

# THE **COST** OF ANIMAL RESCUE.

Tracking the physical, emotional and financial costs of rescue work on Animal Care Workers in Ireland



The Animal Advocacy Project (Ireland) is a CLG, company number 707552

The Animal Advocacy Project is a Charitable Incorporated Organisation registered in England and Wales charity number 1189605

 **INTRO.**

This survey was designed, distributed and analysed by members of TAAP Ireland and TAAP UK. The survey was born from concerns of TAAP Ireland members in late summer 2022 that rescues in Ireland were facing a crisis [1] due to an unprecedented number of animals being abandoned or surrendered post Covid. [2] The crisis appeared to be exacerbated by the fact that rescues were not receiving support and resources to enable them to help the number of animals requiring care. In particular we were concerned that the government was failing to provide the support that rescues required.

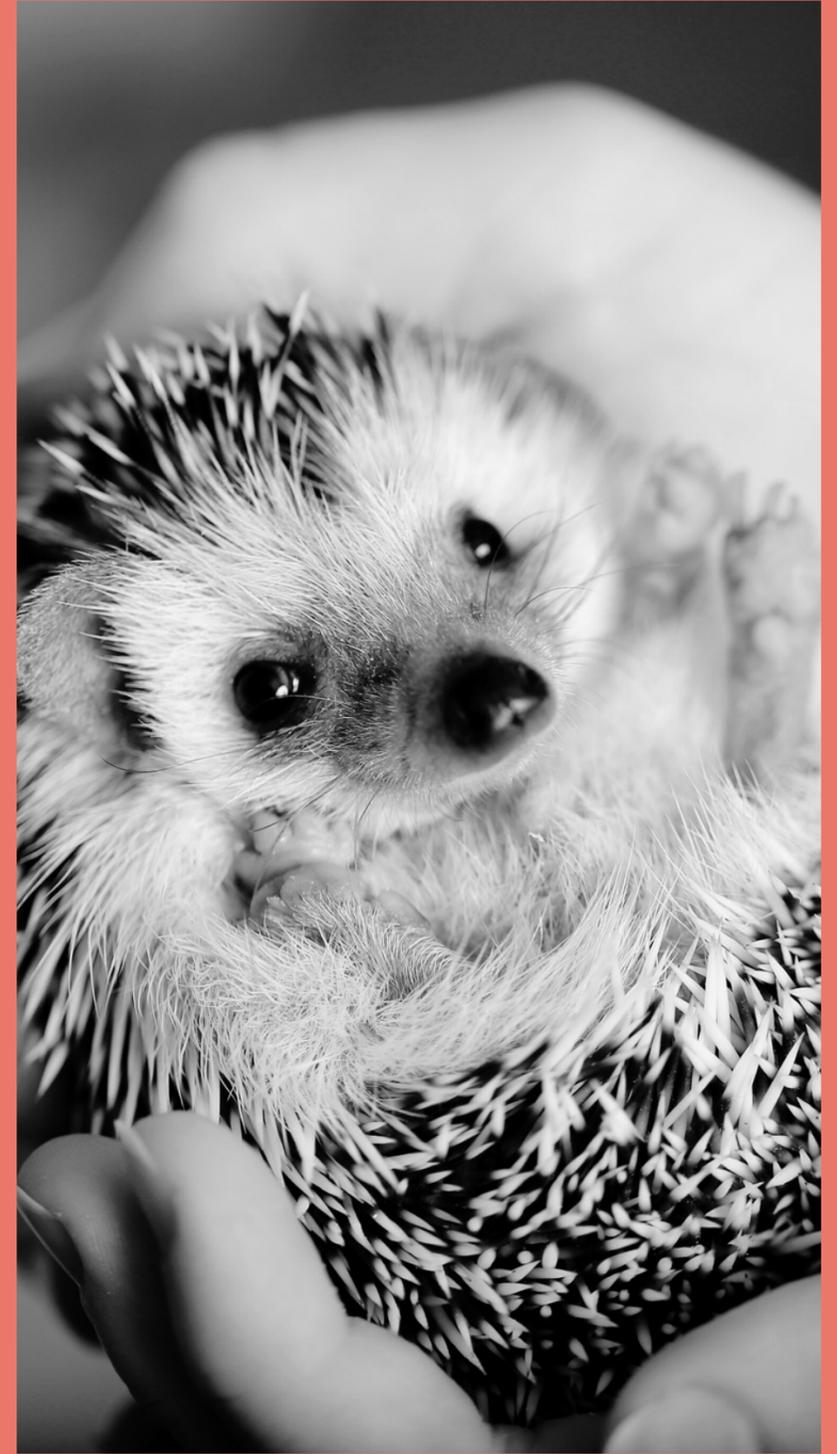
[1] Jennifer O'Connell, 'Aftermath of the Covid puppy boom: 'A tsunami of unwanted dogs'' The Irish Times (21 October 2022) <<https://www.irishtimes.com/life-style/2022/10/21/aftermath-of-the-covid-puppy-boom-a-tsunami-of-unwanted-dogs/>>; Olivia Kelly, 'Surrendered Dublin dogs are being rehomed in Sweden and Italy' The Irish Times (19 October 2022) <<https://www.irishtimes.com/ireland/dublin/2022/10/19/surrendered-dublin-dogs-are-being-rehomed-in-sweden-and-italy/>>

[2] B Murphy and others, A Qualitative Exploration of Challenges and Opportunities for Dog Welfare in Ireland Post COVID-19, as Perceived by Dog Welfare Organisations. *Animals* 2022, 12, 3289



**Whilst there had been reporting in the media on the scale of the animal abandonment problem relating to dogs and the reasons for it, little consideration appeared to be given to how the crisis was impacting those in rescue and what could be done to support them through this difficult time. The rescue community is integral to upholding the welfare of abandoned animals in Ireland and yet, the wellbeing of those who work within this community, animal care workers (ACW), is often overlooked. Given that rescues perform a significant role in terms of caring for unwanted or abandoned animals that would otherwise fall to the government, it is in the government's interest to better understand this issue to provide support to this sector to assist them in managing the current crisis.**

**There is no group to represent the views and concerns of those who work in independent rescues (those not affiliated with larger organisations such as the ISPCA, Blue Cross, Dogs Trust, etc). The purpose of this survey is to gain insights into the factors that impact on all ACW across the country and to bring awareness to issues impacting them and their concerns.**



# WELLBEING OF ACW

The pressure on rescues in Ireland has become acute post Covid. Studies into the mental health of ACW has shown that those in the sector generally suffer higher incidences of post-traumatic stress disorder and psychological distress than the general population due to their work. [3]

Studies show that mental health in highly demanding jobs such as animal care work is impacted by the level of social and organisational support. [4] Social support includes assistance from other people – such as encouragement and help from family and friends.

Organisational support arises from workplace characteristics such as the level of workload and support with workload, but also includes factors such as the perception of whether those in positions of authority value the work being carried out by an individual. [5]

[3] Nicola K. Paul, Suzanne M. Cosh and Amy D. Lykins, "A Love-Hate Relationship with What I Do": Protecting the Mental Health of Animal Care Workers' (2023) 36 Anthrozoös 489

[4] Ibid

[5] Ibid



Whilst organisational support tends to focus on the internal dynamics of a workplace, we argue that organisational support can also include a broader organisational structure such as that between the government (e.g. Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine - DAFM) and rescues. It is suggested in these studies the greater the level of organisational support, the less likely it is that burnout will occur in ACW. [6]

This survey explores the issues facing ACW and rescues to gain an insight into the factors impacting the well being of those in the sector, in order to enable greater support to be provided to the sector.

## STRUCTURE.

Part 1 - **METHODOLOGY** – details the methodology of this survey

Part 2 - **ANALYSIS** – details the survey results and provides an analysis of the data



# **PART 1 - METHODOLOGY.**

The purpose of this survey was to understand the toll that working or volunteering in rescue takes on those involved. The survey addresses the physical, emotional and financial costs incurred by those in the sector.

The research questions were formulated by members of the TAAP team and were informed by issues that had been raised by ACW in the breakout groups at the DAFM 2022 Animal Welfare Seminar [7], as well as reflecting concerns that had been expressed by ACW on social media channels. The survey was designed to understand the physical, emotional and financial issues ACW are experiencing and what ACW consider to be the factors contributing to these issues.

The survey was open to volunteers and staff from all rescues in the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland.

[7] See Appendix I



Before conducting the survey respondents were advised that responses would be made publicly available.

The survey was created using SurveyMonkey. Data was collected anonymously although it was requested that respondents detail which county they were located in. The rationale for this was to determine whether the responses came from a few areas or were countrywide. Respondents were made aware of the survey through social media posts on Facebook and Instagram. Additionally, TAAP obtained a list of rescues in Ireland from TAGS[8] and contacted rescues on this list through Facebook and email to alert them to the survey and encourage them to participate.

Responses were collected between 31 January 2023 and 25 February 2023. There were 174 respondents. The data was subsequently exported into an Excel document and cleaned[9]. The data was then analysed.

This report was drafted between 1 March 2023 and 31 May 2023.

Limitations- Certain questions enabled respondents to provide multiple answers, consequently it was not always possible to analyse the data to provide one clear answer. In future we would anticipate rewording questions to avoid this outcome. Further some questions asked for information that respondents may not be privy to, but may have given their perceptions of (e.g. is your rescue in debt)

[8] <https://www.tagsrescue.ie/rescues/>

[9] We are more than happy to make the cleaned data available to anyone who requests it.

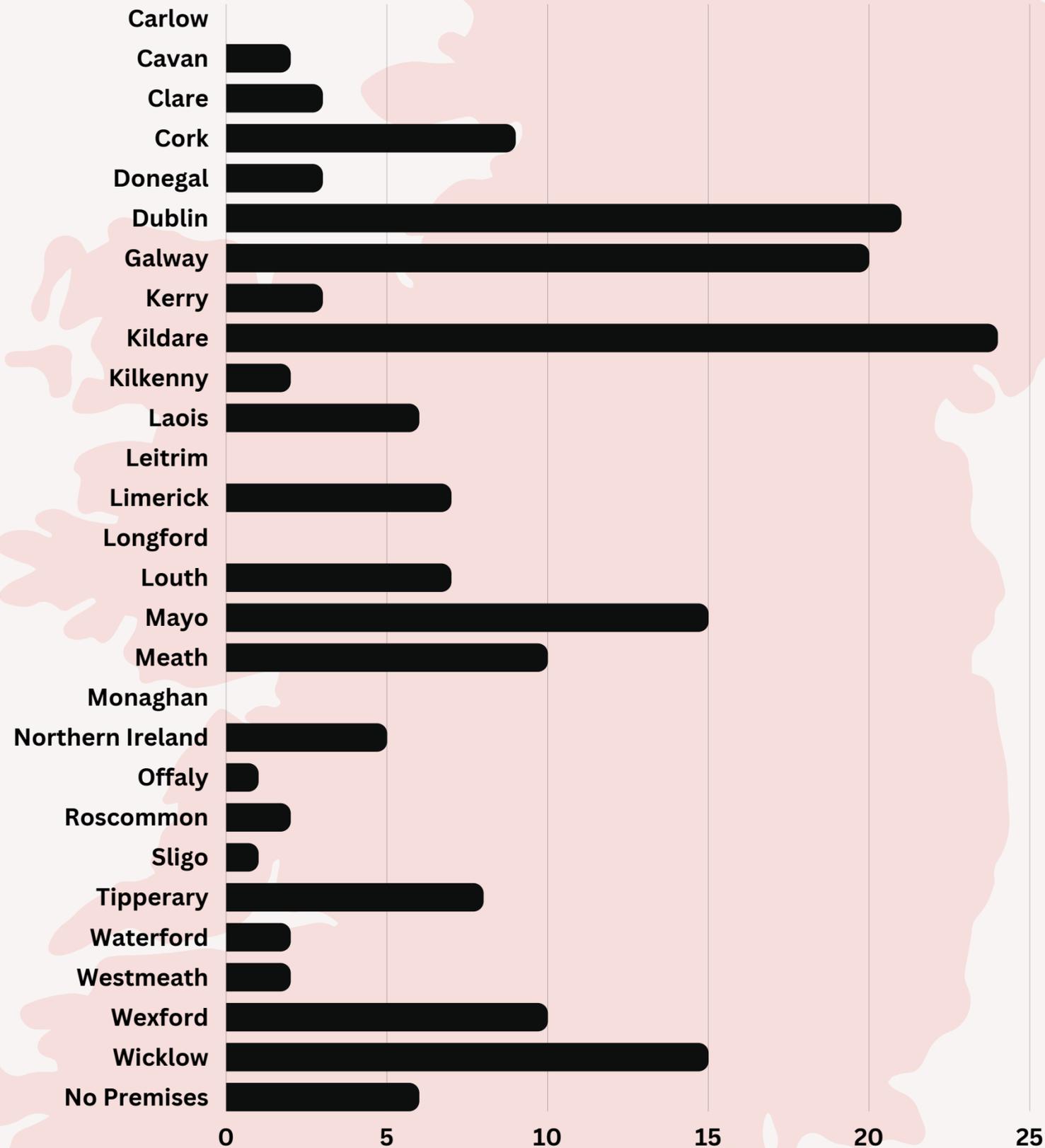


# PART 2 - ANALYSIS.



**PEOPLE** ■





# LOCATION.

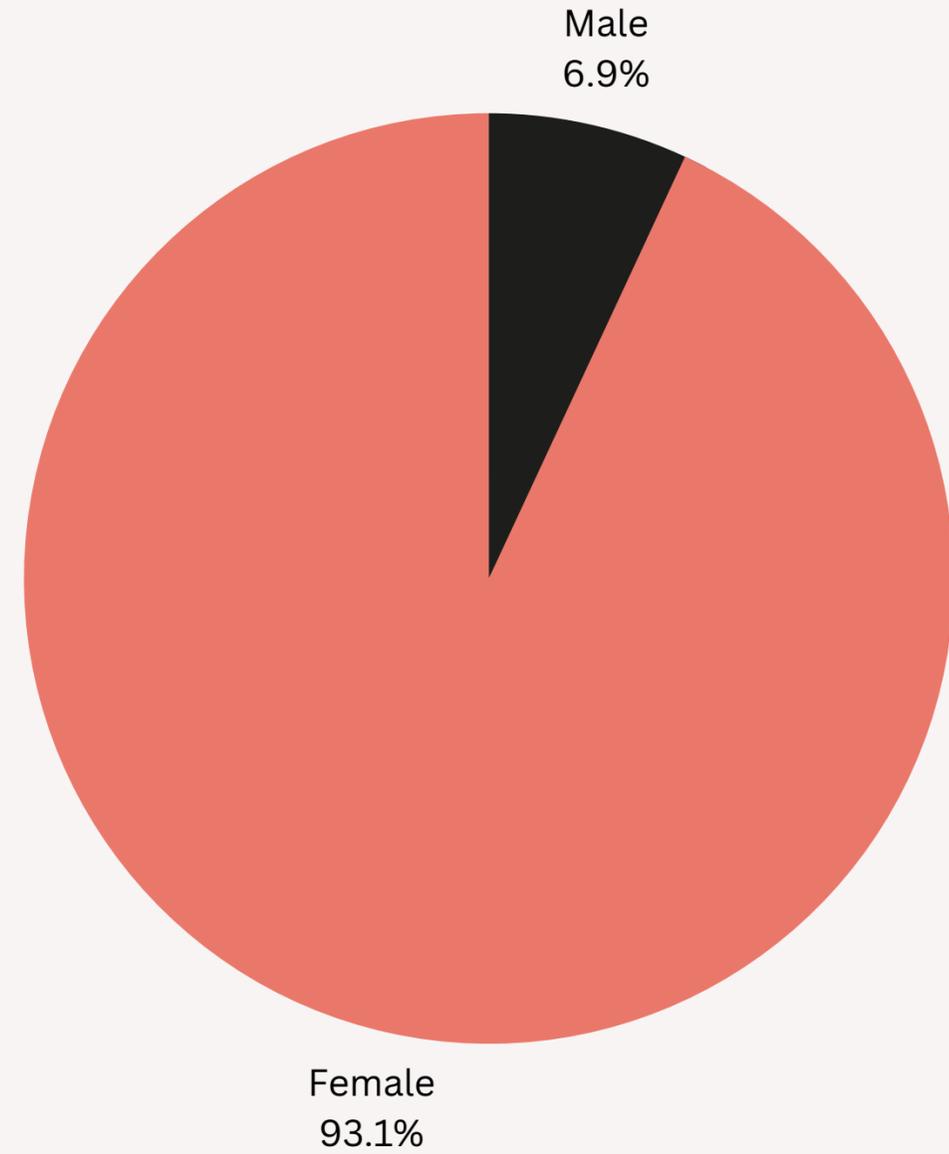
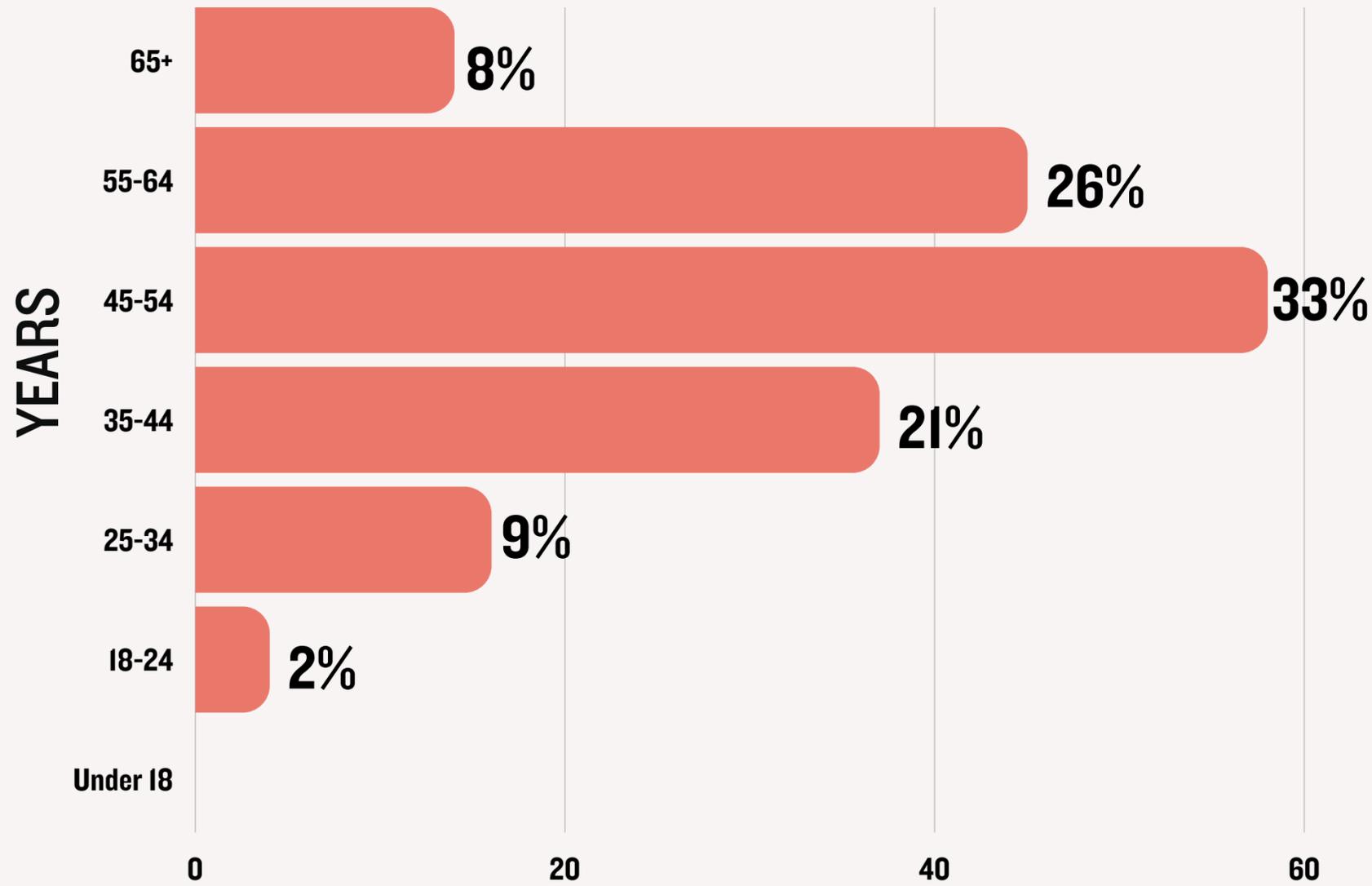
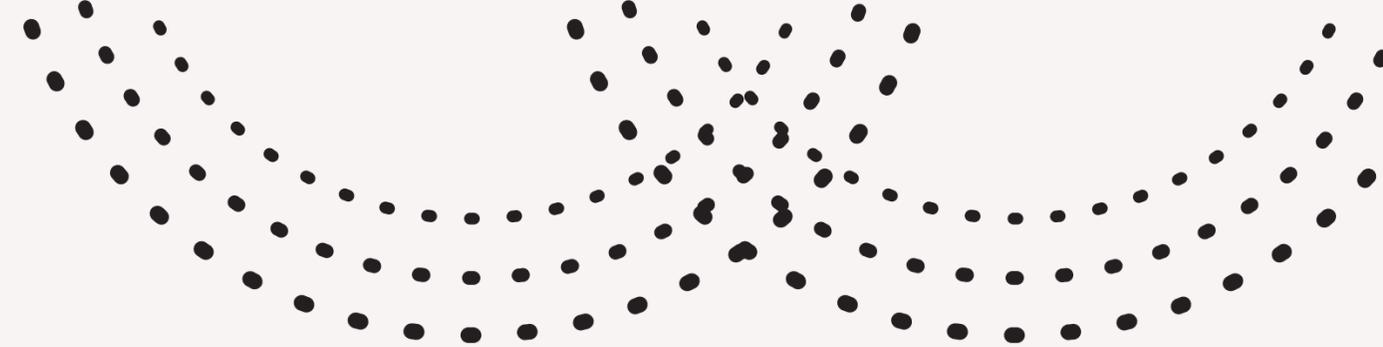
The respondents are based in the following places.

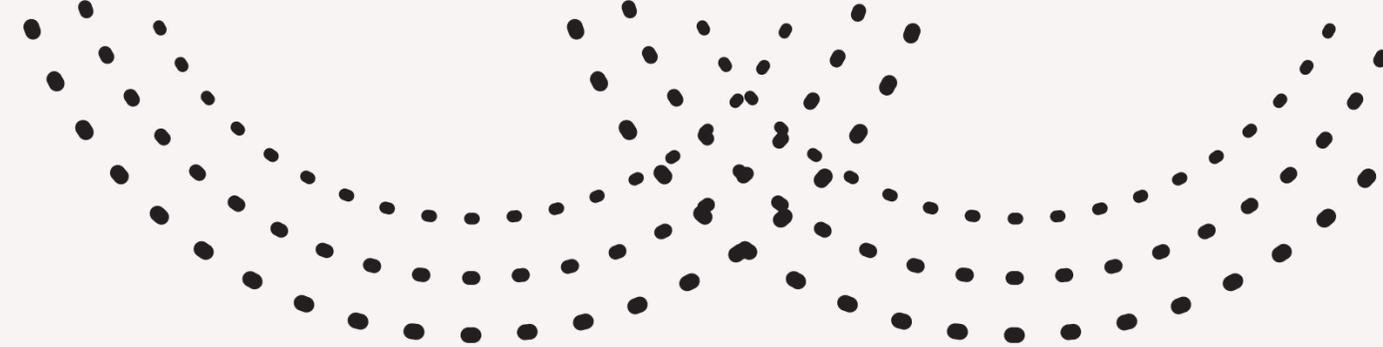
Some respondents chose more than one county which may be those workers/volunteers who work in more than one county

We note that only 3% of respondents were from Northern Ireland and consequently the analysis focusses on the Republic of Ireland (hereafter referred to as Ireland).

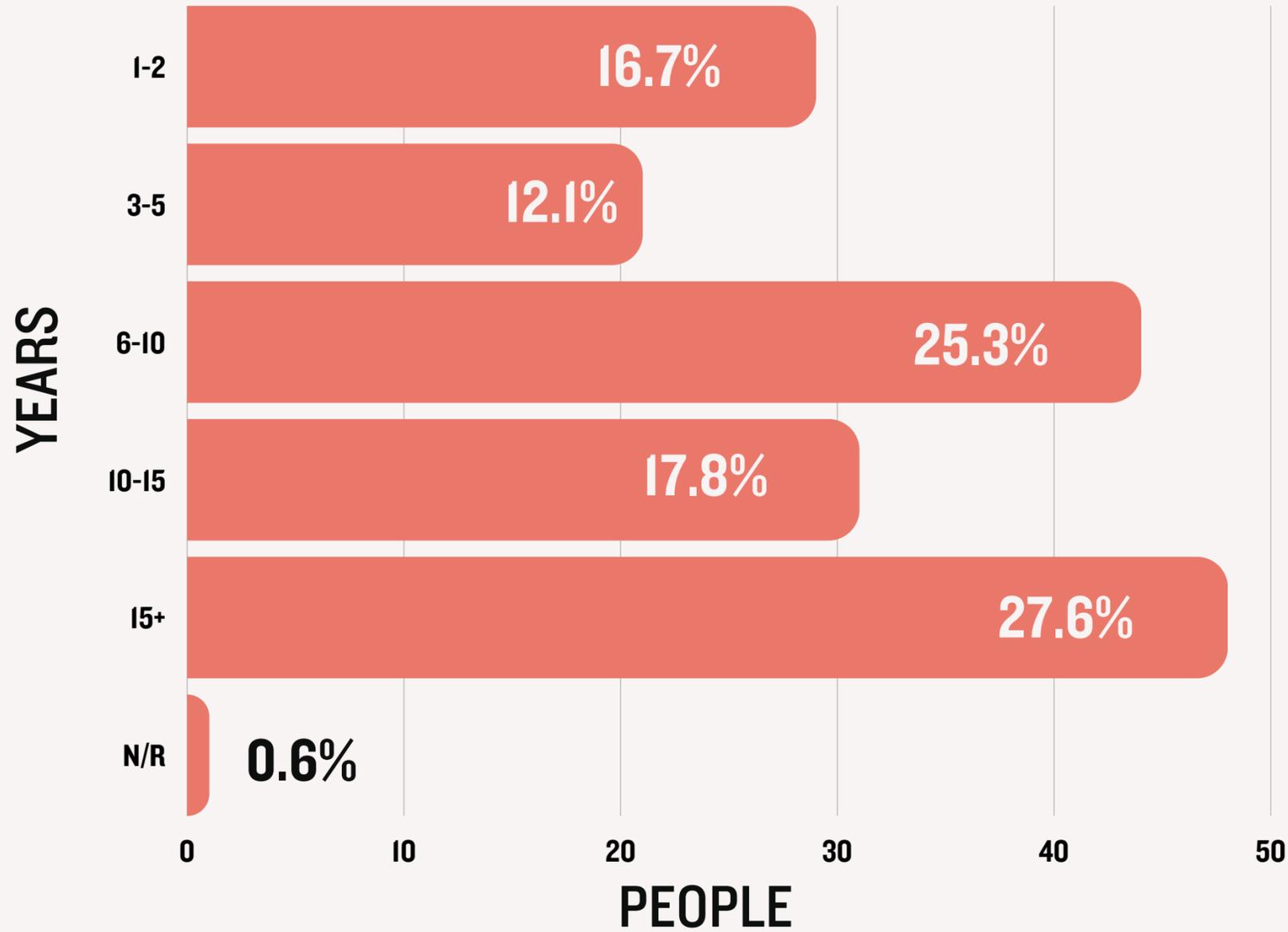


# AGE & GENDER.





# EXPERIENCE.

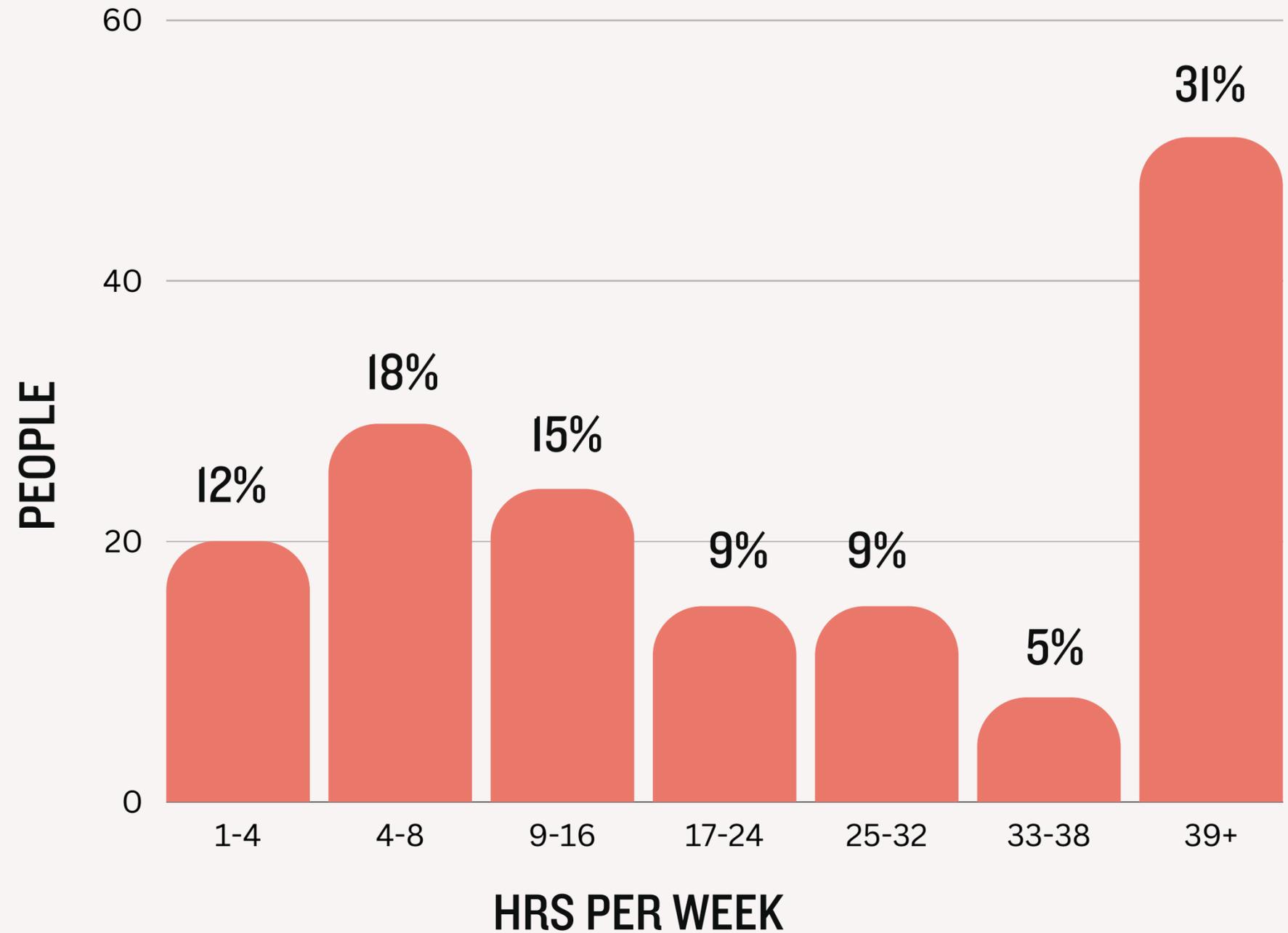


**How many years have you been working/volunteering in rescue?**

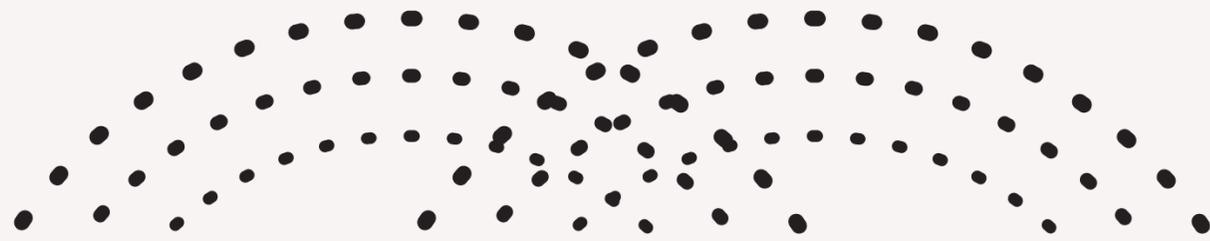


# HOURS.

On average how many hours per week do you work/ volunteer in rescue?

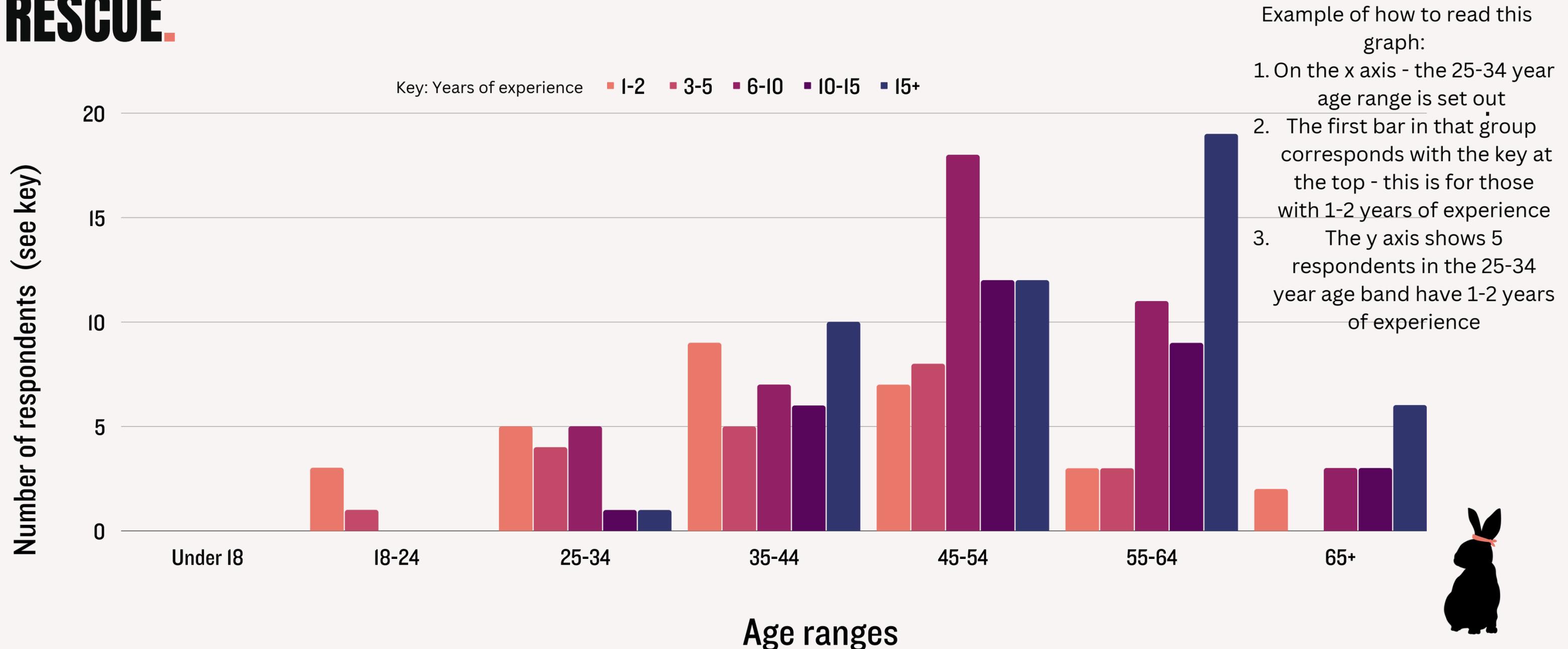


\*percentages were rounded



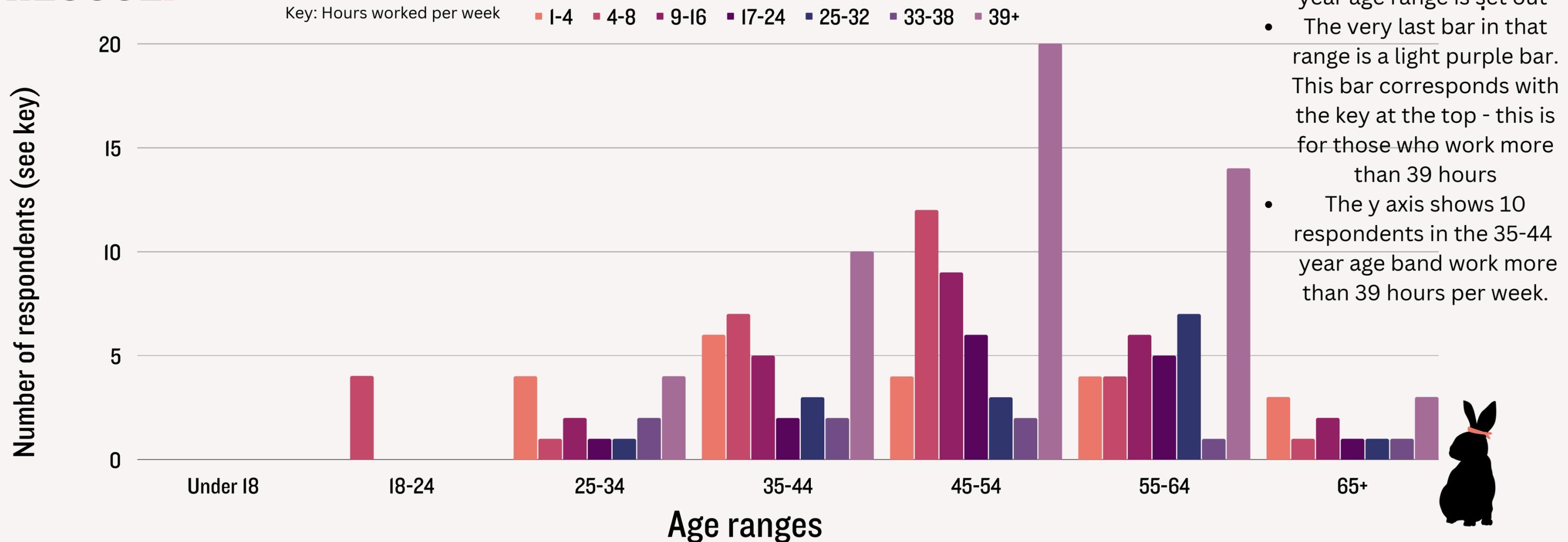
# AGE & EXPERIENCE IN RESCUE.

Using data from the previous slides this graph shows the amount of experience per age band



# AGE & HOURS PER WEEK SPENT WORKING IN RESCUE.

Using data from the previous slides this graph shows  
the hours per week spent working per age band



# EXPERIENCE & HOURS PER WEEK SPENT WORKING IN RESCUE.

Using data from the previous slides this graph contrasts the years of experience in rescue against the number of hours worked per week

Example of how to read this graph:

- The x axis sets out the range of hours worked. Look at the 4-8 hour range.
- The first bar in that range corresponds with the key at the top -this is for those who have 1-2 years of experience
- The y axis shows 10 respondents who work 4-8 hours per week have 1-2 years of experience



# MONEY.



16 PEOPLE

**9%**

**do get paid** for the  
work they do in rescue

**90%**

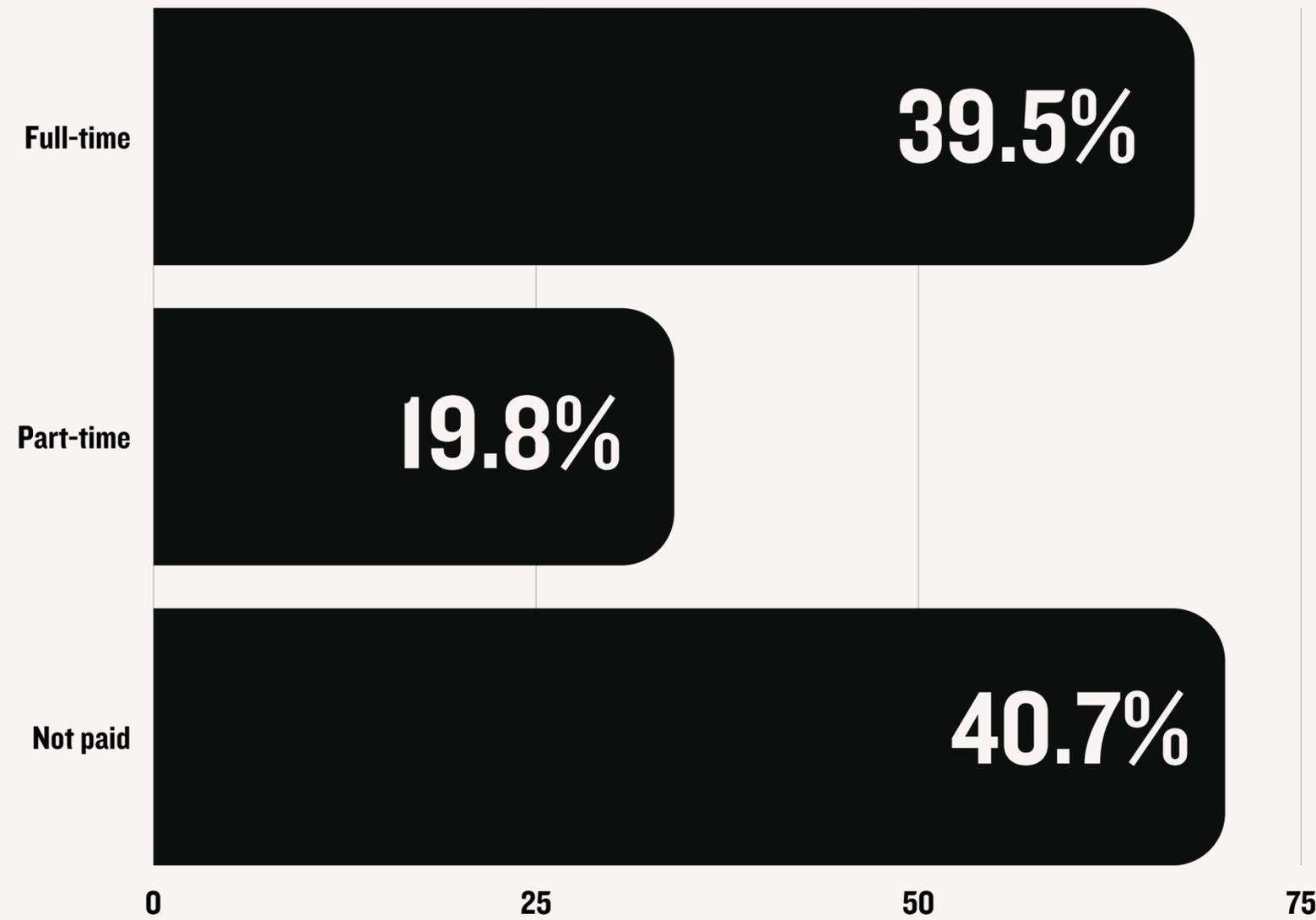
**do not get paid** for the  
work they do in rescue

• Percentages are rounded

# WORK OUTSIDE RESCUE.



Do you **work outside of rescue?**

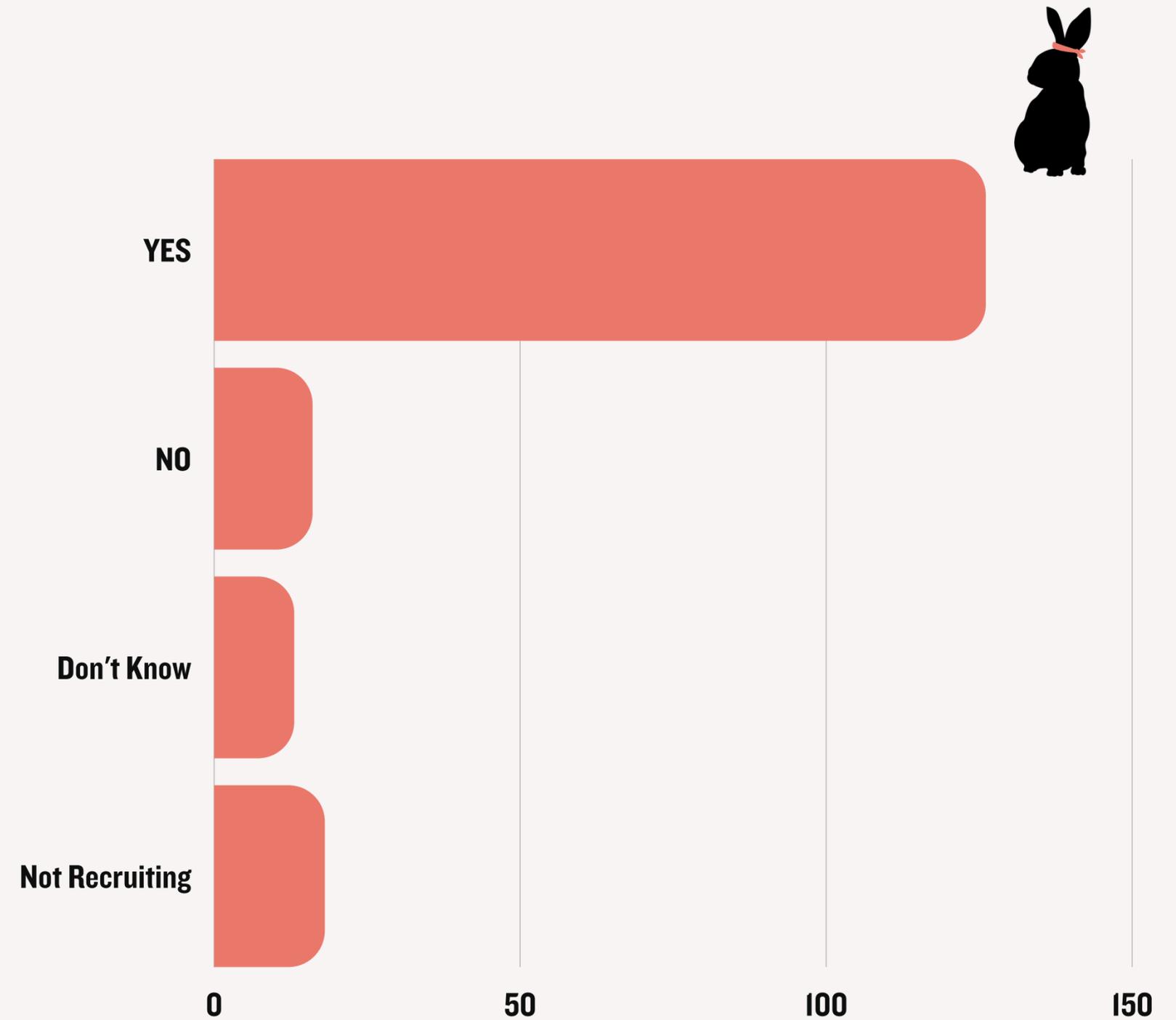


Note that some respondents provided two answers eg – stay at home parent and carer. We have accounted for this by grouping the data  
Not in work includes not working, students, retirees and stay at home parents and carers



# RECRUITMENT.

We asked respondents whether their rescue is experiencing **difficulty recruiting** staff/volunteers?





# PEOPLE, RECRUITMENT & SUCCESSION.

Nearly 90% of those who work as ACW do not get paid. Almost 60% of those who work as ACW also undertake full or part time work in addition to their rescue work. The majority of those who volunteer as ACW and are not in paid employment outside of their volunteer work, are either retired or stay at home parents. If rescues are hugely reliant on unpaid labour, their workforce is likely to be limited by the extent to which the public are able to commit to unpaid activities outside of paid work and family commitments.

## Succession plans for rescues

The graph at p15 comparing age and the number of hours worked in rescue per week reflects the fact that those 45 -64 years carry out the most number of hours work. Further, the graph at p16 shows that those with more years experience in rescue are also those who work the most hours in rescue. What this indicates is that there is a cohort of older rescue workers who are the most experienced and also undertake most of the work.

Retiring ACW have expressed concern that they have not been able to implement succession plans because of the lack of younger ACW able to take over the running of rescues. This issue has been referenced in a recent study. [14] Further research into this issue is required. In particular it is suggested that a longitudinal study be conducted to determine whether or not ACW in the younger age bands will replicate the working patterns of those in the older age bands over time - in other words will ACW who move into the 45+ age bands continue volunteering and take on more hours to the same extent seen in this survey? If not it suggests that rescues may in the near term begin to experience a shortage of experienced workers.

[14] Murphy and others, A Qualitative Exploration of Challenges and Opportunities for Dog Welfare in Ireland Post COVID-19, as Perceived by Dog Welfare Organisations. *Animals* 2022, 12, 3289

## 21 **Recruitment of ACW**

### **There is concern that rescues are struggling to recruit.**

When respondents were asked whether their rescue was struggling to recruit volunteers 73% responded that they were. Written responses noted that work and family commitments appeared to be impacting the amount of spare time that people had to work in a rescue. Others considered that the ability of rescue to pay wages, or pay wages above minimum wage, was impacting recruitment.

It is recommended that this is an area of further research because:

- if the number of animals being abandoned has increased, it seems likely more workers will be needed to ensure rescues can function well; and
- if the ability of rescues to recruit and implement succession plans is being impacted by their ability to either pay a wage/pay a living wage, this is undoubtedly a matter for the government to consider in relation to its longer term animal welfare strategy.

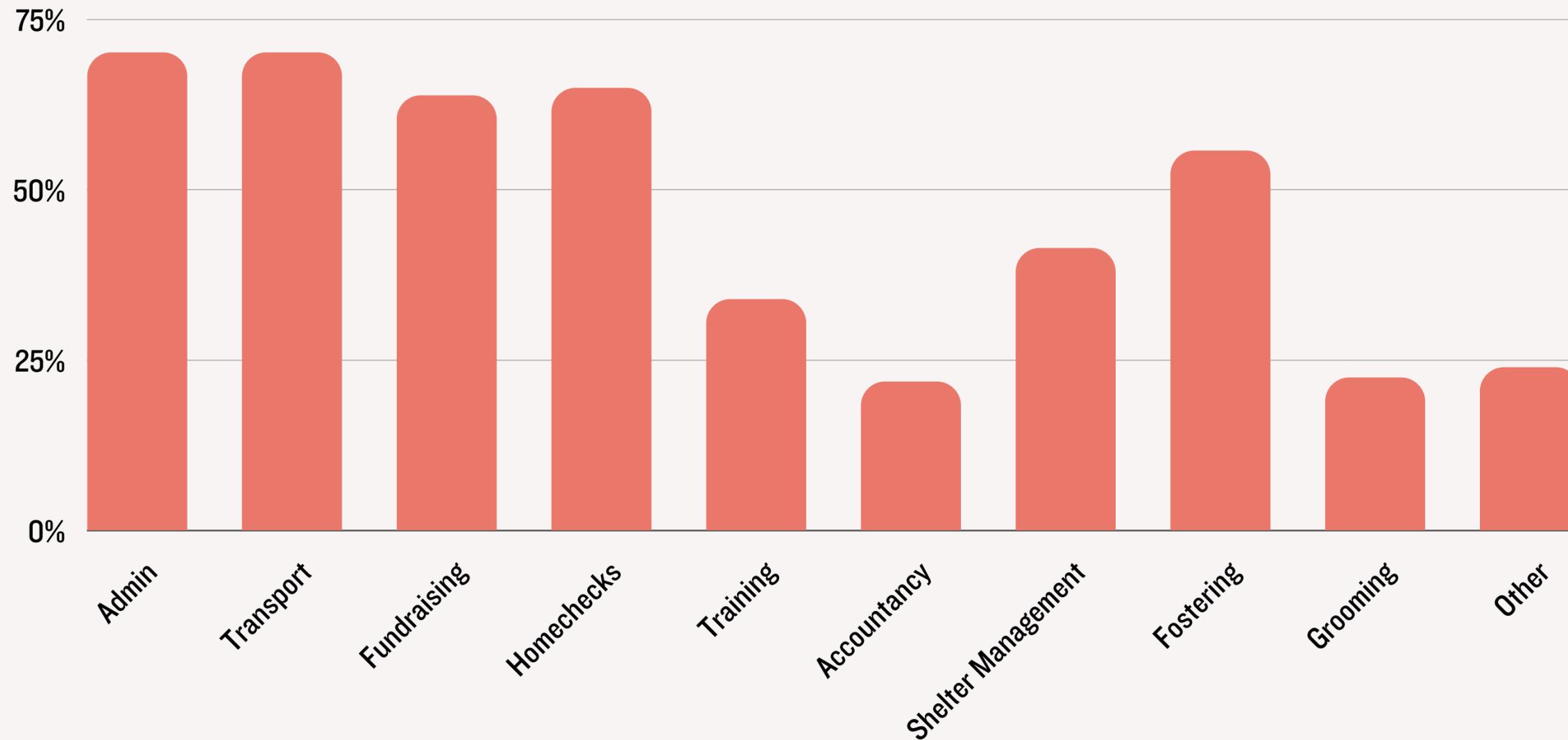




# **RUNNING OF THE RESCUE.**

# ROLES.

What **roles do you perform** within rescue?  
 Respondents were allowed to tick more than one  
 answer. **89%** respondents ticked more than box.



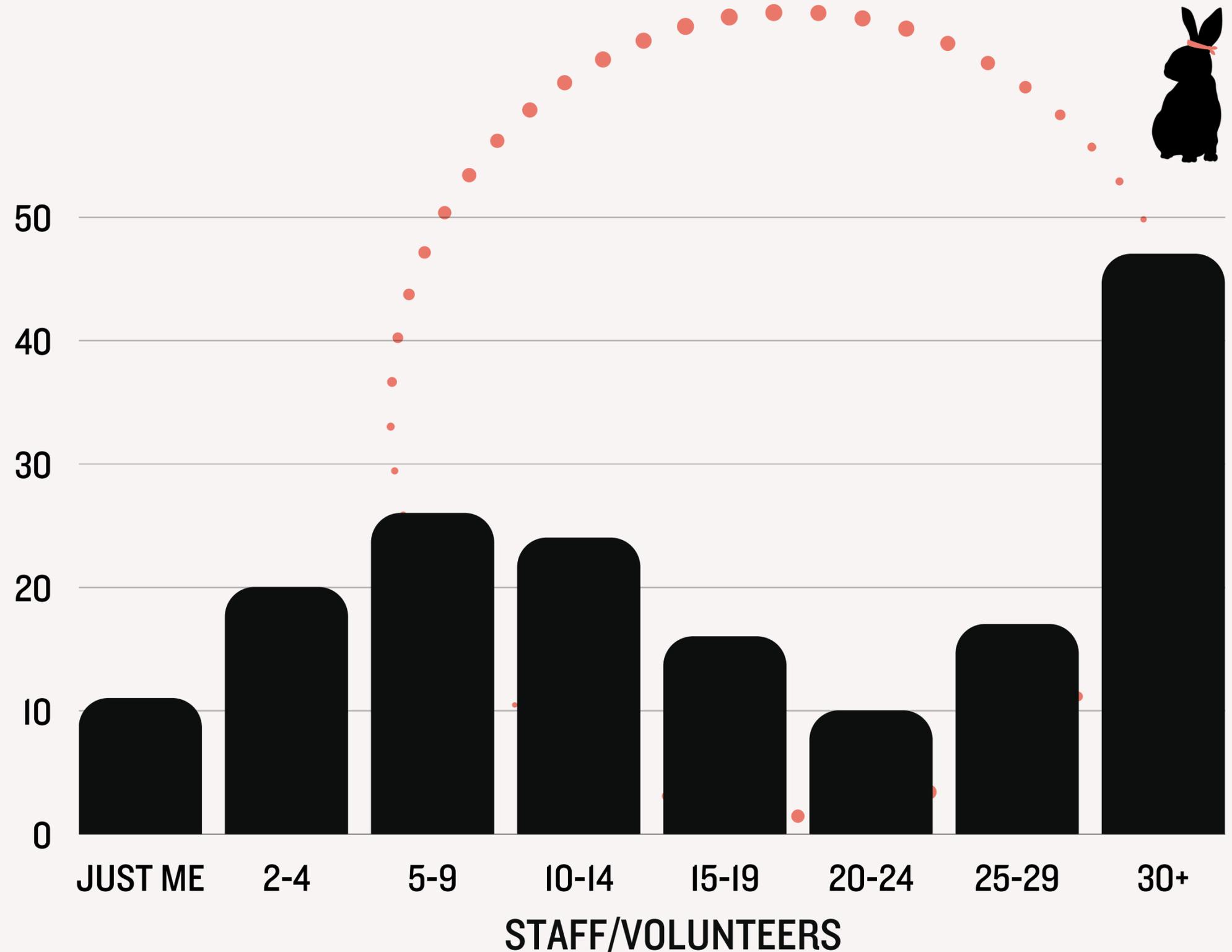
Other includes cleaning facilities, walking dogs, TNR, collecting dogs from pounds/picking strays up off the street, rescuing and releasing wildlife, other admin work such as board of trustee work, preparing applications such as for grant funding.



# ROLES.

We asked respondents **how many staff/volunteers work at the rescue.**

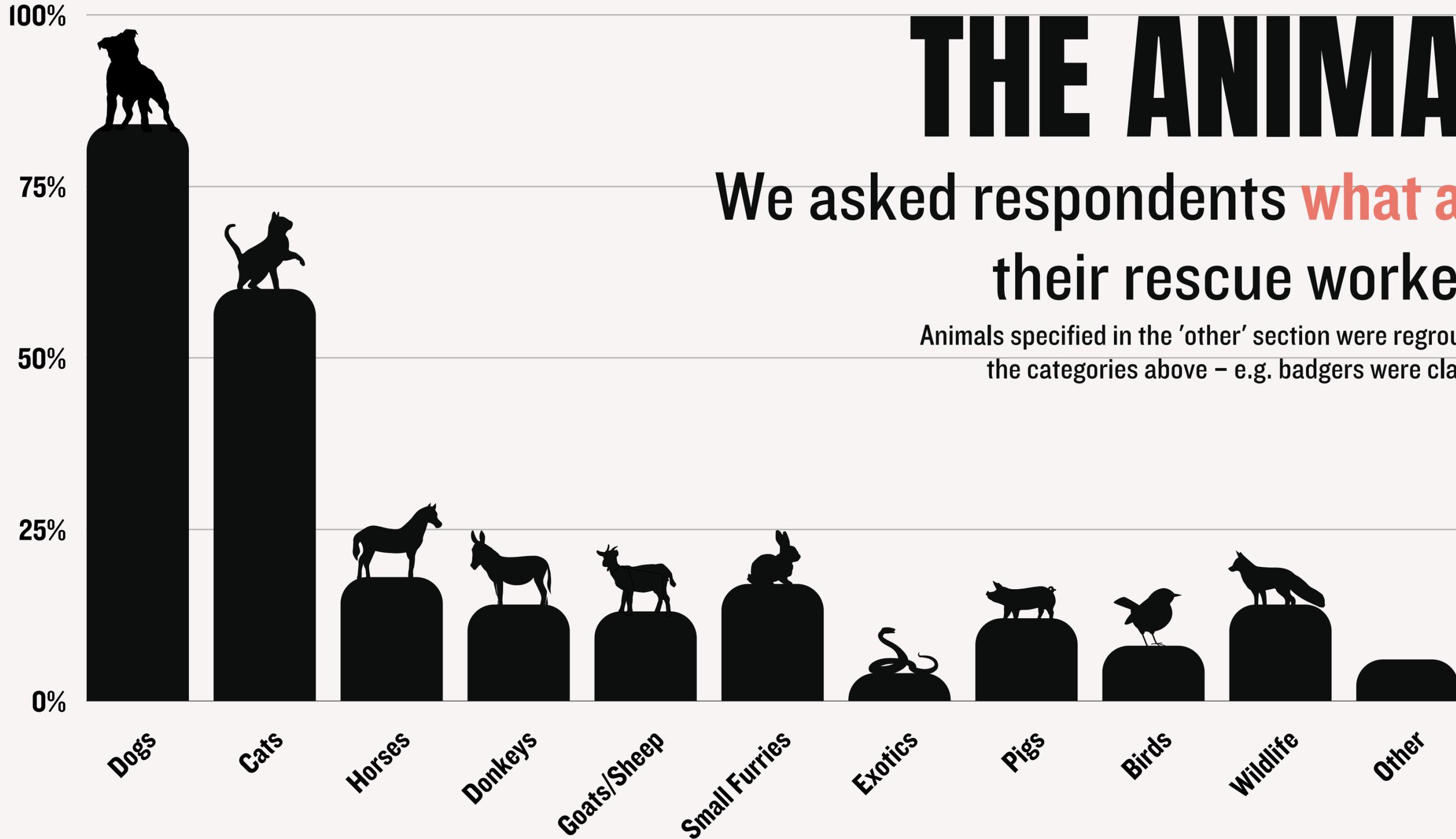
This includes people who regularly foster.



# THE ANIMALS.

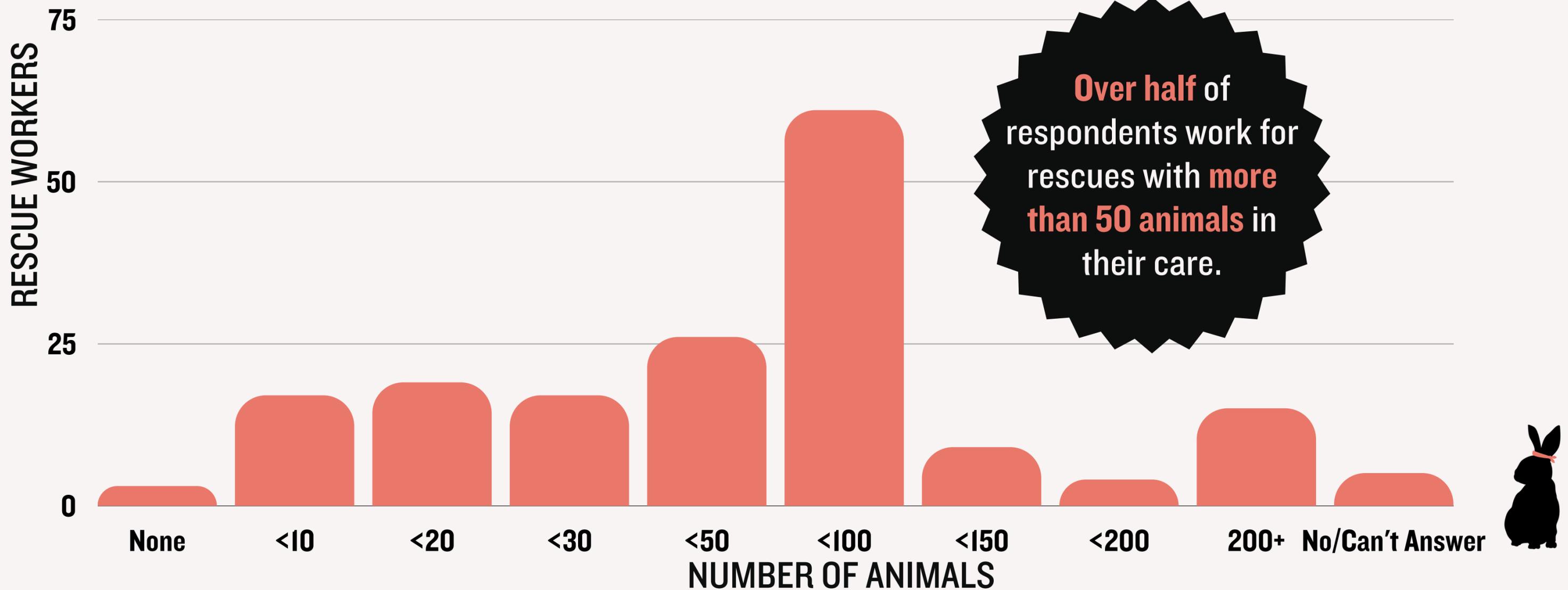
We asked respondents **what animals** their rescue worked with.

Animals specified in the 'other' section were regrouped into one of the categories above – e.g. badgers were classed as wildlife.



**"How many animals does your rescue currently have in its care?"**

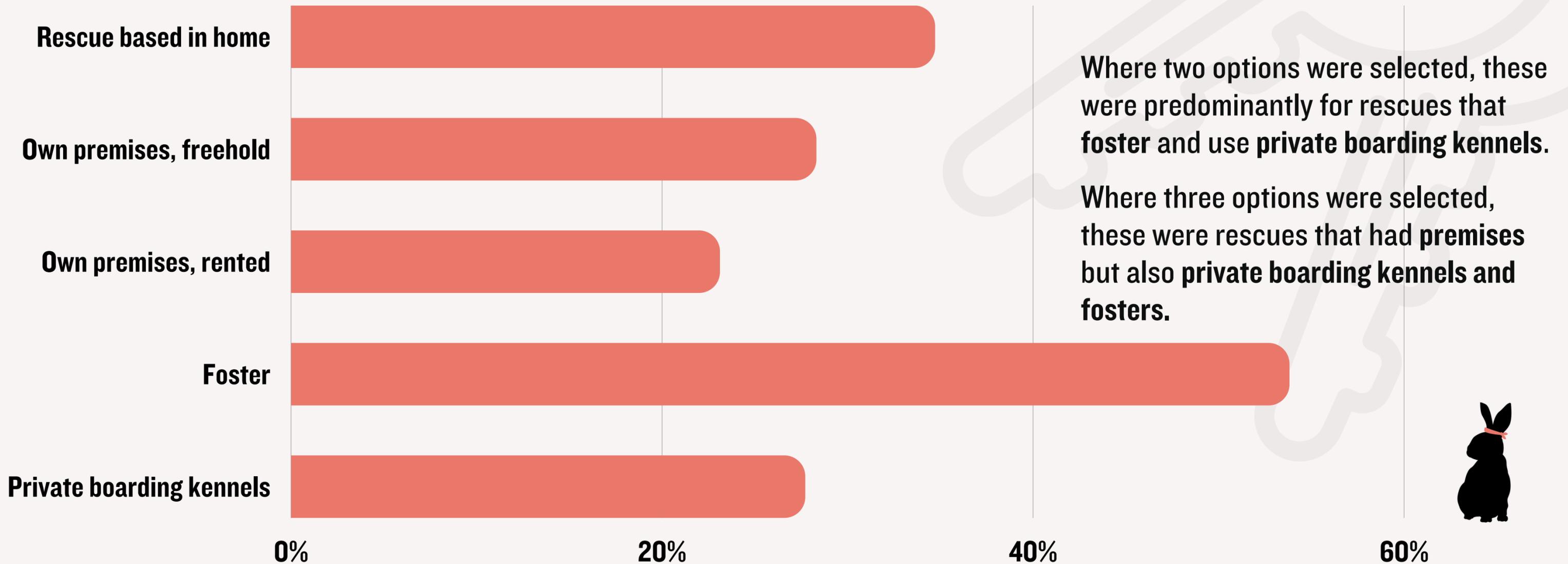
# THE ANIMALS.



# HOUSING.

## What kind of accommodation does your rescue use?

Respondents could tick more than one answer. Over half (83) of respondents reported their rescue uses **more than one kind of accommodation**





The majority of respondents work for rescues that care for dogs and cats. The responses show that over 50% of respondents work with rescues that have over 50 animals in their care. Over 50% of rescues use a combination of accommodation to house animals. Of the types of accommodation used, some types of housing present a degree of uncertainty that can impact on the ability of a rescue to provide long term care:

- Renting carries a degree of uncertainty for tenants [15] due to rent increases, development of the land, sale of the property;
- A fostering model relies on individuals to bring animals into their home for care. The ability of fosters to provide this work depends on factors such as their own accommodation and living circumstances, and their work commitments (if not fostering full time);
- Housing animals in private boarding kennels will incur a cost to the rescue and the long term viability of this accommodation model turns entirely on the ability of the rescue to meet the costs of the boarding fees.

When rescues have chosen to house animals in a combination of accommodation, this survey has not interrogated why these decisions have been made [16]. However, it is suggested that the financial considerations are likely to play a significant role in decision making. The following section sheds light on the financial position of the rescues the respondents work with.

[15] Richard Waldron, 'Experiencing housing precarity in the private rental sector during the Covid-19 pandemic: the case of Ireland' (2023) 38 Housing Studies 84

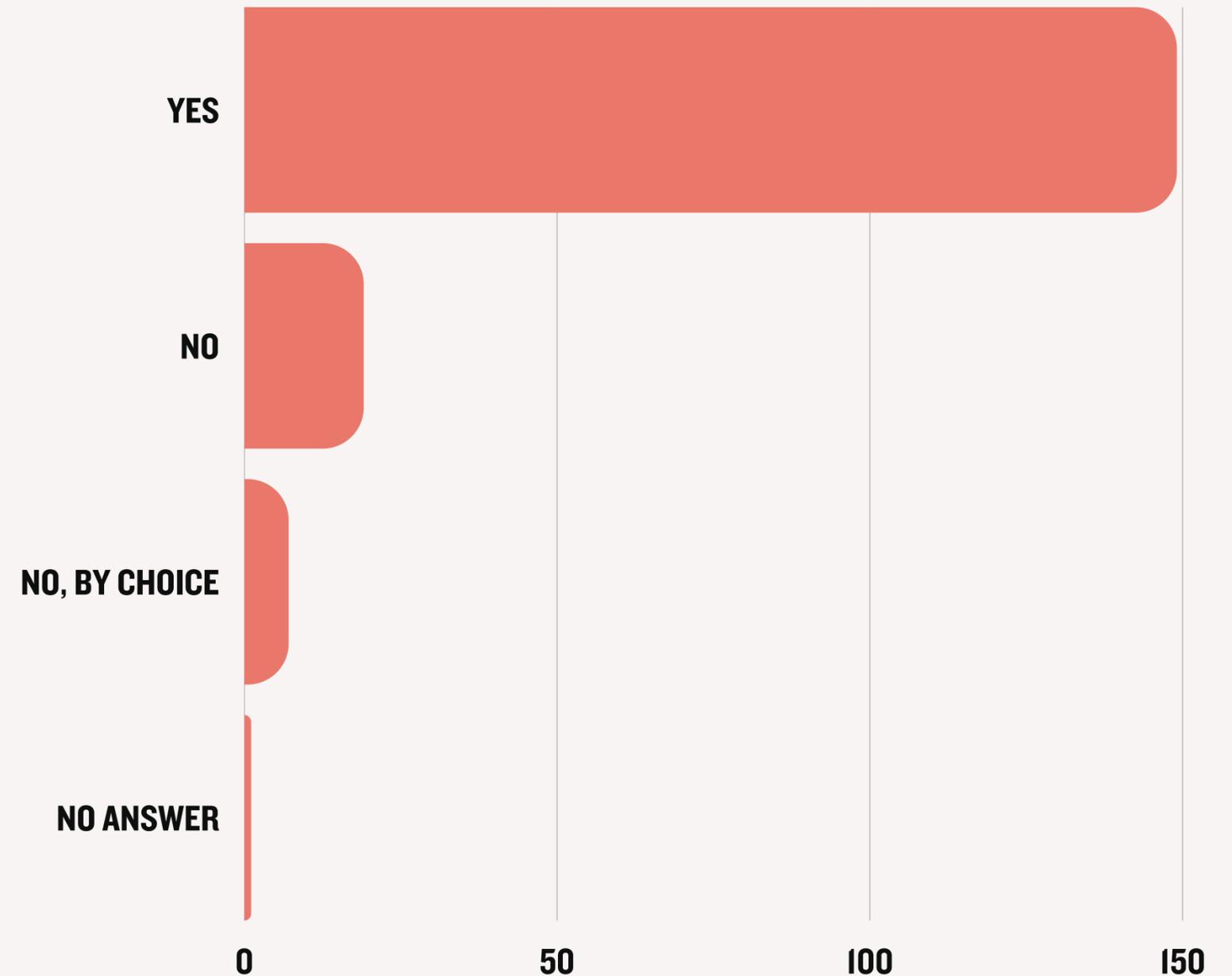
[16] It is also unclear whether the over representation of dogs and cats in rescues respondents work with is representative of a specific issue that relates to the abandonment or surrender of these animals, or whether these animals are easier to house and consequently more rescues are able to look after these species. It is suggested that further research is undertaken to determine whether accommodation limitations impact on rescues ability to take in larger animals such as horses, donkeys, sheep, goats and pigs.

# FUNDING THE RESCUE.



# CHARITY.

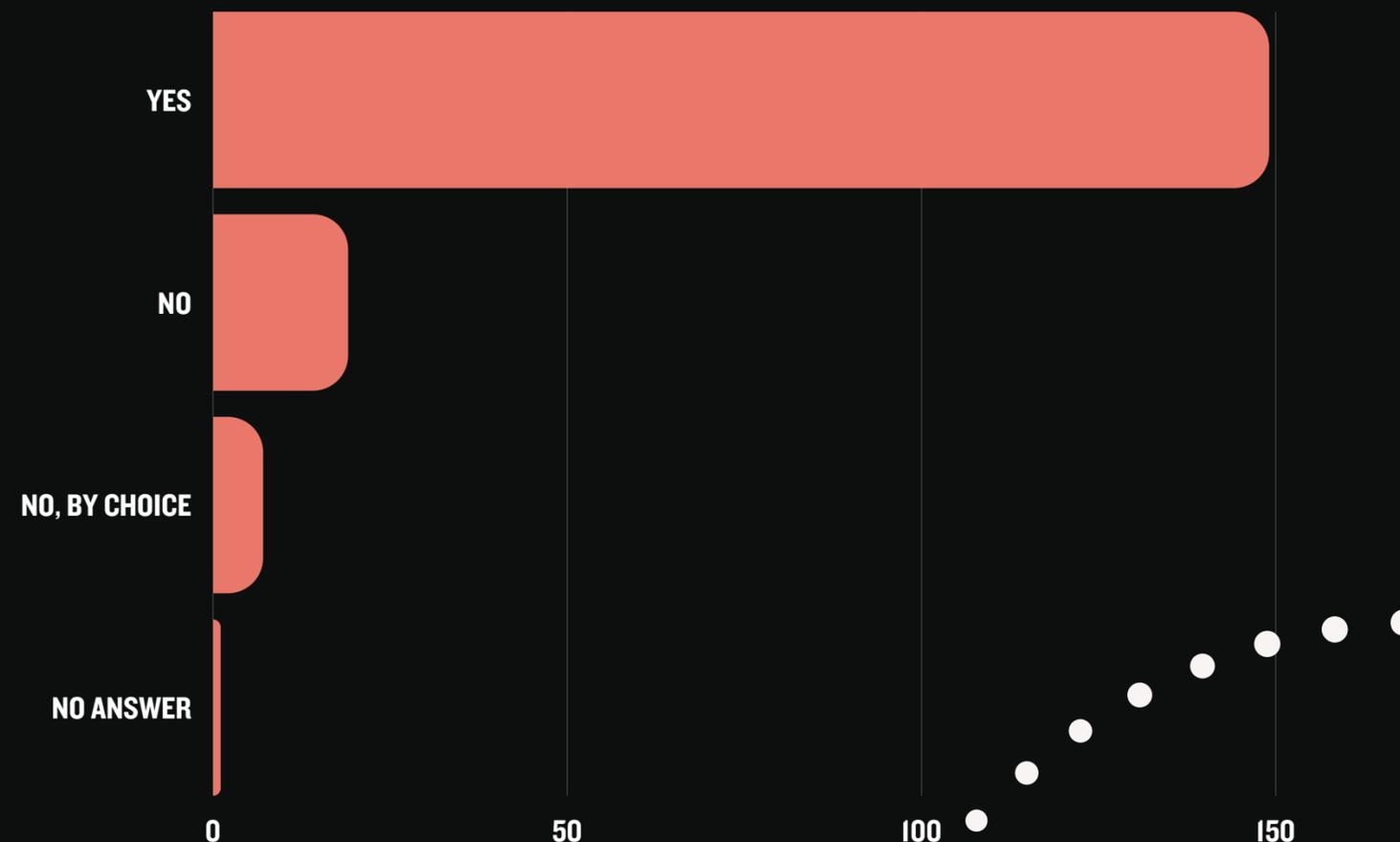
“Is the rescue you work or volunteer for a **registered charity**?”





# CHARITY.

The second part of this question invited respondents to explain why, if **rescues were not charities**, why they were not.



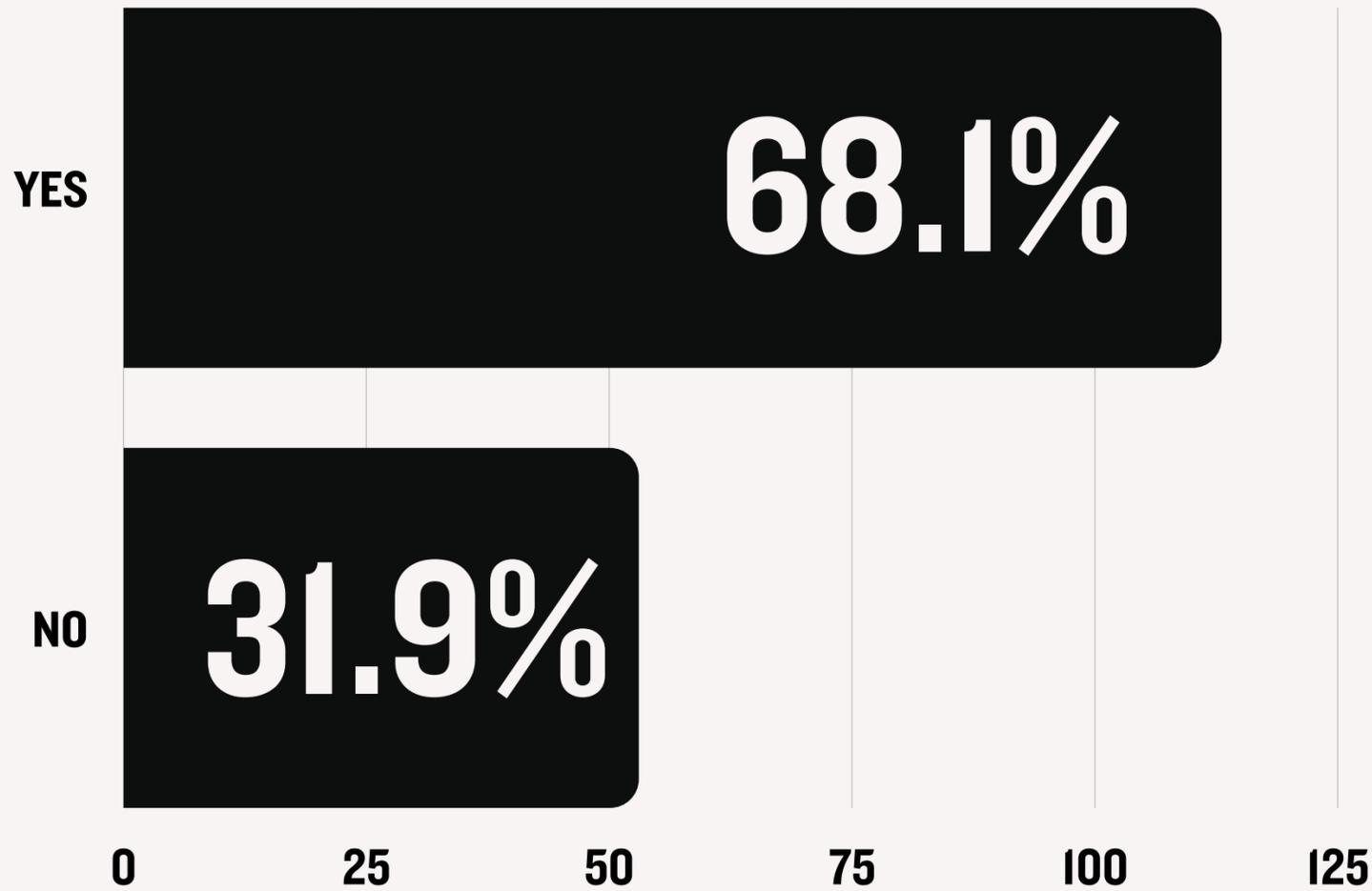
The following themes emerged from these responses ...

## WHY NOT A CHARITY?

- The process of applying for charitable status was **too onerous** to make it worthwhile, being described by one person as a 'one size fits all' model.
- Two responses stated applications for charitable status had been made but not granted yet. One application had been made **two years prior** and still had not been determined.
- **Rescues can't afford the administration costs** that are required, such as engaging an accountant.

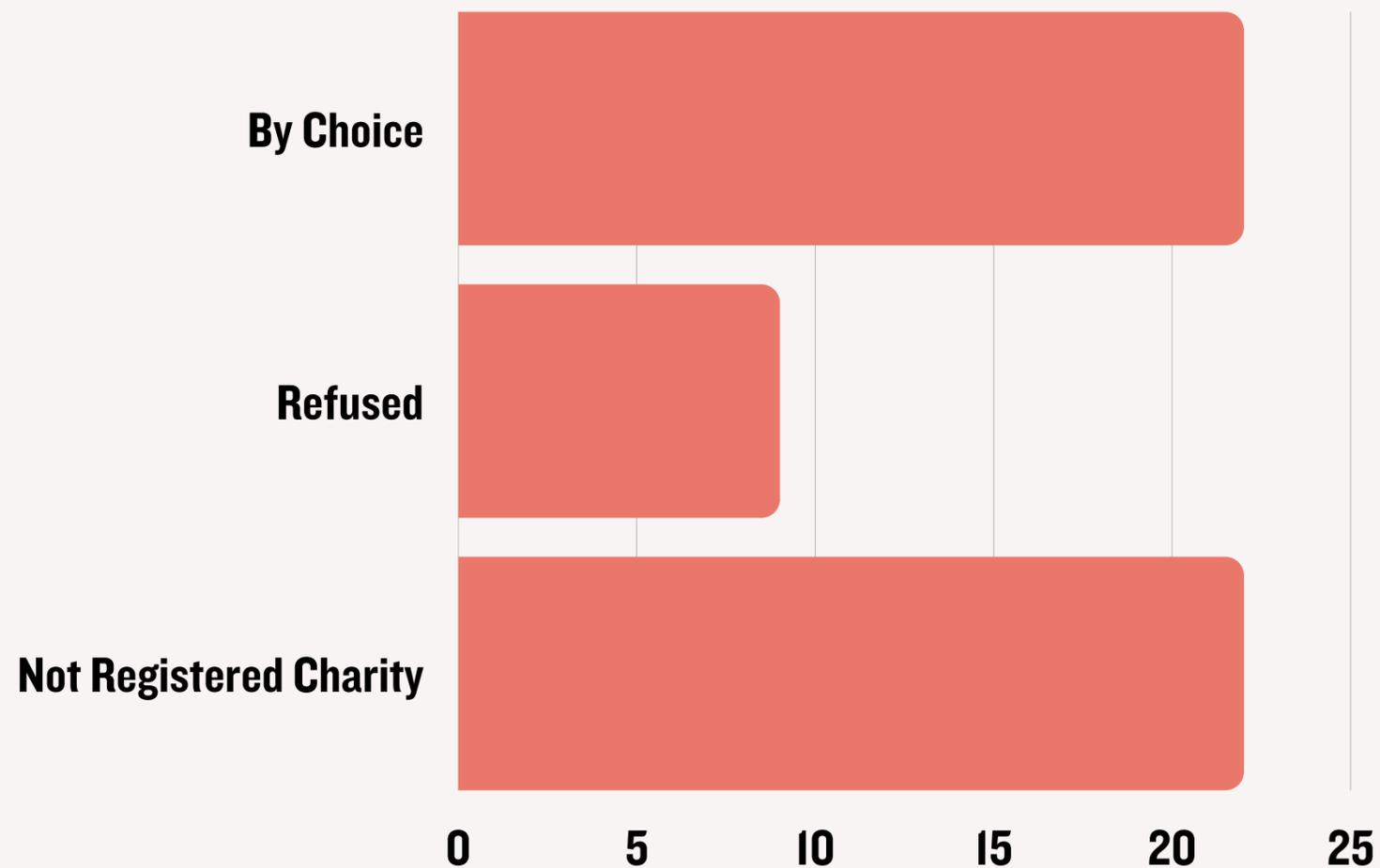
# FUNDS.

Is your rescue in receipt of **government funding**?  
Note only registered charities are eligible for  
Animal Welfare Grants



# WHY.

Those who were not in receipt of government funding fell into the following categories



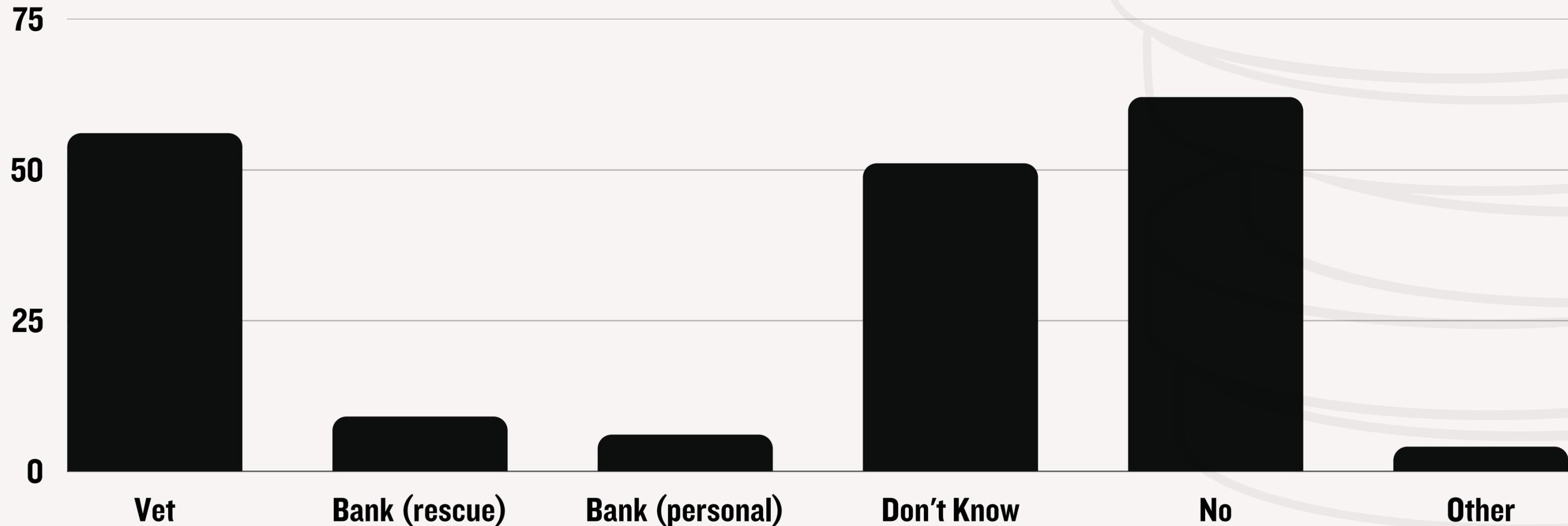
**The general theme that emerged - from those who chose not to apply - was that the funding process was too onerous to make it worthwhile for the amount of funds available.**

# DEBT.

Is your rescue currently in **debt** and if so to **whom?**



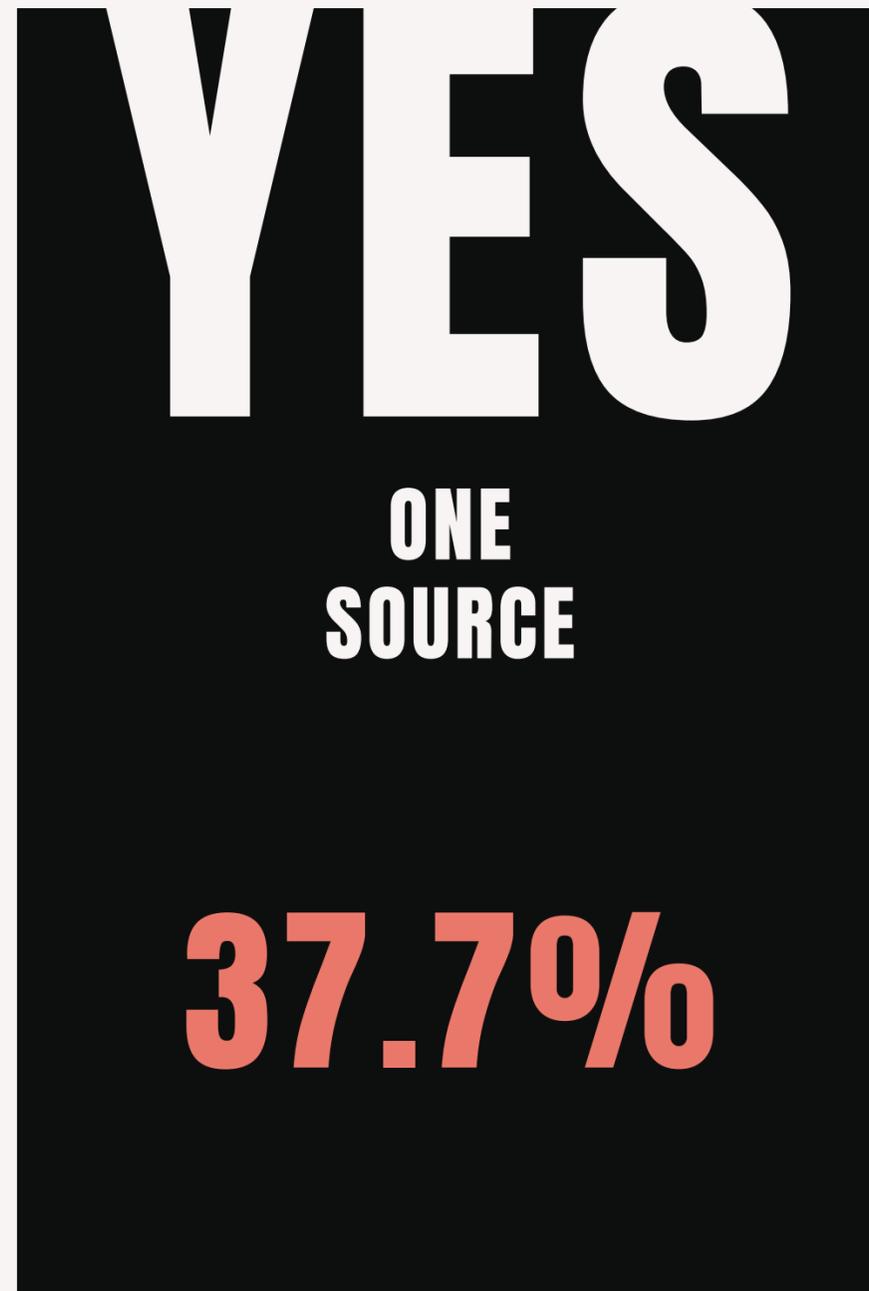
Respondents were invited to tick more than one answer.



\*Data was adjusted to reflect that mortgages have not been counted as debt on the basis that there is an underlying asset.

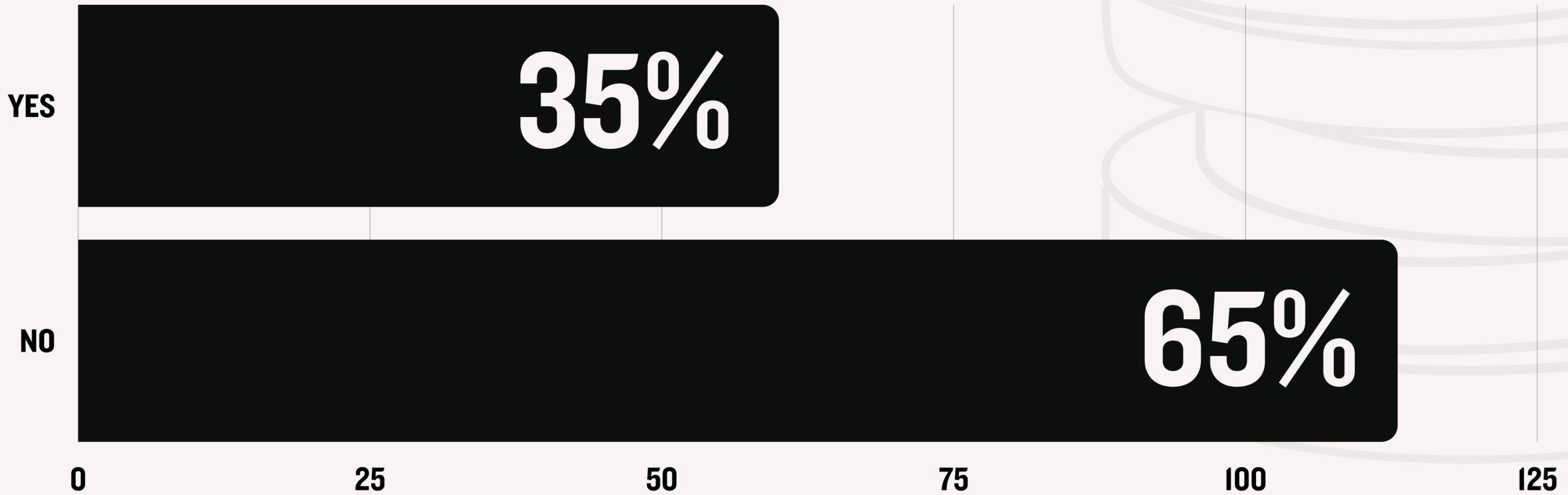
# DEBT.

We collated whether respondents had one or multiple sources of debt.



# RUNNING.

“Have you gone into **personal debt** for your rescue?”



**A third of respondents reported going into personal debt to assist the rescue they worked with. A further third of respondents outlined that the rescues they worked with were in debt, with the major debt being reported as veterinary costs.**

**Most of the respondents worked with rescues that are registered charities. Of those that were not registered some elected not to seek registration due to administrative burdens and costs. Others were awaiting decisions by the Regulator, with one application for charitable status remaining undecided after two years.**

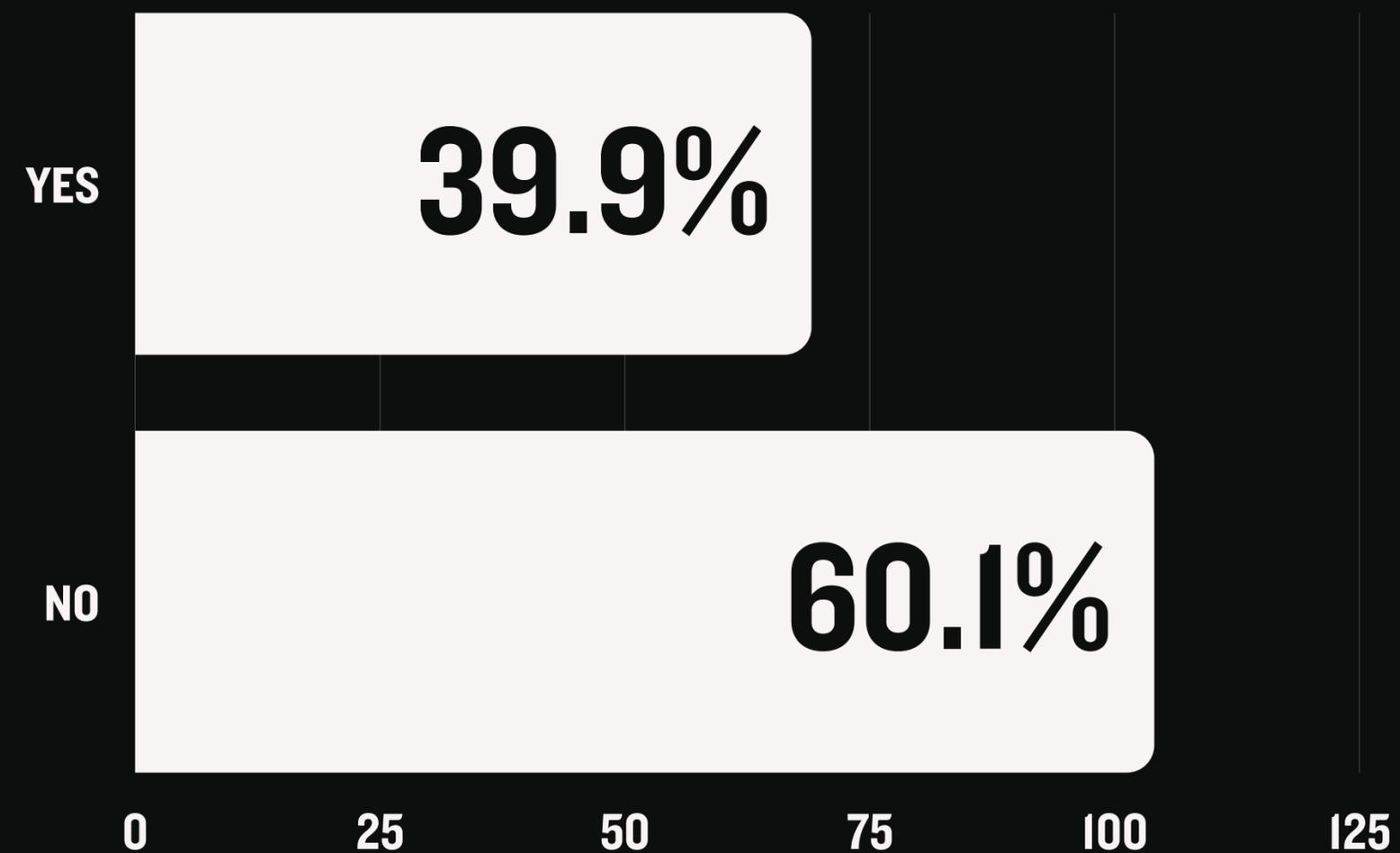




**THE PHYSICAL &  
EMOTIONAL TOLL  
OF RESCUE.** ■

# PHYSICAL TOLL.

"Have you ever been **physically injured** due to your rescue work?"



# PHYSICAL TOLL.

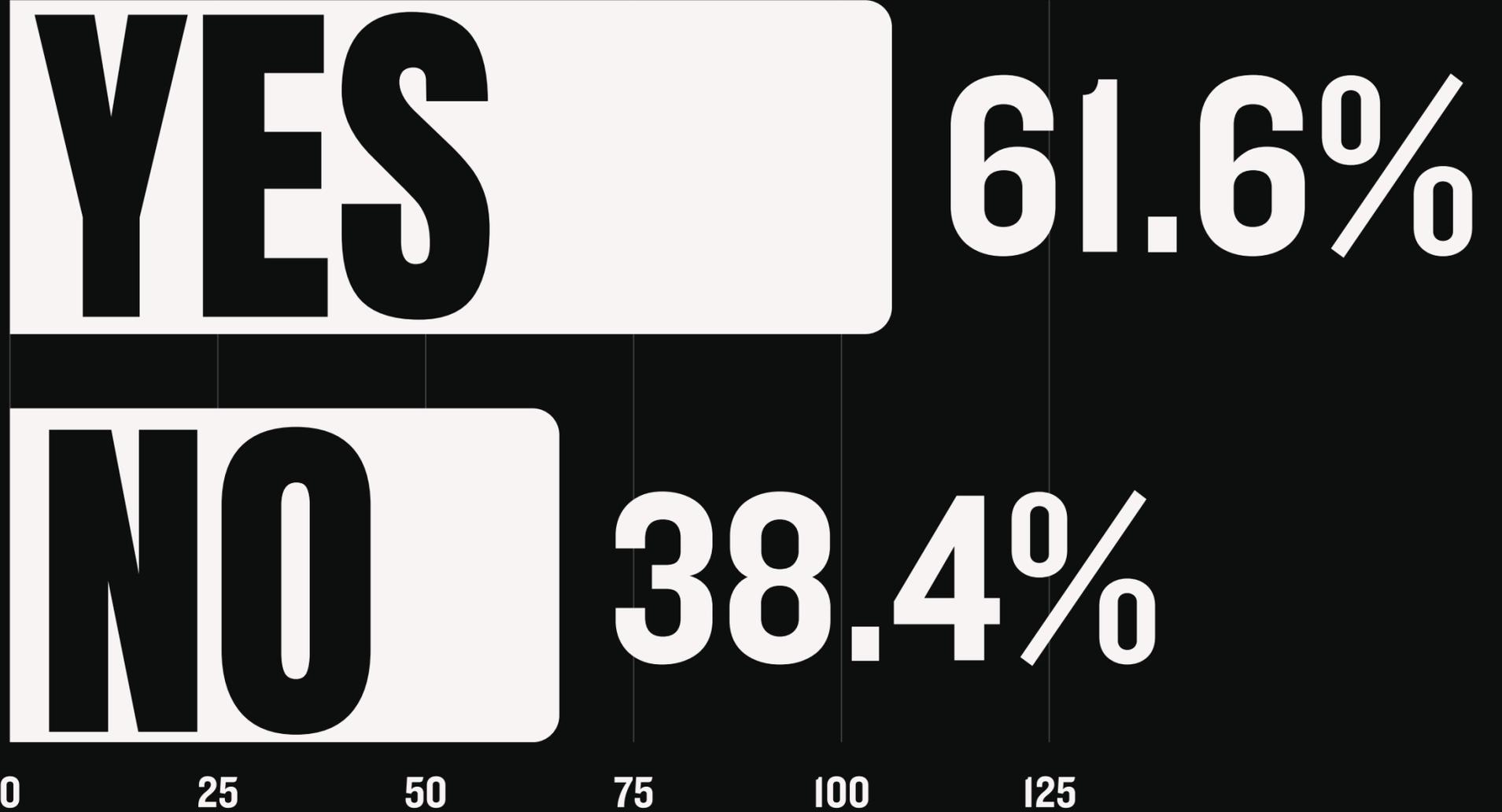
Of those injured, **49 incurred medical expenses.** Whilst the written comments did include some serious injuries that required hospitalisation, most were minor - requiring a doctor's visit and medication such as antibiotics.



# EMOTIONAL TOLL.



**"Do you ever think about giving up rescue?"**



# EMOTIONAL TOLL.



Respondents were invited to give reasons as to why they have/are considering giving up rescue work.

Eighty responses were provided.

One of the main reasons given was **the stress caused by the work.**

# EMOTIONAL TOLL.



Other themes that emerged:

**Lack of support**

inc. difficulty fundraising

**Relentless work**

**Public pressure**

# EMOTIONAL TOLL.



Other themes that emerged:

**Worsening  
of welfare  
issues**

**Family life  
being  
affected**

**Social  
media  
criticism**

# EMOTIONAL TOLL.

Other themes that emerged:

Many of the respondents also expressed **frustration in relation to government and local councils regarding:**

- legislation/policy that worsens the welfare crisis- such as dog breeding legislation
- concern about the enforcement of welfare laws

Many also expressed frustration about the lack of public concern for welfare and feeling by those in rescue that **animals are viewed as disposable.**



# EMOTIONAL TOLL.



**"Lack of support and frustration with government departments that allow over-breeding of dogs, including greyhounds. I feel it's an affront to people like me."**

**"Emotional fatigue, anxiety attacks, guilt for the ones you cannot help."**

**"I feel I'm not present at all. My mind is always on rescue. It absorbs every fibre of my being. There is no off button."**

# EMOTIONAL TOLL.



**"It feels like we're propping up the government, preventing them from having to deal with the welfare crisis themselves."**

**"The relentlessness of it, the feeling that we're always in the depths of reacting/dealing with incoming dogs."**

**"Dealing with injured and starving kittens is harrowing and difficult."**

# EMOTIONAL TOLL.



**I feel like I've been forced to give up my family, home and all my time, all unpaid, without gratitude or thanks (except from the dogs), all whilst puppy farmers continue to churn out thousands upon thousands of dogs ... hounds bred to death and treated like vermin ... farmers having litter after litter of collies wanted by nobody.**

# EMOTIONAL TOLL.



"Have you ever been **abused** or **threatened** by a member of the public as part of your rescue work?"

33.7%

**NO**

**YES**

66.3%

# THREATS.



Of those who answered 'yes' the threats were made:

**62**

**ONLINE**

**43**

**FACE-TO-  
FACE**

**35**

**PHONE**

# EMOTIONAL TOLL.



Written responses noted that some respondents had been subject to verbal abuse often. The threats have included:

Picked up a guy's dog that was straying. When I asked for proof of ownership he threatened to kill me if I didn't hand the dog over.

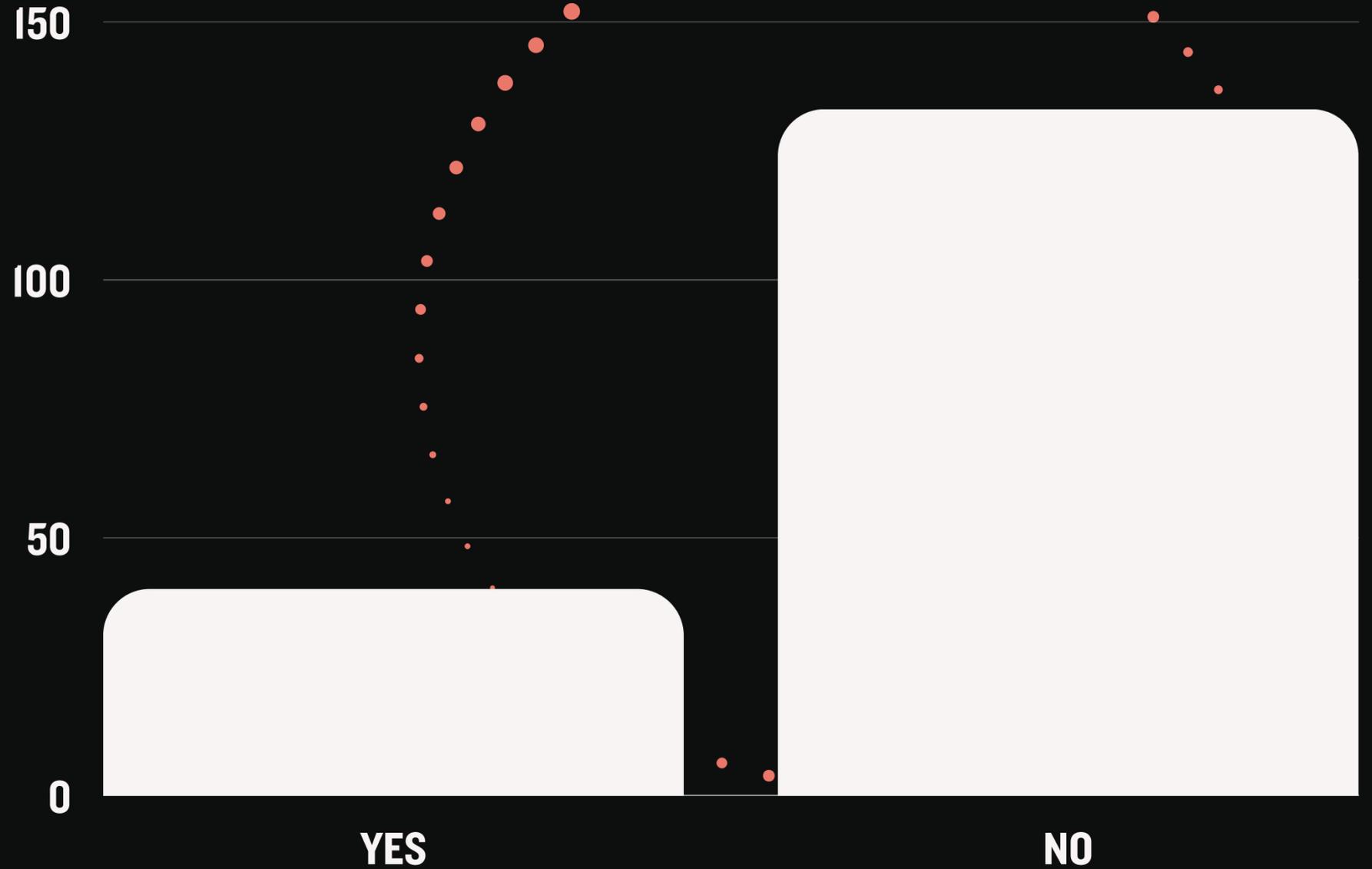
Rescue told: "If you don't come now I'll get a shovel and kill it."

When people want to surrender ASAP and there's no space available they get very irate. People trying to reclaim dogs can also be quite aggressive.

# EMOTIONAL TOLL.



Have you ever **sought counselling** to deal with the stress/anxiety caused by your rescue work?

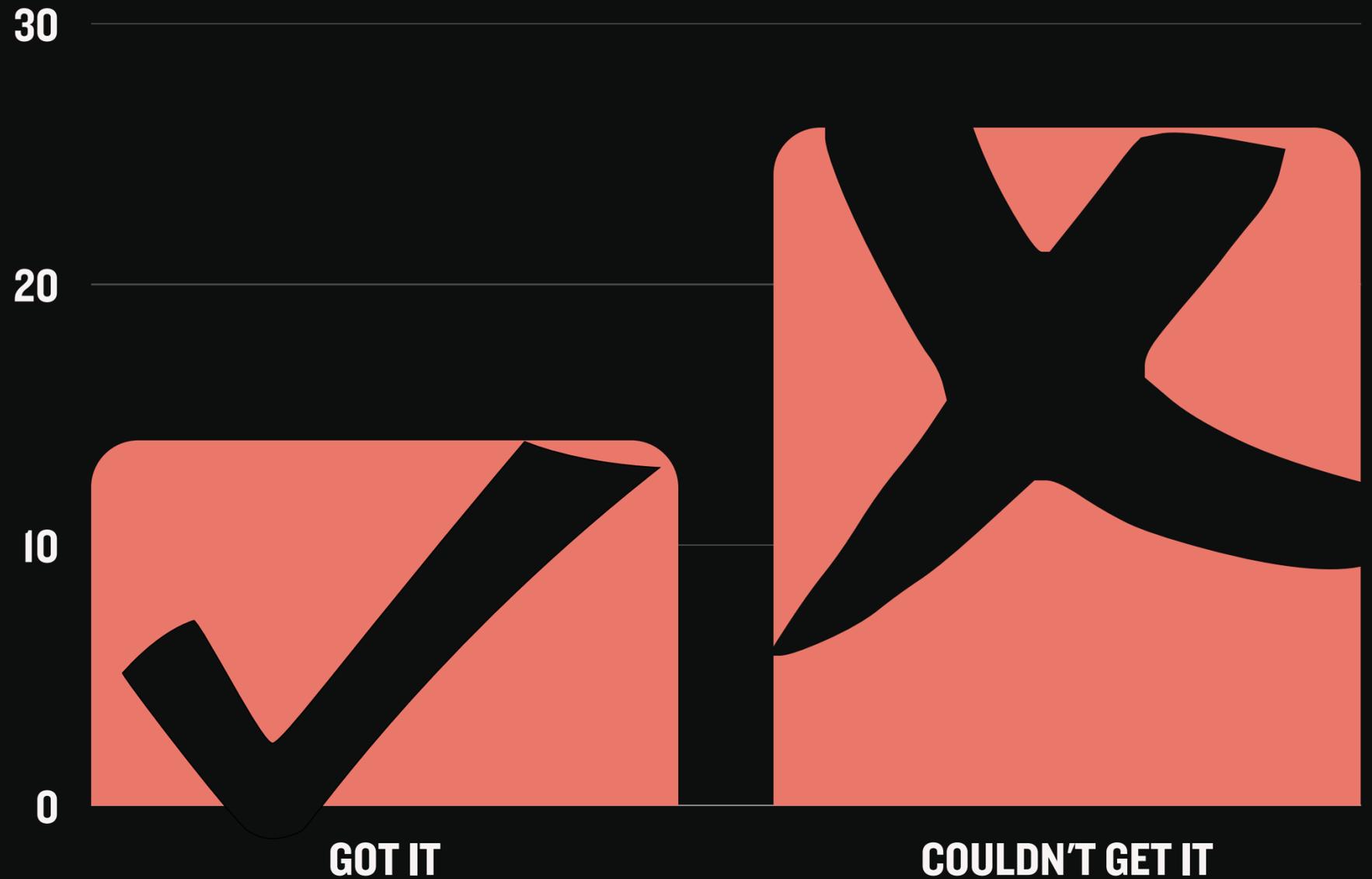


# EMOTIONAL TOLL.



Of those who needed it, **how many could get the help they needed?**

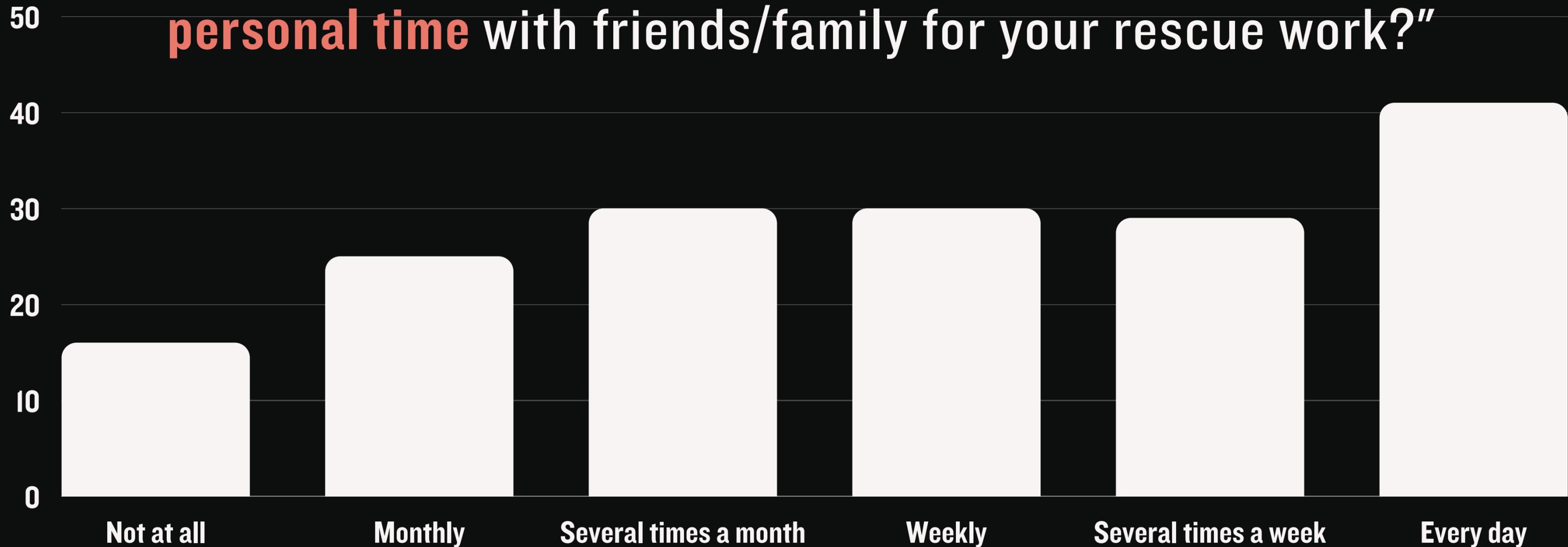
Of those who received counselling (14), 6 paid for their own sessions.



# EMOTIONAL TOLL.



"Over the last 3 months, how often have you **given up personal time** with friends/family for your rescue work?"



# EMOTIONAL TOLL.



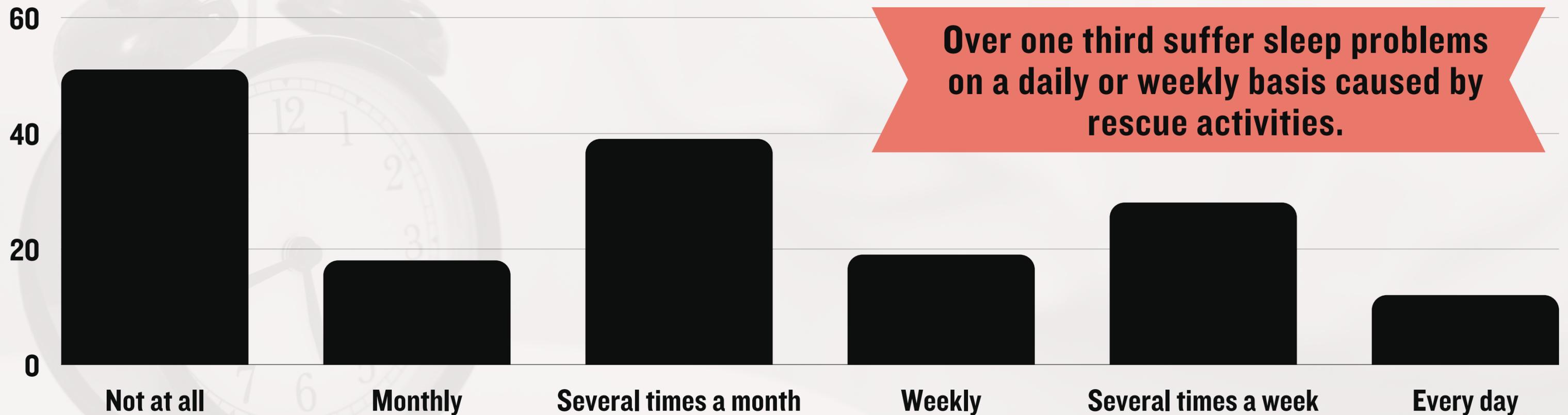
Almost **one quarter** of those surveyed **give up personal time to rescue on a daily basis.**



# EMOTIONAL TOLL.



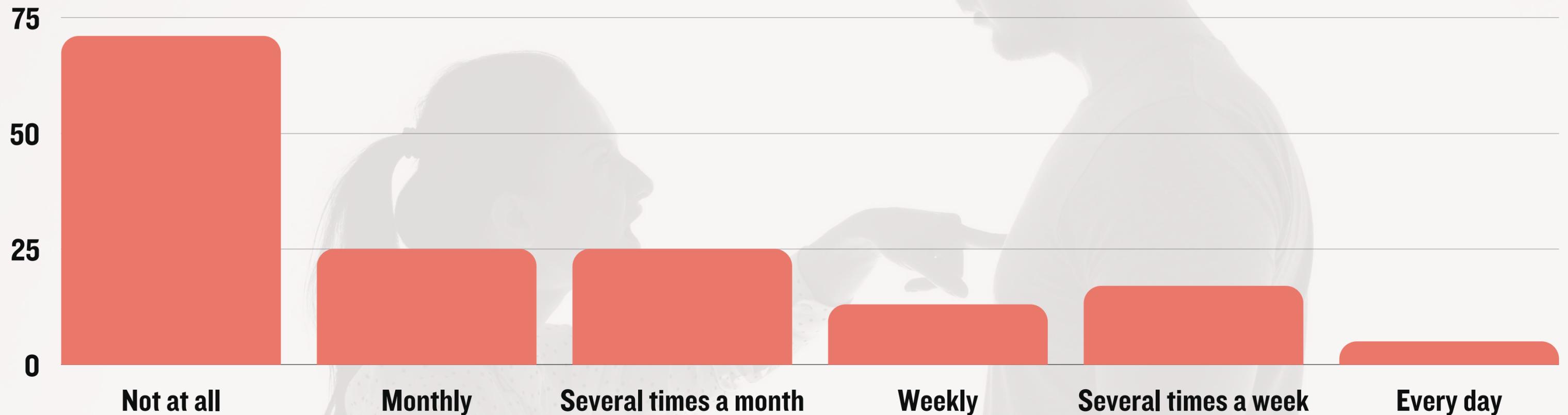
"Over the last 3 months, how often have your rescue activities caused you to experience sleep problems?"



# EMOTIONAL TOLL.



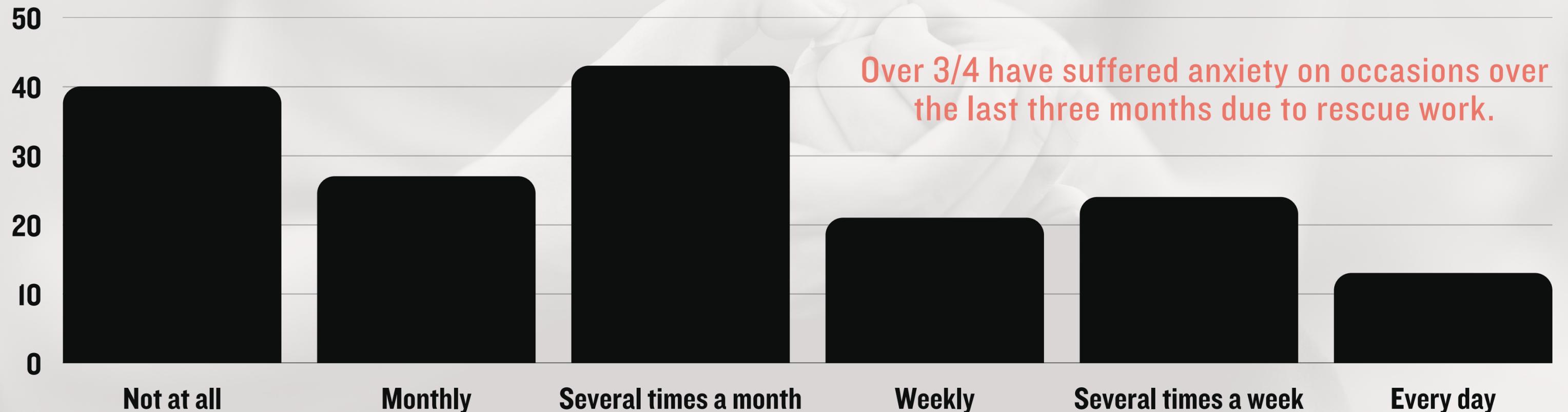
**"Over the last 3 months, how often have your rescue activities caused conflict in your personal relationships?"**



# EMOTIONAL TOLL.



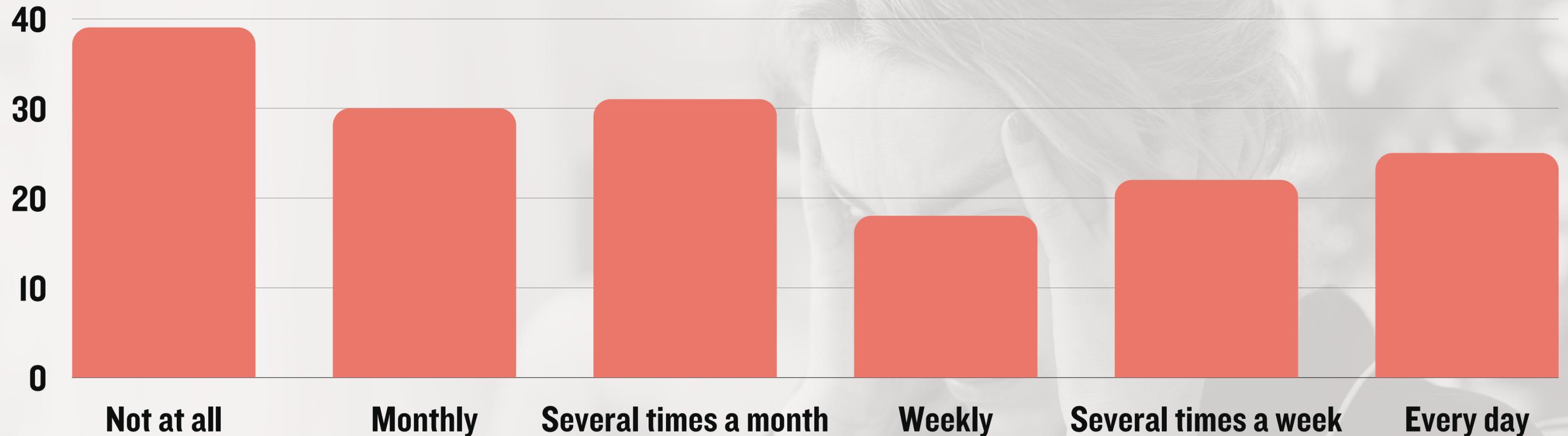
**"Over the last 3 months, how often has your rescue work made you feel nervous, anxious, or on edge?"**



# EMOTIONAL TOLL.



"Over the last 3 months, how often has your rescue work given rise to feelings of restlessness and difficulty relaxing?"



# EMOTIONAL TOLL.



“Over the last 3 months, how often has your rescue work led to you becoming easily annoyed or irritable?”

Over 3/4 have become easily annoyed or irritable on occasions over the last 3 months due to rescue work.



### **Finance and mental health**

Over 61% of respondents reported they had considered giving up rescue work and the written answers detailed how the lack of support and difficulty fundraising were some of the reasons why. Over three quarters of respondents have suffered nervousness/anxiety on occasions over the last three months due to rescue work. Of the 23% of respondents who reported needing counselling as a consequence of their rescue work, 65% reported that they did not receive counselling because they could not afford it.

It is apparent from these results that one of the key factors of stress and burnout in the sector relates to finances. Related to this is the issue that ACWs' ability to access professional services to cope with the stress of rescue and develop resilience is impacted by access to funding.

### **Influence of the public on mental health of ACW**

Respondents reported that emotional abuse and threats from the public have caused them distress. Some of these threats relate to the relinquishment of animals, where ACW are forced into a position where they are told that animals would be killed if the rescue did not take them. We query whether this type of emotional blackmail - where rescues are forced into taking animals they may not have capacity for - is one of the reasons why such a significant proportion of rescues are using precarious types of animal housing such as private boarding. We suggest that this is an area that requires further research. With better funding rescues would be able to house animals in more secure accommodation

Additionally, we query whether the commodification of animals through industries such as commercial dog breeding devalues the lives of animals and creates a situation where sectors of the public feel entitled to "dispose" of animals when they are no longer wanted. 54 respondents cited public education on animal welfare as an issue in need of urgent attention



# MENTAL HEALTH.

## Influence of government policy on mental health of ACW

What is notable about these results is that when respondents were asked whether their rescue work had caused conflict in their personal relationship with friends and family, 71% responded that it had not. This suggests that the majority of those working in rescue are receiving the social support they require. [17] This suggests that the issue relates in large part to a lack of organisational support. A number of respondents reported they felt emotionally drained because government policies were creating a situation in which animal abandonment problems would remain a significant issue - one example referred to dog breeding and greyhound racing as a contributor to the problem. These views are consistent with other studies. [18]

One respondent reported feeling that government policies/legislation such as that relating to dog breeding was an “affront” to all the hard work they did. 70 respondents reported that the uncontrolled breeding (i.e. no limit on numbers allowed to be bred) of animals was one of the most significant welfare issues faced in Ireland. The lack of organisational support as demonstrated through government policy that does not address the welfare crisis, is a factor that impacts on ACW wellbeing. [19] In essence, if the government is (a) not providing sufficient resources to support rescues; and (b) simultaneously enabling industries that can place greater burdens on rescues (such as commercial dog breeding), then it is likely that there is a perception that rescues, and the objectives they are striving to achieve, are not valued by the government. This could be considered a lack of organisational support, which is a contributing factor to worker burnout.

[17] Paul, Cosh and Lykins, “A Love–Hate Relationship with What I Do”: Protecting the Mental Health of Animal Care Workers’

[18] Murphy and others, A Qualitative Exploration of Challenges and Opportunities for Dog Welfare in Ireland Post COVID-19, as Perceived by Dog Welfare Organisations. *Animals* 2022, 12, 3289

[19] Paul, Cosh and Lykins, “A Love–Hate Relationship with What I Do”: Protecting the Mental Health of Animal Care Workers’



**We would like to extend our sincere thanks to all those who took part in this survey**

**All cleaned data is available on request - please email [info@taaproject.org](mailto:info@taaproject.org).**

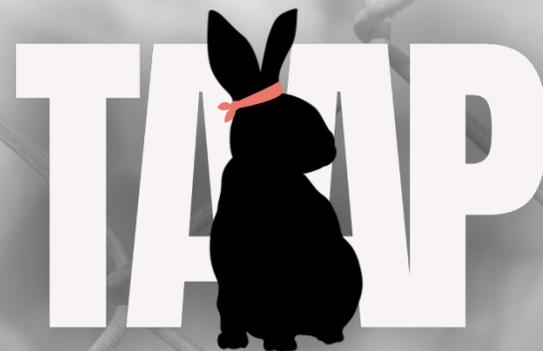
**TAAP is available to address any queries regarding this survey. Please feel free to contact us.**

**TAAP (Ireland) is a CLG company number 707552**

**TAAP is a registered charity in England and Wales charity number 1189605**



# APPENDIX 1.



The Animal Advocacy Project (Ireland) is a CLG, company number 707552

The Animal Advocacy Project is a Charitable Incorporated Organisation registered in England and Wales charity number 1189605

