

# I Like My Data Naked

by **Emily Weiss, PhD, CAAB, ASPCA Vice President, Research & Development (/blog)** on **March 11, 2010**

There is a saying that goes, “There are 3 types of lies: lies, damn lies, and statistics.” As you can imagine, as a scientist this is not my favorite saying. However, there is some truth to it. Numbers, rates, and stats make many of us a bit dizzy – we shut down to the details – and when we can’t understand the details, we sure can’t see the big picture.

**We Like Our Data...**  
**NAKED**

(/sites/pro/files/blog/wp-

content/uploads/2010/03/DSHBRD\_TEE\_ALL\_F1.jpg)The numbers actually never lie. We just need to understand what the numbers are actually representing – and when an increase or decrease is reported, what the change is compared to. This is naked data—and I am ready to bare it all.

Imagine a shelter with an intake of 1,500, 500 live releases and 500 euthanasias. The shelter can report these numbers in a variety of ways:

The shelter can choose to say that they have a “save rate” of 66.66%. Save rate is normally reported as intake minus euthanasia divided by intake. This formula includes as “saved” the population of animals who still do not have a final disposition.

The shelter might choose to report a euthanasia rate of 33.33%. This still leaves that population that has yet to have a final disposition unaccounted for.

The shelter might report their numbers using the formula that we at the ASPCA use – the [Live Release Rate \(http://www.aspcapro.org/live-release-rate.php\)](http://www.aspcapro.org/live-release-rate.php), where we take all live releases and divide that number by all live intake. In our example above, we would have a live release rate of 33.33%.

As you can see, these different formulas can make it very difficult to compare apples to apples. The same shelter has a save rate of 66.66% (where 'saved' includes animals who will likely ultimately be euthanized) and a live release rate of 33.33% (where animals without a final fate are included in the formula of intake). While a shelter reporting save rate sounds like it has a higher number of animals finding homes, it in fact has the same exact amount... they are just counting non-dispositioned animals in their formula. Now in the real world, I would hope that no shelter would ever have half of its total intake without a final disposition... but you get the point.

My gut screams that we need NAKED DATA. In our [ASPCA partner communities \(http://www.aspcapro.org/aspca-partnerships.php\)](http://www.aspcapro.org/aspca-partnerships.php), we have had the opportunity to use this naked data and have the ability to compare the data – with all numbers consistent in what they represent, using terms defined in our [glossary \(http://www.aspcapro.org/definitions.php\)](http://www.aspcapro.org/definitions.php)! – from Spokane to Tampa, thus allowing us to move toward true black-and-white benchmarks. As an example, check out [Austin's numbers for the 4<sup>th</sup> quarter of 2009 \(http://www.aspcapro.org/mydocuments/download.php?f=austin\\_2009\\_dashboard\\_3.pdf\)](http://www.aspcapro.org/mydocuments/download.php?f=austin_2009_dashboard_3.pdf), broken down from intake to outcome.

Want to learn more? We will be facilitating workshops about naked data at the [6 PetPoint summits \(http://www.petpoint.com/summits/\)](http://www.petpoint.com/summits/) and a few other regional workshops this year. I hope to see you there. If you cannot come or want to chew on more, be sure to check back here often, as I will be revisiting this topic and showing you some real-world examples of the power of naked data.