondary sources



In-depth interviews with rescuers



Observations of transports

OKLAHOMA TRANSPORT NUMBERS



26,064

Shelter animals transported out of Oklahoma in 2022 [5]

2 in 5

Adoptable shelter animals were transported out of state [6]

94%

Of transported animals were dogs, 6% were cats



34

States that received Oklahoma shelter animals

ANIMAL TRANSPORT SAVES LIVES

Oklahoma shelters and rescues rely heavily on transport as a lifesaving strategy

A large proportion (39%) of adoptable shelter animals in Oklahoma only found homes by relocating out of state. Without transport, many more animals would be dying in Oklahoma shelters every year and even fewer shelters and communities in the state would be “no-kill.”

The most frequent destination states were Colorado, Iowa, and Wisconsin

Oklahoma organizations work with transport partners all over the country. While transports occasionally went to other southern states, the vast majority moved north. Top states included Colorado, Iowa, Wisconsin, Illinois, Kansas, New Jersey, Minnesota, and Missouri.



INTERVIEW FINDINGS

Animal transport is costly

Animal transport requires immense human and financial resources while generating little if any income for animal welfare organizations. Because of this, organizations must constantly seek out funding to support transport programs. The costs of housing, vetting, and sterilizing animals, as well as purchasing transport vehicles, equipment, and fuel can stress the budget of organizations that are, in many cases, already financially strapped.

“ You get to [where you’re] depending on [transport]. That’s the problem, we’re dependent on it. That scares me. If it was called to a halt today... what is my next plan? –OK Rescuer

Transport is organizationally and logistically complex

Animal transport entails strict medical vetting, behavioral assessments, and coordination across multiple organizational and regulatory contexts. These complexities mean that small problems can easily escalate into larger disruptions for both sending and receiving organizations. The complex logistics also make the process difficult to manage for smaller organizations with limited resources and staff.

The needs of destination organizations determine transport conditions

Because of their greater resources and access to adopters, destination organizations generally set the terms and conditions of transport. This includes who they partner with, the number and types of animals accepted, behavioral and medical requirements, and cost sharing arrangements. When sending organizations fail to meet partners’ expectations, they can be cut off from transport with devastating consequences for their animals.



Animal transport takes a heavy toll on rescue workers

In the South, rescue work is physically and emotionally exhausting. Most rescuers are women who work for little or no pay; they see animals in need and cannot turn away. Especially in rural areas and small towns, just a handful of rescuers do the bulk of the animal welfare work. These women make great personal sacrifices and often feel “stuck” doing the work because they know more animals will suffer and die if they quit.

Animal transport does not address the root of the problem

While transport provides a necessary outlet to alleviate shelter overcrowding, it cannot address the roots of animal welfare problems. Many communities, including those that have reached “no-kill” status, continue to struggle with large numbers of animals in need, often with insufficient resources.



Transport plays a really valuable role in short-term life saving. I call it short term because I think the end goal would always be for a community to be self-sustaining and have the resources to care for homeless pets in their own community. –National Rescuer

Rescuers struggle to fill the gaps left by underfunded public services

Because public shelters are funded through municipal governments and rely on the local tax base, 30% of all Oklahoma counties have no shelter [\[7\]](#). This problem predominantly affects poor rural areas throughout the state. As a result, residents in these areas have few resources to turn to when they come across stray animals or need assistance caring for their own animals. In urban areas, low-income and racially marginalized neighborhoods face similar problems.

Nonprofit organizations and volunteers try to fill the gaps left by underfunded public services. Yet even large urban shelters and rescues with substantially greater resources regularly operate over capacity and cannot keep up with the need.

TOWARD A NEW MODEL OF ANIMAL WELFARE



How can we improve the lives of companion animals and their caregivers in Oklahoma? To address problems of underfunding, the state must commit to funding animal services as a public good rather than displacing the problem onto local governments, other states, nonprofits, and unpaid rescuers. Philanthropic sources can supplement public funding, but funders should avoid short-term programs without back-up plans for when the grant money ends.

REFERENCES & NOTES

1. Best Friends Animal Society, a leading national animal welfare organization, defines “no-kill” as when a shelter or community reaches a 90% save rate. Best Friends (n.d.). “What no kill really means.” Accessed Sep 13, 2024, from <https://bestfriends.org/no-kill-2025/what-does-no-kill-mean>. [\[back to page\]](#)
2. Certificates of Veterinary Inspection (CVI) or “health certificates” are legally required for interstate animal transport. We obtained CVI records from the Oklahoma Department of Agriculture, Food and Forestry through an open records request. [\[back to page\]](#)
3. The information contained herein was derived from data supplied by Shelter Animals Count. Shelter Animals Count specifically disclaims all responsibility for any analysis, interpretations, conclusions and opinions contained in the information presented. [\[back to page\]](#)
4. This research was approved by the University of Oklahoma Norman Campus Institutional Review Board (IRB# 13906). 61 interviews and 8 observations have been conducted to date. [\[back to page\]](#)
5. Estimate combines data from 2021 and 2022 based on the timing of data collection. Where different sources conflicted, we deferred to counts directly from organizations. [\[back to page\]](#)
6. Estimate based on the total number of transported animals as a percentage of adoptable shelter animals in 2022. Adoptable animals was calculated using Oklahoma aggregate shelter data from Best Friends Animal Society: (net intake) – ([returned to owner] + [returned to field] + [owner requested euthanasia] + [died in care]). [\[back to page\]](#)
7. Best Friends (n.d.). “Shelter Animal Statistics: Oklahoma.” Accessed Sep 13, 2024, from <https://bestfriends.org/no-kill-2025/animal-shelter-statistics/Oklahoma>. [\[back to page\]](#)

Want to learn more about our study? We’re writing a **book** about animal transport and rescue! Anticipated release in 2026.

THANK YOU!

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GET IN TOUCH!

Questions? Comments? Contact us at the University of Oklahoma Center for Applied Social Research!



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