

# Which life is worth saving? Preferences between animal-based and humanitarian charities

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## SUMMARY

While charity work and philanthropy have existed for millennia, the specific issues society wants to address have changed. Specifically, support for animals has grown substantially. This development has prompted questions regarding the ethics of prioritizing animal-based or humanitarian needs. Despite these conversations, several gaps remain. Most discussions lack evidence to support their claims. The limited data that does exist usually comes from presenting subjects with hypothetical scenarios. We aimed to find whether a preference towards helping humans or animals exists. To explore this topic, we hypothesized that students and staff at Barrington High School would be more inclined to support animal-based charities. Different charity choices were presented to students and staff during a series of bake sales. We saw that students and staff did not show a strong preference for one type of charity over another ( $p > 0.05$ ). Our data suggests that students and staff at Barrington High School care relatively equal amounts for animal-based and humanitarian issues.

## INTRODUCTION

Philanthropy has been part of human society for thousands of years. The Pythagoreans, a community that began in 6<sup>th</sup> century BC, practiced charity by providing meals for poor members, securing proper burial for those who could not afford it, and offering financial support to one another (1). While charity work has continued throughout human history, the specific problems society wants to address have changed. The idea of supporting animals has gained significant traction, as seen by the birth of the modern-animal rights movement in the 1970s (2). This movement argues that both animals' and humans' interests should be equally considered (2). In response to the emerging concept of animal rights, many began to question how humans' and animals' worth compared to one another. Although there is extensive literature discussing how humans value animals, existing research mainly argues which group should be prioritized from a moral or philosophical standpoint but fails to identify which is prioritized in practice (3, 4). Of the research that does attempt to determine which is favored,

most gather data from hypothetical scenarios (5). Exploring this question in a philanthropic context will provide insight into the human-animal relationship in a society after the modern-animal rights movement. Further, it will reveal whether people favor humanitarian or animal-based needs in real world situations.

In 2019, Congress enacted the first law making animal cruelty a federal crime. Laws criminalizing animal cruelty are increasingly supported not only by animal welfare advocates, but also by law enforcement and American society (6). The recent legal protections animals have received suggests that the American public has become more aware of and concerned about animal wellness. However, this love of animals is often overshadowed by an obligation to prioritize humans. For example, at the Cincinnati Zoo in 2016, a three-year-old boy entered Harambe the gorilla's enclosure. When the fate of two lives was placed under the zookeeper's discretion, he shot and killed Harambe (7). The zoo workers cared for Harambe, yet they decided to end his life. This situation exposes a larger moral inconsistency: animals are simultaneously slaughtered for meat and worshipped as deities. Some are viewed as resources (labor, food, materials) while others are treated as man's best friend, often even regarded as members of the family (8). Despite the increased advocacy for animal protection, there are still situations where we decide their lives are less important than humans'.

We conducted our experiment on a niche group of individuals: the students and staff at Barrington High School (BHS). While the idea of prioritizing humans is widespread, it is less prevalent among younger people such as children and adolescents (9). This is especially likely for children from urban areas in developed countries, who see animals depicted in highly positive and anthropomorphized forms (10). The Barrington community falls into this group and strongly values animals, with horses playing an essential and celebrated role in the area's foundation and history (11). This love for animals has persisted over time, exemplified by the SOUL Buddies Animal Therapy Club, which has brought therapy animals to BHS and encouraged students to volunteer and care for animals since 2018 (12).

Since people who view animals in a positive way are more likely to care about them, and Barrington has continuously valued animals, we hypothesized that BHS students and staff would significantly favor animal charities. We asked if students and staff at Barrington High School were more inclined to support animal-based or humanitarian charities. Overall, we saw that 40.7% of all transactions were made towards humanitarian charities compared to 38.9% towards animals; the remaining 20.4% were split between both charity groups. We ran three ANOVA tests based on the type of donation

involved – regular donations ( $p = 0.7192$ ), extra (donations beyond the cost of the baked goods) donations ( $p = 0.8323$ ), and total donations ( $p = 0.6866$ ). Our data highlights the highly complex relationship between humans and animals. It also suggests that people have many different reasons for supporting charity, reasons which can be used by charities to market themselves more effectively and maximize potential donations.

## RESULTS

To test our hypothesis, we held four bake sales on four days (with 2-3 weeks between each sale) during two lunch periods at BHS. When students and staff made a purchase, they selected which charity they wanted to support, either an animal-based or humanitarian cause. Humans' willingness to help others is highly influenced by donors' perceptions of victim's needs, media coverage, and how much donors can relate to recipients in terms of identity, nationality, culture, or religion (13). Further, when donating to animals, people are more inclined to help species perceived as cuter or more aesthetically appealing (14). To limit the effect of differential suffering and existing preferences, we selected animal-based and humanitarian charities that focus on similar groups facing similar problems (Table 1). No organizations focused on specific species or controversial topics were selected. This allowed us to limit other confounding variables and only focus on the effect of changing whether animals or humans were involved.

Since several individuals purchased items at multiple bake sales, each data point is referred to as a "transaction" rather than the choice of a single student or staff member. Split transactions – where the customer chose to donate half their money to each charity – were separated, as we inferred that these customers either care equally for both humans and animals or do not have a preference. Out of 165 total transactions, 30 were classified as split.

Across all four bake sales, animal-based charities received \$308.50, and humanitarian charities received \$338.50. These numbers include the \$209 earned through split transactions (Figure 1A). While 40.7% of transactions were humanitarian, 38.9% were animal-based, and only 20.4% were split, these split transactions generated roughly the same amount of money as the two more popular categories (Figure 1A-B). This suggests that the customers who wanted to support both charity categories spent more money per transaction than customers who only supported one charity, which could indicate a higher level of dedication towards the issues.

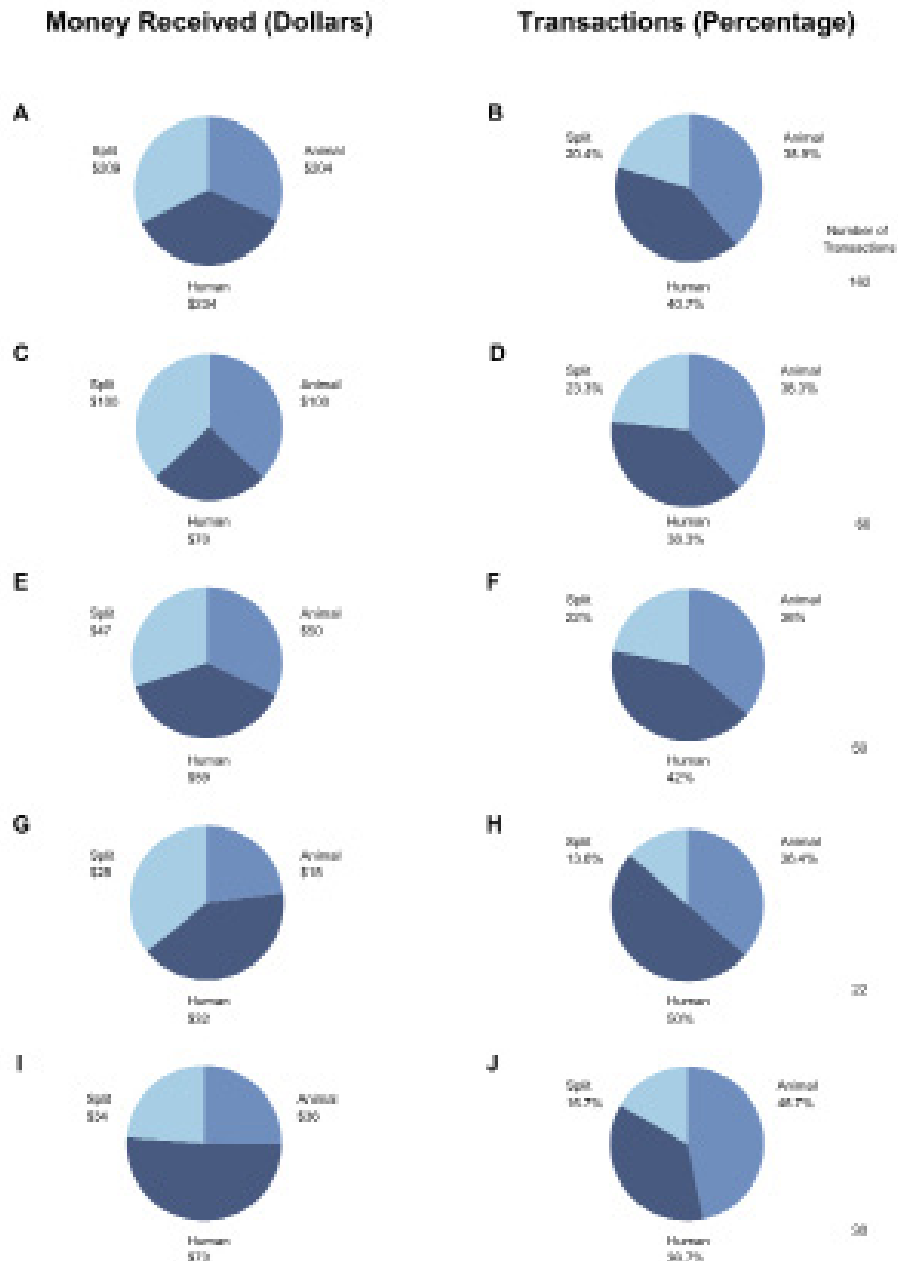
The first bake sale focused on human and animal welfare and was the most successful in terms of money received and number of transactions (Figure 1C-D). This success was likely because this bake sale happened first, not because the charity choices were specifically focused on welfare. The welfare sale aligned with the total bake sale data in the sense that while split transactions made up a much smaller percentage than humanitarian and animal-based, the amount of money received by all three groups was very similar (Figure 1C-D). The second sale focused on human and animal health and also followed the observation of split transactions occurring a smaller percentage of time while receiving similar amounts of money (Figure 1E-F). The third sale focused on abuse and has the most divided transaction distribution across all four sales, with 50% humanitarian, 36.4% animal-based, and 13.6% split (Figure 1H). Despite the contrast in transaction percentages, the split donations totaled to \$28, and the humanitarian donations came to \$32, while the animal donations were only \$18 (Figure 1G). This sale was also the least successful in terms of money received and number of transactions, which could be due to the heavy topic of abuse or external factors such as the position in order of bake sales or events happening at BHS that day. It is unclear whether the difference in transactions towards each group is due to the specific issue of abuse or because of the small number of

Title	Animal-Based	Humanitarian	Summary of Charity Goals	
Welfare	Animal Welfare Institute	UNICEF	International charity that focuses on increasing animal welfare and rights	International charity that focuses on increasing human welfare and rights
Health	Morris Animal Foundation	National Institutes of Health	Invests in science to improve animal health	Invests in science to improve human health
Abuse	ASPCA	Child Rescue Coalition	Focuses on preventing animal cruelty and saving animals from abuse	Focuses on preventing child exploitation and saving children from abuse
Housing	PAWS Chicago	Chicago Coalition for the Homeless	Chicago-based charity that provides healthcare, shelter, and emotional support for stray animals	Chicago-based charity that provides healthcare, housing, and emotional support for homeless people

**Table 1: Charity pairings based on summary of goals.** All selected charities received a four-star (highest) rating on Charity Navigator, an organization that evaluates charitable organizations based on their practices, financial accountability, and overall performance (15). Summaries in the rightmost columns were condensed to highlight similarities between each charity. Signs using this neutral verbiage were displayed at each bake sale to ensure each charity received equal advertising.

transactions. Perhaps if more people had purchased items at this sale, the data would regress towards the total distribution (**Figure 1B**). The fourth and final sale focused on housing/homelessness, and while humans were chosen 10% less than animals, they received more than twice the amount of donations (**Figure 1I-J**). This reflects many BHS students' and staff's opinions on housing, as several students approached us and spoke strongly against supporting homeless people. It's plausible that while many participants chose the animal-based charity, those that chose the humanitarian charity were more passionate about the cause.

We ran three ANOVA tests based on the type of donation involved. We began by testing if there was a difference amongst regular donations, comparing the base amount of donations each group received across all bake sales. Our test found that there was no significant difference in regular donations ( $p = 0.7192$ ). To further investigate if supporters of one charity group were more enthusiastic than the other, we calculated how many extra donations each group received (donations where the amount of money given exceeded the price of baked goods purchased). Humanitarian charities received \$12 extra and animal-based charities received



**Figure 1: Distribution of bake sale data.** Across all bake sales the **A)** total money and **B)** total percentage of transactions towards each group. During the welfare sale **C)** money received and **D)** percentage of transactions towards each group. During the health sale **E)** money received and **F)** percentage of transactions towards each group. During the housing sale **G)** money received and **H)** percentage of transactions towards each group. During the abuse sale **I)** money received and **J)** percentage of transactions towards each group.

\$15 extra. While these amounts have a difference of \$3, the ANOVA test found that this difference was not statistically significant ( $p = 0.8323$ ). Finally, we tested if there was a significant difference in total donations (sum of base cost of baked goods and extra donations beyond the cost of baked goods) which yielded similar results ( $p = 0.6866$ ), suggesting there is no significant difference in total donations.

## DISCUSSION

Our research explored the dynamic between humans and animals, specifically after the modern-animal rights movement. The intricate relationship between animals and humans examines various subjects such as empathy, connection, and welfare. Understanding these relations is crucial for improving the quality of life of both animals and humans (16).

While research was performed as rigorously as possible, several limitations must be considered. First, there were many students and staff who purchased items at multiple bake sales. While several chose to always support humans or always support animals, others switched each time. However, to ensure the anonymity of the participants, we were unable to track which transactions were made by repeat customers. As a result, some individuals' charity choice was considered multiple times instead of once, which may have influenced our data. If we could identify which transactions were whose, individuals would not be counted more than once, and our data would have been more accurate.

We conducted our study with a large number of possible participants; however, there were only 162 transactions in total, which fell short of our expected participation levels. Having a larger number of participants would have made our results more accurate. This could have been achieved by lowering the prices of our items or increasing the size of each baked good. Further, the baked goods may not have aligned with certain potential customers' dietary needs and food preferences.

While our study was extremely small, it may still be useful for additional research. This process and its findings can be consulted by a wide range of groups such as charity organizations, animal rights activists, anthrozoologists, and people within the Barrington community. This paper displays the revenue generation capabilities and preferences of BHS students and staff. Future researchers may find value in conducting similar experiments within additional communities, or to measure the difference in support between other charitable organizations. They may also be interested in conducting an in-depth analysis comparing the support received by a larger selection of issues - such as war refugees of various religions, races, and regions; predominantly male and female-divided topics such as health and sexual violence; etc. If other researchers pursued these topics, they could consider gathering information on the demographics of their participants to enhance their findings. Researchers could assess if people with similar characteristics prioritized similar charities, and if participants were more likely to select causes that felt closer to them (for instance, if women favored women's issues more than men did, or if participants of a certain culture favored issues specific to their culture).

Ultimately, our results indicate that differences in donations are not significant between animal-based and humanitarian charities, regardless of the nature of the donation (regular,

extra, or total). While people often prioritize other humans, we believed that the age of our participants combined with Barrington's strong appreciation for animals would lead BHS students and staff to show a preference for animals (10). Our findings do not support this hypothesis and suggest that BHS students are not preferential to either group. Further, many participants chose to split their donations between the two groups equally. Many others had no leaning, and several asked to donate to whichever charity had previously raised less. This suggests that students and staff at BHS care equally for both people and animals, which contradicts the claims made in existing literature. Our findings imply that the question of humans versus animals is much more complicated than current research suggests. Many people do not want to choose one group over the other, they want both species to receive the support they deserve.

Possible explanations for the lack of significant preference could be attributed to the fact that the Barrington school district has an extremely high socio-economic status. Data Commons' summary of United States Census Bureau data reports that in 2022, the school district's median household income was 216% of the median household income of the United States (17). Psychology professors Mark Brandt, Geoffrey Witherall, and PJ Henry studied nearly 2000 participants from the United States and United Kingdom and measured their changes in socioeconomic status and social trust - an individual's expectation that other humans are good and can be relied on - over time. The professors found that there is a positive and significant correlation between changes in socioeconomic status and social trust (18). This suggests that BHS students' and staff's support for humanitarian charities may be related to their high socioeconomic status, and samples with lower incomes may generate results more aligned with existing research. A larger sample of a broader population that more closely represents the United States overall might suggest that people otherwise like BHS students and staff (young and raised with positive, anthropomorphized depictions of animals) prefer supporting animals. Our results, which suggest that students and staff at BHS care equally for both humanitarian and animal-based charities, may be due to the community's elevated levels of wealth. Further, Barrington's high socioeconomic status suggests that students were likely to have more disposable income and therefore be more likely to purchase from bake sales and be able to support the causes they chose.

Based on these results, we suggest that future researchers consider the motivations of individuals - perhaps through a questionnaire or values assessment - rather than generalizing humanity. They may find merit in studying how people's opinions change over time (based on their environment, stage of life, changes in income, and larger societal trends), how cultural views of animals and humans affect their preferences, and if individuals who do have a preference hold animosity towards the other group. The motivation behind our decisions is multifaceted and influences the charities we decide to support.

Determining these motivations is crucial to increasing donations. To maximize the effectiveness of resources, charities should focus on targeting the right audience rather than the largest one. By curating campaigns to smaller groups whose values align with their goals, organizations can create more relevant messages to increase their chances of



receiving donations (19). Additionally, potential donors may experience fatigue (13). Donors are constantly bombarded by hundreds of problems that they may not feel particularly connected to. Online advertisements, rounding up at checkout lines, and distributing flyers outside of grocery stores are tactics that reach the widest audience. However, potential donors might feel overwhelmed by the sheer volume of issues and believe their contributions are futile. Preventing donor fatigue will allow charities to build stronger relationships with their supporters, leading to increased donations and more impactful results. Overall, prioritizing quality over quantity outreach ensures that resources are used effectively and allows groups to maximize their impact. Understanding why people donate will allow charities to determine their desired audience.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

### Procedures and participants

Four bake sales were held during two out of three lunch periods at BHS across the span of two months. We chose to do four different sales so we could represent a variety of humanitarian and animal-based issues, and it also allowed us to have a “cooldown period” between each one, so people who purchased at one sale would feel less reluctant to purchase at another. None of the four days chosen were close to important events or circumstances that might make one more likely to donate to a certain group.

We sold the same baked goods at each event, and kept the conditions (time, place, advertising) for each sale consistent. Each bake sale had a sign presenting an animal-based and humanitarian charity that had similar focuses. The names of the charities were displayed along with a summary of what the charity does, using neutral language and similar descriptions to reduce potential bias (Table 1). When students and staff made a purchase, they selected which of the two charities they wanted their money to go to.

The participants in this study were the students and staff present during the two lunch periods at BHS without any selection for grade, age, ethnicity, gender, political views, and other factors that may influence the outcome of the study. All procedures were approved by an Institutional Review Board (IRB) prior to conducting studies.

### Data collection procedures and analyses

Data was stored in a spreadsheet that was updated after each transaction (purchase of a baked good in exchange for money, which was donated to the customer’s choice between the two charities). Data analysis yielded the total amount, the percentage of total money, and the amount of extra donations received by each charity. All other calculations, figures, and data collection processes were produced and stored in Google Sheets.

We performed one-way ANOVA tests to determine whether there was a significant difference in support for animal-based and humanitarian charities.

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