

Pandemic 'Hobby Pets' Being Surrendered in Droves

Normally, animal care centers in this city take in about 200 of these easily attained pets in a 10-month period. However, in 2022, they've taken in 650, forcing the city to purchase a special \$20,000 tower to house them and to introduce a bill banning their sale.

Analysis by [Dr. Karen Shaw Becker](#)

Dec 15, 2022 • 5 min read

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- While most new dog and cat owners — 90% and 85%, respectively — who adopted during the pandemic have kept their pets, this isn't the case for guinea pigs, which are being brought back to shelters "in droves"
- At New York's Animal Care Centers (ACC), they typically take in about 200 guinea pigs in the first 10 months of the year; in 2022, they've taken in 650 during that time
- There are so many guinea pigs being surrendered that a bill has been introduced that would ban the sale of the animals at pet shops in New York City
- Dogs and cats are also being given up, with surrenders up 25% in 2022 at ACC compared to 2021; while surrenders are up, adoptions have decreased, leading to overcrowding
- If you'd like to help out animals in need, consider volunteering at your local animal shelter, fostering, donating supplies or making a monetary contribution

During the pandemic, animal adoptions boomed. In April and May 2020, close to 1 in 5 U.S. households adopted a new pet.¹ Now, animals are being surrendered back to shelters at an alarming rate, as the novelty of pet ownership wears off and rising inflation makes pet care unaffordable for many families.

While most new dog and cat owners — 90% and 85%, respectively — who adopted during the pandemic have kept their pets, this isn't the case for guinea pigs, which are being brought back to shelters "in droves."² Room at shelters is also growing scarce for dogs and cats, many of whom are being surrendered because their owners can no longer afford their food and veterinary care.

Guinea Pigs Returned as 'Hobby Pets'

At New York's Animal Care Centers (ACC), they typically take in about 200 guinea pigs in the first 10 months of the year. In 2022, they've taken in 650 during that time.³ Guinea pigs are sold at chain pet stores around the U.S., where anyone can buy one on a whim for about \$40. It's also difficult to determine the sex of a guinea pig, so owners may accidentally house a male and female together, leading to babies.

Many view them as "hobby pets" that are easier to care for than dogs and cats, but they require special spacious enclosures and frequent bedding changes, along with regular interaction and environmental enrichment.

Plus, they can live for 10 years or more. Indeed, in 2020, 12.2% of U.S. households owned a pet other than a cat or dog, up from 10.8% five years ago.⁴ This was driven by a "pandemic-driven acquisition spree," according to Packaged Facts, which also noted:⁵

"Among households that added pets in the 12-month period ending February 2021, 31% added pets other than dogs or cats, a disproportionately high number given that these pets were kept by only 20% of pet-owning households in 2019."

Once owners grow bored or tired of their upkeep, however, many try to surrender them to shelters but most do not accept these small pets. In New York, ACC is the only animal shelter that takes guinea pigs.⁶ ACC has had to purchase a \$20,000-guinea pig tower to house the influx of animals, most of which are under 3 years old — a giveaway that they were purchased during the pandemic.⁷

There are so many guinea pigs being surrendered that a bill has been introduced that would ban the sale of the animals at pet shops in New York City. "This situation has become untenable," Katy Hansen, an ACC spokesperson, told The New York Times. "We are at our wits end."⁸

Drop in Adoptions Fuels Overcrowding

Dogs and cats are also being given up, with surrenders up 25% in 2022 at ACC compared to 2021. "We're packed right now. We're putting animals in cages in the hallways," Hansen told The Guardian.

"It's really sad, people crying, it's a part of their family. But if you're choosing between feeding your family and feeding your pet, your choices are limited."⁹ The increase in surrenders is compounded by the fact that adoptions have slowed to a crawl. Hansen continued:¹⁰

"All these surrenders coming in and it's really hard on staff. When someone walks in with their pet and you see the look in the pet's eye, not knowing what's happening but you know what's happening – it's heartbreaking ... We have a high population at all times."

A number of factors are contributing to the surplus of pets at shelters across the U.S. According to Shelter Animals Count, which compiles statistics on U.S. animal shelters, 6% more animals entered shelters in 2022 than have left.¹¹ At Humane Indiana in Munster, increased housing costs are playing a role. Shelter director Jessica Petalas told NPR:¹²

"We have seen a huge influx of owner surrender requests. I'd say in the last eight years, this is the most I've ever seen. It's at least doubled, and sometimes it's triple the amount that we're normally used to. A lot of people, the cost of housing has put them in a position where they have to move in with family or friends, and they can't take their animals with them."

"We do have some people that are still feeling some of the effects from COVID and being out of work, and they've been evicted. And there's really a lack of pet-friendly housing available in our area."

How to Help Animals in Need

If you'd like to help out animals in need, consider volunteering at your local animal shelter, fostering, donating supplies or making a monetary contribution. If you see a neighbor struggling to care for a pet, you can also try to help directly, by offering to take their dog for a walk or help with pet food.

Pet owners should also exhaust every option before surrendering their pets. Many communities have resources to help with pet food and low-cost veterinary care. Some also offer short-term foster programs, where someone will care for your pet temporarily until you can obtain new housing or get back on your feet.

For behavioral problems, seek out options like crate training and positive reinforcement behavior training to resolve issues before considering surrender.

For small mammals in need of homes, local schools or park districts may be able to adopt animals for classrooms, but remember to never purchase an animal as an impulse buy or present — and if you're looking to add a guinea pig or other exotic pet to your family, adopt one from an animal shelter in your area, which is likely to have many in need of a permanent home.

Sources and References

^{1, 2, 3, 6, 9, 10} [The Guardian October 17, 2022](#)

⁴ [Packaged Facts August 31, 2021](#)

⁵ [Packaged Facts August 27, 2021](#)

^{7, 8} [The New York Times October 1, 2022](#)

¹¹ [CNBC August 5, 2022](#)

¹² [NPR July 23, 2022](#)
