

ORIGINAL RESEARCH ARTICLE

'It's Becoming a Privilege to Own a Pet' – Pet Acquisition Experiences for Black/African American and Hispanic/Latino Families in Four U.S. Cities

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Abstract

Introduction: Pet ownership has benefits for human and animal well-being. However, Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) in the United States (U.S.) face systemic and institutional barriers to acquiring pets. Current literature on pet acquisition largely overlooks BIPOC families' experiences. This study aimed to explore BIPOC families' experiences, challenges, and priorities regarding pet acquisition in four U.S. cities (Atlanta, Miami, and Minneapolis, Philadelphia).

Methods: Focus groups were conducted with 26 pet owners who identify as Black/African American or Hispanic/Latino. Participants were asked about their perceptions of and experiences with various pet acquisition sources (animal shelters and rescues, professional or licensed breeders, and family members, friends, or neighbors) and suggestions to improve the pet acquisition process. The data were analyzed inductively through rapid qualitative analysis.

Results: Participants reported varied experiences across pet acquisition sources. Barriers to shelter and rescue adoption included experiences of judgment, lengthy or intrusive screening processes, and a lack of cultural responsiveness. Some participants described experiences of discrimination from shelters and rescues, particularly related to race and income. Many relied on friends, family, and neighbors to acquire pets due to convenience, trust, and affordability.

Conclusion: The Black/African American and Hispanic/Latino pet owners in this study encountered structural and interpersonal barriers to pet acquisition that influence their source of pet acquisition. The participants' experiences suggest that managing bias and removing barriers to pet acquisition may expand access to the human-animal bond and decrease animal shelter overpopulation and euthanasia.

Keywords: adoption barriers; racial equity; pet ownership; human-animal bond

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Supplementary material

Supplementary material for this article can be accessed here.

In the United States (U.S.), the percentage of households that own dogs and cats has increased steadily since the 1990s.¹ In 2025, an estimated 51% of households include dogs, while 39% include cats.¹ While 4.2 million dogs and cats were adopted from animal shelters and rescues in the U.S. in 2025,² previous research suggests that Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) families experience barriers to obtaining pets from this source.^{3–5} Common practices in animal shelter and rescue organizations, like lengthy applications or background checks during the adoption process, result in disproportionate rates of pet adoption denial for BIPOC families.⁵ These adoption policies are often described as

'judgment-laden and reflect[ing] biased attitudes about who is deserving of pet ownership.'⁶ These processes can negatively impact animal welfare by increasing animals' length of stay, undermining human well-being by exposing BIPOC families to experiences of discrimination, and fostering distrust between BIPOC community members and animal shelter and rescue organizations.^{5,7,8}

Previous research has critically underrepresented BIPOC pet owners and their experiences with acquiring pets from shelter and rescue organizations. Furthermore, animal shelter and rescue adoptions represent only one potential avenue for pet acquisition. Therefore, a more comprehensive understanding of the pet acquisition

market for BIPOC families is needed.^{9–11} To address this gap, the current study explored Black/African American and Hispanic/Latino pet owners' experiences acquiring pets across three pet acquisition source categories: shelter and rescue organizations, professional or licensed breeders, and informal sources such as family members, friends, or neighbors. Specifically, this study aimed to identify the needs and priorities related to pet acquisition among BIPOC pet owners in four major U.S. cities (Atlanta, GA; Miami, FL; Minneapolis, MN; Philadelphia, PA) and identify equitable, accessible, and community-led solutions that improve access to pet ownership for all.

Methods

The approach

This qualitative study used an inductive, rapid qualitative analysis (RQA) approach to explore the lived experiences of BIPOC pet owners in four U.S. cities. The four focus cities (Atlanta, GA; Miami, FL; Minneapolis, MN; and Philadelphia, PA) were selected based on locations where Companions and Animals for Reform and Equity (CARE) provides services and is actively engaging in programming and policy work to increase access to pet ownership and other pet support services.

Reflexivity statement

The research team recognizes that their intersecting identities have the potential to influence the research design, interactions with participants, and the interpretation of the findings.¹² The lived experiences of the research team had some similarities and differences to the participant sample. The majority of the research teams are BIPOC individuals, and all authors are pet owners. All authors' academic experience includes at least some post-graduate education in the fields of animal welfare, public policy, psychological sciences, social work, and sociology. Authors' experiences with pet acquisition have included animal shelters or rescues, family members, and professional or licensed breeders. None of the authors have experienced discrimination or judgment during pet acquisition, and they recognize that their proximity to the animal welfare field benefited them when searching for a pet. Several authors have experienced discrimination or judgment in other areas of their lives, which informs their commitment to research on this topic. The research team acknowledged their positionalities through continuous and collaborative reflexive practices throughout the research process, including the following: reflection on the power dynamics informing the rapport between researcher and participant and how that might inform how much a participant decides to share about their experience; modifying or refining interpretations of the data with consideration of the cultural, historical, structural,

and other social context; and member checking of the findings with the participants.¹²

Ethical review

As a team of nonprofit organizations rather than academic institutions with access to an Institutional Review Board, formal institutional ethics and oversight were not sought for this study. An ad hoc review committee composed of community-based organization leadership and research professionals reviewed the research protocols for human subject protections. The study was designed to ensure that data collection and analysis procedures met the criteria for exemption, including minimal risks to study participants, confidentiality of participants' identity, and no use of deception. All members of the research team completed ethics training for human subject research through a university institutional ethics board. To maintain participant confidentiality, the identifying information used to schedule participants and send gift card incentives was stored separately from focus group transcripts. Participants received a written copy of the consent form, which outlined confidentiality procedures, risks and benefits, and provided resources for additional support, prior to participating in the focus group. All research materials, including participant contact information for scheduling and incentives, signed consent forms, focus group transcripts, and audio files were stored in a password-protected data storage system (Google Drive) hosted by CARE.

Recruitment and sampling

BIPOC pet owners were recruited through social media, word-of-mouth, and community-based nonprofit organizations. Participants were eligible for the study if they were at least 18 years old, self-identified as BIPOC (verified using self-reported race/ethnicity), resided in or near one of the four focus communities (verified using self-reported zip code), and either currently have a pet or previously had a pet (dog or cat). In a pre-screening survey, participants provided their contact information and availability and selected their preference for in-person or virtual focus groups. There were 422 individuals who completed the screening form, but 376 participants (89% of all screening forms) were removed due to ineligibility (particularly IP addresses outside of the focus cities), incomplete screening forms (no contact information provided), or duplicate submissions. Of the 46 eligible participants (11% of all screening forms), 20 (43% of the eligible) did not respond to scheduling attempts or did not attend their scheduled focus group. Therefore, our final sample size was 26 participants.

Data collection

In-person and virtual (via Zoom) semi-structured focus groups were conducted between September 2024 and January 2025. Four focus groups were conducted

in-person, and six were conducted virtually. The mean number of participants per focus group was 3 (range = 1 – 4 participants), and the focus group duration was an average of 81 min (range = 56 – 108 min). The focus group questions were designed in alignment with the RQA approach to include focused, yet open-ended questions, to address the research aims and identify practical implications and solutions.¹³ The focus groups were facilitated by three research team members. At the beginning of the focus group, the facilitator provided a brief overview of the purpose of the study and confirmed the participant's written consent. The researchers asked participants 12 open-ended questions that fell under five broad categories: factors informing the selection of pet acquisition source, experiences with acquiring pets from animal shelters and rescue organizations and other sources (e.g. professional or licensed breeder, friend, family, or neighbor), attitudes toward pet ownership as a fundamental right, and suggestions for how to improve the process of acquiring a new pet. The full focus group instrument is available in the Supplementary materials.

Following participation, in-person participants received \$150, and online participants received \$50 through Giftogram electronic gift card incentives. Participant compensation was determined using the National Health Council's Patient Engagement Fair Market Value Calculator, which factors in the type and length of the research procedure, expertise required to perform the activity, and travel time.

Data processing

Recordings of the in-person and virtual focus groups were transcribed using Otter.ai and Zoom and then manually de-identified and verified.

Data analysis

The data were analyzed inductively using an RQA approach. Inductive analysis, which involves developing themes directly from the participants' responses rather than imposing a preexisting theory or framework, was selected due to the lack of representation of BIPOC families in previous research on pet ownership and the desire to preserve the nuance of the participants' lived experiences.¹⁴ The RQA approach, which is less time-intensive than traditional qualitative methods and is often used to translate data efficiently into actionable results,^{13,15,16} was selected for this study to allow the findings to inform time-sensitive discussions with animal shelters, community-based organizations, and funders on adoption discrimination and pet acquisition practices. In alignment with the RQA approach, an analysis matrix was created in Microsoft Excel to allow the research team to collaboratively and systematically summarize the data. The matrix included rows for each focus group question, and

columns for generating a summary, participant quotes, and themes for the responses from each participant. The column for participant quotes was particularly important to allow for continuous comparison and validation when engaging in interpretations later in the analysis process.¹³

Five members of the research team (SMH, LHL, CM, JF, and VFC) inductively coded the data in pairs. In the first round, the primary coder read through the transcripts and summarized the participants' major points within each topic. The primary coder also noted areas of agreement and disagreement between focus group participants. The primary coder then identified exemplary participant quotes for each topic. In the next round, a secondary coder reviewed the transcript and summary from the primary coder and reviewed the summaries and quotes to ensure an accurate representation of the participants' data. The second coder also added 'themes', which were overarching concepts that described the responses to each topic for the participants in that focus group.

A list of all the themes across the focus groups was generated following the two rounds of inductive coding. All five coders reviewed the list of themes from the focus groups and engaged in iterative rounds of discussion of the themes until they were able to achieve a consolidated and representative list of themes across all focus groups. In alignment with the RQA approach, the coders utilized the data analysis matrix to systematically review and compare the participant responses from each focus group question, and then the data analysis team prioritized themes that were actionable for the programming and policy context and reflective of participant lived experiences. Disagreements or interpretive differences were resolved by engaging in reflexivity and deferring to the original transcripts. The final list of themes was then used to create a summary, which included a list of themes and exemplary quotes for each theme. The research team used the relative magnitude terms of 'many' to indicate the themes with half or more of the sample and 'some' or 'several' to indicate themes with more than one participant, but less than half of the sample. As a final step to ensure the accuracy and validity of the findings, the summary was provided to participants for member checking. The following results are organized based on the four broad categories of questions, with subtopics describing the themes that emerged from the responses. Exemplary quotes are presented to illustrate the themes.

Results

A total of 26 current or previous pet owners who identify as Black/African American or Hispanic/Latino participated in the focus groups. Table 1 outlines the focus group participant demographics.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of focus group participants (*n* = 26).

Variable	<i>n</i>	%
City		
Atlanta, GA	11	42
Philadelphia, PA	10	38
Miami, FL	4	15
Minneapolis, MN	1	4
Gender		
Woman	14	54
Did not answer	12	46
Race/Ethnicity		
Black/African American	20	77
Hispanic/Latino	6	23
Age		
18–24	4	15
25–34	14	54
35–44	4	15
45–54	1	4
55–64	2	8
Did not answer	1	4
Housing status		
Temporary housing (e.g. friends/family, hotel/motel)	5	19
Renter (and my unit allows pets)	15	58
Renter (and my unit does not allow pets)	1	4
Homeowner	4	15
Other	1	4
Education		
High school diploma	4	15
Some college/associate's degree	4	15
Professional degree	2	8
Bachelor's degree	10	38
Graduate degree	4	15
Did not answer	2	8
Pet ownership status		
I currently have pet(s)	24	92
I have had pet(s) in the past	2	8
Source for acquiring pet(s)*		
Shelter/rescue organization	16	62
Family member, friend, or neighbor	15	58
Breeder	8	31
Pet store	4	15

*Participants could select more than one response; the percentage may exceed 100%.

Factors informing the selection of acquisition source

The selection of the acquisition sources was primarily influenced by participants' prior personal experiences (both positive and negative), the experiences of their friends or family members, and their preexisting beliefs or perceptions about the acquisition sources. For example, in reference to acquiring multiple dogs and cats from a

friend, one participant was not interested in considering other sources and said, 'I'm just good with the reliable source I have' [MIA2]. Another participant preferred shelters because of previous experience volunteering with local organizations [ATL2]. On the other hand, one participant described that 'backyard breeding' was normalized in their community [ATL1]. Similarly, another participant said, 'In my community, I hear a lot more about breeders than shelters' [MIA4]. Previous negative experiences with the pet or the acquisition source decreased participants' trust when considering a place to get future pets. For example, one participant who adopted a dog from a shelter eventually returned the dog after multiple bite incidents and said they would not choose a shelter for future pet acquisition, 'I guess I thought I could trust the shelter, but I don't really trust the shelter. This is my first experience with a dog. And it just wasn't the best experience' [ATL9]. The focus group participants discussed several factors that pet owners considered when searching for a new pet, which are described later.

Location and accessibility

Participants described selecting a source based on proximity to their community and perceived accessibility. One participant who acquired three dogs and a cat from a friend said, 'I considered the distance ... because I didn't want to leave my house' [MIA2]. Another participant preferred to adopt from local animal shelters and rescues but then traveled out of state to look for a dog from a breed-specific rescue due to lack of availability of their preferred breed nearby.

Accessibility was also described in relation to the ease of the acquisition process. For example, one participant reported going to a pet store rather than a shelter because they wanted to take the animal home that same day. Others described the simplicity of getting a pet from a family member or friend because there is little to no application process. Some participants were deterred from shelters and rescues based on the belief that the adoption process would be too difficult or lead them to being rejected. One participant said, '[the breeder] was better than going to the rescue or a shelter, and having to fill all this paperwork, and then judging you' [MIN2].

Cost

Participants often considered cost when acquiring a pet and sometimes used cost to choose between various acquisition sources. Some participants believed that the cost of adoption from animal shelters or rescues was high. One participant recalled that their first family dog from a shelter cost \$75, while their more recent dog from a rescue cost almost \$900. Another participant questioned the cost of animals adopted from shelters, given the number of animals at the organization, 'It's 100 of them at the shelter

and they should be reasonably priced' [ATL2]. On the other hand, others voiced a preference for shelters or rescues due to the cost of breeders. A few participants who acquired through a breeder were unhappy with the cost of the pet. One participant who tried going to a breeder said, 'I tried to get a bred dog [...] and they wanted \$5,000' [PHI1]. Another felt that the cost of obtaining a pet from a breeder was not worth the level of care provided, 'you would think the amount that you pay for these pets, they will at least have their shots, their paperwork' [PHI6]. Some participants shared that they preferred to acquire pets from friends, family, or through strangers online (e.g. Facebook, Craigslist) due to low or no cost.

In other cases, participants specifically stated that cost was not a consideration when looking for a pet. For example, one participant said, 'I didn't consider the cost, because at that point I could literally give up anything just to have that companion' [MIA2]. Another participant suggested that the cost of animals from shelters or breeders can offset initial care costs (e.g. spay/neuter, microchip, and vaccinations) [ATL6].

Pet characteristics

Some participants prioritized certain breeds, physical traits, or behavioral characteristics during their search for a pet, which sometimes limited their options. One participant who went to breed-specific rescues said, 'I was looking for a specific breed, Golden doodle [...] I wanted some type of doodle breed' [PHI5]. Another participant with a strong breed preference believed they could not get the desired breed from a shelter or rescue. Other participants voiced a preference for traits like color, size, age, or specific behavioral characteristics (e.g. protective, friendly) that influenced their choice of acquisition source. Some participants recognized that preferences for specific traits made the acquisition process more difficult. One participant stated, 'Everybody else wants a puppy, so it's in high demand, whereas the senior dogs weren't in demand' [PHI5]. A few participants with preference for behavioral characteristics believed that animals adopted from shelters may have more unknown histories or behavioral concerns, 'I hear a lot of stories about the Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (SPCA). When you get animals from them, sometimes they're crazy, or they're not doing normal stuff. And most of the time it's because they come in as stray cats and dogs' [PHI7]. Others believed that animals acquired from shelters and rescues were better behaved, 'I've seen people that have rescues or shelter animals that have the opposite effect. They're so much nicer' [MIA4].

Care and welfare of the pet

Participants emphasized the care and welfare of the pet when selecting an acquisition source, and some further

suggested that the animal's care and well-being were more important than the source of acquisition itself. Some participants who acquired from breeders mentioned inquiring about vaccinations, early-life healthcare, or socialization. Participants also discussed aspects of the pet acquisition process that increased trust about the care of the animal. One participant said, 'if I was to ever get a dog in the future, I will make sure I have the American Kennel Club papers and I could see the mom and the dad' [PHI7].

Some participants were concerned about the welfare of animals in shelters and rescues, which contributed to their decision to pursue alternative sources. One participant said, 'The shelters in Philadelphia, I wouldn't say they're always the best from what I know. From what I hear there's a lot of overflow [of] animals over there. They can't really take care of them' [PHI5]. One participant, who got their cat from a neighbor, also suggested that some people who go to breeders or pet stores may prefer being the first and only owner of the animal, 'I don't want [my pet] to have a past experience, past owners. I wanna start from scratch' [MIA4].

Rescue mentality

Some participants described an interest in adopting from shelters or rescues because of motivations to improve the welfare of animals, address overpopulation, or help animals find a home. One participant said, 'knowing that a lot of dogs are there and that they need a home definitely played a big part in me choosing to [go to a shelter] instead of going to like a breeder' [ATL3], while another participant shared, 'I did originally look at the breeding option just so I can get exactly what I wanted, but it's just my heart was just like, I want to save an animal' [PHI1]. Others described the desire to save animals through self-rehoming from family members, friends, or neighbors. One participant mentioned acquiring pets from family members and strangers in order to intervene when there were animal welfare concerns.

Experiences with animal shelters and rescues

Positive experiences

Many participants reported positive experiences during their experience of getting a pet from a shelter, including that their adoption process was quick and simple, and that the staff were respectful. Although one participant felt the adoption process was lengthy ('it was like trying to find a job' [PHI1]), they noted being treated with respect during the process. They also had positive experiences with post-adoption support from the shelter. 'My dog ended up having kennel cough when I got her ... She was, like, really sick, and I just brought her back there. They gave me free vitamins, they gave me free nutrition to put in her food, and then recommended a vet to me' [PHI1]. Some participants

described differences in experiences depending on the shelter or rescue organization. For example, one participant shared, ‘there’s a difference between the county-run shelters and the ones that are run by the city versus, like, the private ones, they can pretty much make up their own adoption process’ [ATL2]. The participant had a positive experience with a private (non-profit) organization and described it as fast and simple [ATL2]. Another participant said, ‘a lot of them do ask for a lot of information, and a lot of them are just more or less lenient’ [MIN2]. Interestingly, some participants valued the long adoption process. For example, one participant felt that the adoption process was not as long as people may think and recognized the importance of steps like meet and greets for finding an appropriate pet. They said, ‘I think it’s very necessary, because you could end up with a dog that you really don’t vibe [with], and that’ll make you mistreat the dog’ [ATL7].

One participant described how multiple visits to an animal shelter contributed to a more positive adoption process: ‘After they saw my face for like, a month and a half, you know, and they saw my mom, and we were really consistent in trying to find the right animal, then that’s when the helpfulness came along ... I had to earn their trust’ [ATL5]. Similarly, another participant in the focus group agreed that their familiarity and relationship with the shelter staff made their adoption experience very positive. Overall, while some participants reported being treated with respect during the adoption process, several other participants reported barriers and feelings of judgment and discrimination during their experiences with shelter and rescue organizations.

Barriers and experiences of judgment

Challenges with adopting from a shelter or rescue were often related to strict adoption criteria, which were considered time-consuming and onerous. One participant who adopted from a rescue organization described the adoption process as ‘intrusive’ [ATL3] and mentioned that certain aspects, like sending photos of themselves and their apartment, made them feel uncomfortable. They said, ‘I had to send a picture of myself by my college apartment so they could see, like, if it was fenced in’ [ATL3]. The participant also mentioned sharing their social media with adoption counselors and answering a series of questions about their lifestyle, ‘[the adoption counselors] were like, “okay, so if you get this dog, what [will] the day with this dog look like? Um, what time are you waking up with this dog? What are you feeding this dog? How many times are you taking the dog out to potty?” And [I] was like, “this wasn’t my first dog”’ [ATL3]. Another participant described a similar experience with the questionnaires associated with adoption, ‘they were [getting] way too personal with me. Yeah. My income, what I earn, and all of that ... I’m gonna take care of this dog. So why do you need to know about my income?’ [MIA2].

One participant felt that the requirements for adoption from shelters were contradictory to public messaging about overpopulation in animal shelters. They shared, ‘It is also still kind of mind boggling, like y’all have all these dogs in the shelters, but you’re putting people through background checks ... I would think your goal would be to get them out of the shelter as quickly as possible but a lot of times it’s not like that’ [ATL2].

While one participant who adopted from a shelter didn’t feel that their own adoption process was difficult, they recognized that the requirements and personal information required may limit the ability to adopt animals for other families, noting ‘one thing I can say that I have noticed with other rescues that they do require a lot, like that fenced in backyards, that’s one big thing. They asked about space. They asked about the age of children that you have in a household, how many kids you have. Breed restrictions in the area, like all that kind of stuff they do ask, and a lot of times, I do think they miss some really good owners’ [ATL6].

Other participants experienced delayed or no communication when they attempted to adopt from a shelter or rescue. One participant mentioned that they had difficulties communicating with the shelter that they tried to adopt from, which made them feel like they were being judged by the organization. This participant shared, ‘It just seemed like there was a lack of communication, basically like, “Oh, we’ll get back to you or like this dog is on hold,” or “somebody’s looking to adopt this dog. So just call back.” It was a lot of, like, stalling and stuff like that ... We wanted a dog right away, so I guess we were trying to rush it. And maybe we weren’t being as patient, but I just felt like it shouldn’t have taken that long’ [MIN2]. This participant estimated that the process took 2 months from initial contact with the shelter, and they ended up finding a dog from somebody on Craigslist as an alternative. Regarding the breeder they acquired their animal from, they said, ‘they were willing to just, you know, give us the dog ... We [didn’t] have to deal with any hassle or anything like that’ [MIN2]. Another participant, who experienced a lack of communication from the shelter, speculated that shelters may make judgments based on a potential adopter’s name, income, and home address. The participant explained ‘They didn’t see who we were, but they would see names on paper and maybe see what our income was and where we lived, and that we didn’t own our home. We rented so maybe that had something to do with why they weren’t trying to process paperwork right away for us’ [MIN2].

Many participants were not explicitly denied from shelters or rescues but sometimes felt that they were discouraged from adopting their preferred animals. One participant was discouraged from adopting a dog with a history of abuse, which they felt was due to their age at the

time: 'I do think that my identity played a big role in why I wasn't chosen, instead of, like, it just being based off of application or whether or not they thought I would be a good home for the dog' [ATL3]. Another participant who ended up adopting a puppy from a breed-specific rescue described their experience with one organization that discouraged them from adopting a puppy, stating 'One organization, they told me, based on my needs ... I should be looking for a senior dog, because I told them I want a dog that was house trained and neutered. I wanted this baby. I wanted a brand new dog' [PHI5].

Several participants felt judged by staff at the shelter during the process of adoption. One participant described an experience where they went to a shelter with their mom to adopt a dog. Upon arriving, they were surprised by the staff's attitudes toward potential adopters: 'One of the first things they [said] was, like, "it's very hard to get a dog from us. We don't just adopt to anybody. We'd rather keep them here forever"' [ATL2]. Then, the participant described how the staff were standoffish before learning that the dog was for their mom, sharing 'I went with my mom to get [dog's name]. The people at the shelter, I think they thought [dog's name] was for me. And they would be very standoffish towards me. I walked in and it wasn't friendly. It wasn't helpful. And then when I say, "Oh, this is my mom's dog. She's a doctor." Oh, [they had a] completely different attitude' [ATL2]. This participant's feelings about adoption were also informed by their experiences as a shelter staff member themselves, where they described how the organization felt that ideal adopters came from a more wealthy county. Another participant who had experience with animal shelter adoption felt that lower-income community members were discriminated against during the adoption process, 'because oftentimes, unfortunately, we don't fit the narrative of what they think the ideal candidate looks like' [ATL3].

Experiences with alternate acquisition sources

Family members, friends, or neighbors

Several participants felt that acquiring pets from informal sources like friends or family was simple because there was already a personal connection with the source. Often, circumstances leading to rehoming through friends or family were out of a desire to support somebody who could no longer care for their pet. One participant said, 'Everyone knew me personally. They knew my living situation. So they knew that I was okay to take care of [pets]' [PHI5]. Participants appreciated the simplicity and low cost of acquiring pets from friends and family. One participant, who got a cat from a family member's litter, said, 'It's more simple, and I feel like it is a cheaper option for people who might love animals' [MIA1]. One participant mentioned judgment from others online when

commenting on posts of pet owners who are trying to self-rehome their pets through Facebook, 'You got somebody posting, "Oh, make sure you know where [the dog is] going, there's dog fighting here." You deal with a lot of that' [ATL6].

Breeders

Several participants found breeders through personal connections or already had friends, family, or neighbors who breed pets. One participant, who acquired their dog from a licensed kennel, felt that they were able to get their dog due to personal connections with the breeder [ATL7]. Similarly, another participant looked at a shelter, but due to breed preferences, they got their dog from a friend who was also a breeder, 'When I finally got the opportunity to get the kind of dog that I knew that I wanted. Then I decided to jump on it, especially for the price of what type of dog it was' [ATL10].

Generally, participants felt that the process of getting a pet through a breeder was quick and convenient. When discussing the application process with breeders, participants felt that they were treated with respect; however, some felt that the breeder they acquired a pet from was not forthcoming about the pet's background. After asking about the timing of future vaccinations, one participant said that the breeder was unsure ('he really couldn't tell me' [PHI7]).

Suggestions to improve pet acquisition and support

Inclusivity and accessibility of adoption process

Some participants suggested that the adoption process in shelters and rescues needs to be more inclusive of BIPOC families. One participant said, 'I want to feel like I'm being evaluated as an individual and not based off of like, what you think meets the perfect candidate in a way that is heavily based on characteristics and not whether or not I will be a good fit for this dog. I think that that would have made me feel a lot more comfortable in my process. And that would also encourage more people who are a bit afraid of engaging with the process to go ahead and do it, because they are afraid of that shame that can come with it ... Which is very weird to say that there's shame involved in trying to adopt an animal' [ATL3]. Similarly, another participant suggested that shelters are not reaching certain communities through their outreach approaches. This participant shared: 'I feel like a lot of times the [shelters'] outreach is circular. They're preaching to the choir. They go to the people who have credit cards with no limits specifically for their dogs ... and they talk to them about 'adopt, adopt, adopt', but they don't come to our neighborhood with that same type of thing, you know?' [ATL2].

One participant suggested that shelter and rescue organizations should be more transparent about the details of the adoption process, including how long it takes and what information is needed from potential adopters. They said, ‘I’m sure that going through the process gives you that information, but I think maybe some people might stray away from adoption [simply because] of not knowing’ [PHI10]. One individual recommended changing adoption processes to be more like ‘home buyer workshops’ [PHI5], which include more one-on-one support and focus on the individual’s needs and lifestyles. Participants also expressed the need for more information-sharing about a potential pet’s background across all acquisition sources. One participant shared that they acquired one dog from a shelter and another from Facebook and felt they received more information about the dog from Facebook than from the shelter [ATL11]. Another participant suggested that increasing the accessibility and inclusivity of adoption processes may reduce concerns with overpopulation in shelters, stating ‘the more people that we help get dogs and cats the less there will be in shelters’ [MIN2].

Pet retention support

Information and resources. One participant suggested that shelters and rescues should provide access to ongoing information and support after pet adoption, ‘if someone adopts a baby ... I would want them to understand that you can come back here for help or questions if you need those resources, like, we can point you in the right direction’ [ATL6]. Others who acquired pets from breeders also wanted additional information about resources, especially low-cost veterinary care and behavioral support. Multiple participants suggested that more resources or information about caring for a new pet should be available. They suggested that this information should be located in a single centralized online location, such as on an animal shelter’s website.

Participants typically sought pet care advice from family, friends, or online. One participant described a group text chat with their family members about the cats in their families, ‘we made a cat chat for everyone in the family that has a cat. It [just became] a kind of informational chat about our cats and what they like and what they don’t like, which also helps when we babysit each other’s cats’ [MIA4]. Others also used sources like Google and social media for information on pet care and behavior. One individual described their community Facebook group, where they received pet supplies from a neighbor, ‘People [give] away all kinds of litter boxes, cat food, you know, from animals passing away or whatever, just leftover stuff. So I definitely utilize my neighborhood as far as resources to help take care of my animals’ [ATL5].

Many participants used lower-cost or free community-based resources, including veterinary clinics and

resource centers. One participant described the One Health (i.e. human and animal health) clinic in their area, stating ‘they provide human care and pet care. But in order for you to get the free animal care, you have to get yourself checked out first. A lot of people do put themselves on a back burner to take care of their [pet] sometimes’ [ATL7]. Another participant described support from a community-based organization that provided individual care for community members and their pets, ‘I have a friend that works with an animal program called CARE, which is usually who I hit up anytime I have like, anything that’s related to [...] donating stuff or finding pets. And when I was in a living situation where I couldn’t bring my cats. He helped me get them temporarily housed’ [PHI5]. Participants also mentioned veterinary care support from animal shelters, such as vouchers that included discounts for veterinary visits. One participant who used a pet resource center had a positive experience as a client decided to volunteer at the organization, ‘they were huge on helping out with like where to go get low-cost veterinary care, and then also with food supplies, and anything we needed, like if we needed a kennel, things like that. And they were really good to us. I liked them so much that I became a volunteer there, too’ [MIN2].

While many participants considered formal behavioral training, only one participant reported that they attended a puppy class for the dog they acquired from a breeder. They mentioned the inaccessibility of behavioral support due to cost, ‘it was cool to get to a point in my life where I could afford something like that. But at that time we were the only Black people [in the puppy training class]’ [ATL1].

Other suggestions for information or resources needed to support pet ownership included pet starter kits with basic supplies (e.g. leash, collar, and bowls), a help line, recommendations for veterinarians and behaviorists, financial support for pet care, and spaces that are pet friendly (e.g. dog parks).

Non-judgmental & inclusive support. One participant emphasized that post-acquisition support should be free of judgment or stigma, sharing ‘if we have questions, please be open and not judge us. Because once we get the dog you expect us to already know all these things. Like, don’t judge us if we end up calling or asking a question about what should I do? You know, we’re just trying to make sure, like we’re doing the right thing for our pets. We want to take care of them and give them a good life and stuff like that’ [MIN2]. One participant who had experience working in various animal health and welfare roles recognized the lack of diversity in the field as a source of the judgment they have experienced, ‘vet med is the least diverse profession in America, and that impacts everything’ [ATL2]. They suggested supporting more BIPOC individuals with pet-related employment opportunities, training, and certifications (e.g. Fear Free).

Participants discussed stress associated with being perceived as a responsible pet owner. Some participants described situations where they felt that they needed to change their pet caregiving behaviors to meet societal expectations about responsible pet ownership. 'It feels like [non-BIPOC pet owners] are just allowed to have the dogs or have their pets and fully enjoy their pets, without having to worry about how they're being perceived for their pets, or if they're being perceived as responsible pet owners, if they're being looked down on because of what they feed their dog, or how they're walking their dog, or, like, how they discipline their dog. And I think that's something that's an extra burden for me personally, and I've also noticed other people in the community have shared similar sentiments' [ATL3].

Financial support. Participants described some challenges associated with pet ownership. The most commonly mentioned concern was financial stress related to both general care and emergency care for their pets. Participants often noted the lack of accessibility and affordability in pet-support services and indicated a need for more access to pet ownership information (e.g. online) and free or low-cost services and resources (e.g. veterinary care and pet-sitting). Multiple participants specifically described the need for lower cost behavioral services, particularly for those who may be concerned about adopting an animal from a shelter that may have previous behavioral concerns. One participant said, 'I feel like behavioral training should be kind of sponsored in a way, like scholarships. I feel like there should be some type of foundation or resource for getting your dog trained if they don't want you to bring the dog back to the shelter. Because training is very expensive, and that was just something that wasn't in the budget for us' [ATL9]. One participant who attended a puppy training class said, 'I just wish that that was more accessible for Black people, more normalized ... I remember when I said I was getting [my dog] trained. It was like a "bougie" thing that I was doing' [ATL1]. One participant also suggested a monetary incentive ('even if it's like a \$5 gift card' [PHI7]) that may increase engagement with post-adoption classes.

Pet ownership as a right

Most participants agreed that the human-animal bond is important and beneficial and believed that pet ownership is a right regardless of background. One participant said, 'I think pets provide a lot for mental health and things like that. So I don't think anyone should be denied that option' [PHI5]. Another participant said, 'It's becoming a privilege to own a pet, and I think that's a bad thing' [ATL2]. One participant felt that income and resources did not equate to love and care for a pet. They said, 'there's no right or wrong. I think that each person is different, and we need to get out of that stigma where certain people

shouldn't have dogs and things like that, because ... the people I encounter every day, you know I see something different' [MIN2].

Participants also recognized the resources required to care for an animal. One participant said, 'I feel like everyone should have a chance at having a pet ... but you should just make sure you can maintain [care] before you just say yes' [MIA3]. Another participant described the conflict between the resources needed to care for a pet and their belief that everyone deserves to have a pet. They said, 'I feel torn in this because I would probably be upset if somebody was telling me that I couldn't have a pet based on where I am financially or because of my race. Nobody wants to be ostracized like that' [ATL7].

Discussion

This paper aimed to describe the experiences of pet acquisition for BIPOC pet owners across four major U.S. cities. It is important to underscore that the experiences of the diverse range of individual ethnicities and cultures captured within Black/African American and Latino/Hispanic are not monolithic. There are also unique community-specific contexts that inform the state of pet ownership and access to pet-support services in each of these cities. Nonetheless, this study presents a high-level assessment of how Black/African American and Hispanic/Latino families navigate the pet acquisition system in Atlanta, Miami, Minneapolis, and Philadelphia.

Participants had varying preferences for and experiences with the three pet acquisition source types. However, some participants described experiences of judgment and discrimination when attempting to acquire a pet from animal shelter and rescue organizations, which impacted pet adoption outcomes and trust in shelter and rescue organizations as a future source for pets. Participants described potential opportunities to improve the pet acquisition experience, including reduction of barriers to adoption, outreach to BIPOC families, and increasing accessibility of post-adoption support.

Experiences with pet acquisition sources

Aligned with previous studies, many participants in the present study were motivated to adopt an animal from shelters or rescues due to ethical beliefs and a desire to reduce shelter overpopulation^{17,18}; however, some participants felt discouraged from engaging with animal shelters or rescues based on perceived or actual barriers in the adoption process. Previous research has also reported avoidance of animal shelters and rescues due to onerous or invasive procedures.⁷ Arluke and Rautkis found that individuals with lower socioeconomic status might be more likely to consider adopting a pet through an animal shelter or rescue organization but rarely end up getting their

pet from this source due to concerns of rejection, cost, and intrusive application processes.¹⁹ Blackwell et al. found that BIPOC pet owners were less likely to adopt from a shelter and rescue in Charlotte, NC, Dallas, TX, Detroit, MI, and Los Angeles, CA.⁶ In addition, they found that organizations in these areas adopted a higher proportion of dogs into communities with higher proportions of white residents than the communities where the dogs originated from.⁶ Ly et al.²⁰ found similar patterns in Canada, where shelter animals were adopted into less marginalized communities compared to those from which they were surrendered. Similarly, the focus group participants in the present study who did not adopt from animal shelters shared their perception of the shelter and rescue adoption process as time-consuming, costly, or judgmental. Several of these participants also expressed a lack of trust in shelter and rescue organizations, particularly regarding whether these organizations avoid disclosing information about a pet's background in order to be adopted more quickly. A previous study explored the impacts of off-site adoption events, where adoptable animals are brought to public spaces, as a strategy to increase equitable adoption outcomes for shelters and found that large shelters were more likely to have fewer logistical barriers to adoption at an off-site event compared to smaller shelters.⁵ Together, this body of research documenting disparate experiences for BIPOC families at both the individual and community level indicates the presence of larger systemic barriers to pet adoption that need to be addressed. Each of these families who were denied, experienced barriers and delays, or have not applied to adopt a pet from a shelter or rescue represents a crucial potential asset to address the current shelter and rescue pet overpopulation issues. Future research should evaluate how reducing adoption barriers through strategies such as off-site adoption events or eliminating strict adoption criteria impacts overall shelter overpopulation and rates of adoption by BIPOC families.

Many participants in this study described negative experiences of judgement and discrimination when attempting to adopt an animal from a shelter or rescue. For example, some participants were discouraged by shelter staff from adopting particular animals based on their personal characteristics or lifestyle. It is an increasingly common practice for animal shelters to utilize a conversation-based adoption approach, where animal shelter employees ask open-ended questions rather than using lengthy applications with a strict pass-fail criteria.²¹ However, some participants perceived this guidance from shelter staff as a barrier to adopting a pet. Previous research suggests that there is no difference in animal care outcomes for pets adopted

through traditional versus conversation-based adoption practices⁸; however, no recent research to date has evaluated the perceptions of conversation-based approaches for families who are racially marginalized or experience other forms of social or structural vulnerability. Ly et al. found that 39% of surveyed U.S. shelter staff described using 'vibes' or 'gut-feeling' in their conversation-based approach to adoption.⁵ In the present study, some participants felt that reasons for hostility from shelter staff during the application process were based on their race or financial status. These findings highlight the need to examine how traditional and conversation-based adoption practices are implemented to ensure that they do not perpetuate systemic inequities and implicit biases in access to pet acquisition.

Many participants relied on personal networks to acquire animals, particularly when they had perceived barriers to animal shelter or rescue adoption processes. Previous studies have also found that acquiring and rehoming animals through friends and family is common.^{9,18} Across the U.S., several studies have found that lower-income communities or individuals were more likely to acquire their pet from a family, friend, or neighbor.^{11,19} The present study similarly suggests that Black/African American or Hispanic/Latino families may rely more heavily on informal community networks rather than formal institutions for pet acquisition, due to factors such as personal connection to the source, ease of acquisition process, and cost. The participants shared that these are often adult dogs and cats being re-homed within their community, rather than being surrendered to a shelter or rescue. Kremer and Neal suggested that animal shelters benefit from programs that support families that acquire animals through family and friends, as this may reduce intake to shelters.¹¹ As such, many of these individuals engaging in pet acquisition through friends and family are valuable assets for keeping pets out of the shelter and rescue system. Future research could explore the impacts of shelters and rescues offering support for individuals rehoming through their personal networks and self-rehoming's potential to reduce shelter intake and overall shelter population.

Participants also had varying experiences with professional or licensed breeders. Similar to previous studies, participants in the present study often considered breeders due to preferences for a specific breed.²² While previous studies have reported that higher-income individuals were more likely to acquire pets from breeders,^{11,17} participants in our study often acquired dogs through family or friends who breed dogs professionally, whereas other participants acquired pets through a licensed breeder. As such, perceptions of the breeder acquisition experience and cost varied. Future research may distinguish across types of

breeders for a more nuanced discussion about experiences with breeders.

Opportunities to improve the acquisition experience

BIPOC individuals remain underrepresented in animal welfare as veterinarians, staff, and volunteers,^{23–25} which may limit the efficacy of animal shelter and rescue efforts (including adoption).^{26,27} Importantly, our results suggest that perceptions of the adoption process and actual or perceived reasons for denial may play a role in building trust between animal shelter and rescue organizations and community members. Multiple participants cited frustration when they felt that barriers to the adoption process contradicted their perception of animal shelter overpopulation. Similar to our study, a previous ethnographic account of adoption in shelters and rescues found that potential adopters often identify strongly with the moral good of adoption.⁷ However, when that values-based identity of making a morally good choice to adopt a pet is denied by experiencing a rejected adoption application, community members may feel embarrassment or shame that may deter them from using animal shelter and rescue organizations in the future.⁷ One participant in the study who had a positive experience with pet adoption continued volunteering at the organization, suggesting that inclusive adoption experiences may also lead to higher engagement from BIPOC community members in other shelter programs.

Increased post-acquisition support that is explicitly inclusive of BIPOC families may reduce owner surrender rates and increase trust in shelter and rescue organizations as a future source for pet acquisition. Several participants discussed how increased access to basic pet care information and resources (e.g. low-cost veterinary care, behavior support, pet food, and kennels) would have improved their overall experience of acquiring a pet. Across all pet acquisition sources, participants described the need for more information and communication from the source, including information about the pet's needs and personality. Shelter and rescue organizations may benefit from filling this gap by providing the aforementioned pet-support information, particularly for pets acquired through other sources. In one study in South Carolina, Powell et al. found that returns due to mismatched expectations from the owner significantly lowered the odds of that owner returning for a future adoption.²⁸ The inverse may also be true, where organizations who provide clear and accessible information about caring for new pets may be considered as the source for future adoptions. Future research could explore how enhanced communication and information-sharing following pet acquisition impacts both increased access to pet ownership for BIPOC families and increased rates of selecting a shelter or rescue organization as the source for future pet acquisitions.

Pet ownership as a right

Participants' reflections on pet ownership as a right highlight tensions within the current pet acquisition system. Many participants believed that access to pet ownership should not be restricted based on race or income; however, at the same time, participants acknowledged responsibilities associated with pet ownership, such as veterinary costs and time. This tension is reflected within the animal welfare sector, where resource-based definitions of responsible pet ownership (i.e. home owner, middle to upper socioeconomic status) remain prevalent.²⁹ For example, PetSmart Charities reported that 63% of surveyed veterinarians believed that individuals should not own pets if they cannot afford their care at the current market rates.³⁰ Positioning socioeconomic status as a determinant of pet ownership reinforces inequities that limit access to pet ownership and the human–animal bond for many BIPOC families. As such, efforts should be focused toward expanding equitable access to resources and supports, in recognition of the significant role pets play in human well-being.

Limitations

There are a few limitations of this research to note. This study may be limited by the use of convenience sampling, which can bias the sample toward participants who were more interested or involved in animal welfare efforts in their community. Additionally, the present study aimed to describe the experiences of Black/African American or Hispanic/Latino families during the process of pet acquisition in Atlanta, Miami, Minneapolis, and Philadelphia and, therefore, should not be generalized to other communities or populations. Due to limited representation in two of the four cities (Minneapolis and Miami), additional research with a larger sample size of participants in these cities is needed. Furthermore, although all racially minoritized groups represented within the term 'BIPOC' were eligible for participation, the sample's representativeness could have been improved by including individuals from additional racial and ethnic groups within the broader 'BIPOC' category as well as individuals who speak languages other than English. Additionally, income data were not collected for participants. Finally, while previous research has highlighted barriers to obtaining pets for families who rent or are unhoused, housing status was not explicitly discussed by the participants in the present study as a factor informing their pet acquisition experience. Future research could explore the intersectionality of race, income, housing status, and other social vulnerabilities in access to pet ownership.

Conclusion

This study described the multifaceted experiences of Black/African American and Hispanic/Latino families seeking to acquire pets across four U.S. cities.

While many participants expressed strong motivations to adopt animals and a belief in pet ownership as a fundamental right, their experiences often reflected systemic barriers – particularly within the shelter and rescue system. Discriminatory practices and inaccessible processes at animal shelter and rescue organizations influenced some participants' decisions to rely on informal sources, such as friends, family, and neighbors, to acquire pets. To promote equitable access to pet ownership, participants suggested reducing barriers to pet adoption, eliminating discrimination in the adoption process, investing in accessible post-acquisition support, and diversifying the animal welfare workforce.

Author contributions

Conceptualization – SMH. Data curation – SMH. Formal analysis – LHL, SMH, JF, VFC, CM. Funding acquisition – SMH, CM. Investigation – SMH, CM. Methodology – SMH. Project administration – SMH. Resources – SMH. Supervision – SMH. Validation – SMH, LHL, JF, VFC. Writing – original draft – LHL, SMH. Writing – review & editing – VFC, JF, CM, DB.

Artificial intelligence use

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