

PAWS FOR ACCESS

A Global Survey on Assistance Dogs Rights

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**International
Guide Dog
Federation**



**Assistance Dogs
INTERNATIONAL**

TABLE OF CONTENTS

| |
|------------------------------|
| Overview 3 |
| Report Purpose 3 |
| Background 3 |
| Problem Statement 4 |
| The Challenges 4 |
| Regional Differences 4 |
| Defining Assistance Dogs 5 |
| The Survey 5 |

| |
|---|
| Key Findings 5 |
| Access Issues 5 |
| Verification & Justification 6 |
| Transport 6 |
| Skepticism & Fake Certifications 7 |
| Emotional & Behavioral Impact 8 |
| Perception of UN Rights 8 |
| Comparative Statistics Across Countries 8 |
| Advocacy & Next Steps 9 |
| Conclusion 10 |



OVERVIEW

Public spaces are essential for social interaction, community engagement, and accessing vital goods and services. Unfortunately, assistance dog handlers often face barriers to these necessities due to being denied access when accompanied by their dogs. This is a significant ongoing issue with serious effects on the wellbeing of individuals requiring assistance dogs.

The **International Guide Dog Federation (IGDF)** and **Assistance Dogs International (ADI)** survey aimed to uncover the challenges faced by assistance dog handlers in accessing the community. The survey revealed significant access issues and refusals, highlighting the need for greater awareness, education, and legislative changes to support these individuals.



“I balance my experiences between advocating and avoiding”

REPORT PURPOSE

The primary goal of this report is to offer a global perspective on the significant and consistent challenges faced by assistance dog handlers daily, and to identify the advocacy and social change efforts they seek to improve inclusion.

This is achieved in three ways:

1. The report aims to raise awareness about the challenges that handlers encounter in public spaces by pinpointing the most common issues and the effects on wellbeing.
2. It will provide a robust evidence base by detailing the findings from the IGDF/ADI survey, and documenting the prevalent issues faced by these assistance dog handlers.
3. The report will offer recommendations, informed by the responses of assistance dog handlers, that is aimed at legislators, businesses and the public to address these issues.



“It’s disheartening to see how often my guide dog and I are turned away from places”

BACKGROUND

Assistance dog handlers face substantial access challenges in public spaces, businesses, and public transport. These issues vary regionally due to differing regulations and public perceptions of assistance dogs. In countries including the United States of America, the United Kingdom, Canada and Australia, assistance dog handlers are often denied access to crucial products and services.



“A doctor refused to see me because I had an assistance dog”

The emotional toll on assistance dog handlers is also considerable, leading to feelings of exclusion, anxiety, and frustration. This is exacerbated by the need to continually advocate for their rights before receiving equal treatment. Despite legal frameworks designed to protect these rights, the implementation and enforcement of these laws can be inconsistent across different regions, reflecting a broader issue of global disparity in the treatment and perception of assistance dogs.

These issues underscore the need for improved public education, clearer definitions of assistance roles, and stronger enforcement of existing laws. This approach would help mitigate the challenges faced by handlers and promote a more inclusive and accessible environment for all assistance dog handlers.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

THE CHALLENGES

Assistance dog handlers encounter significant access challenges in areas including restaurants, cafes, hotels, medical facilities, and public transportation systems like ride share services and buses. Assistance dog handlers report that these access denials are frequent and widespread, with almost one in two survey respondents (43%) reporting they had been refused access to public spaces in the past 12 months.

Additionally, the data shows that these experiences are often motivated by the public's limited understanding and misconceptions about the roles and rights of assistance dogs. Despite legal protections in many regions, enforcement of these laws often varies, and many businesses and individuals are either unaware of or choose to ignore these mandates.

REGIONAL DIFFERENCES

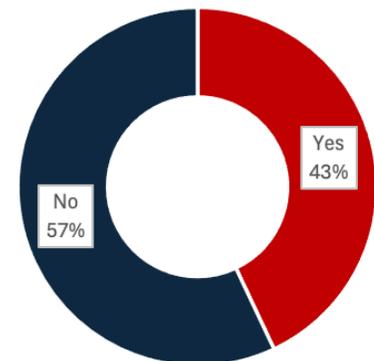
Regional differences in the treatment of dog handlers arise due to disparities in public understanding, local legislation, and the application of laws between countries.

Data from the survey reveals how wide-ranging and consistent access refusals are globally. In the UK and Netherlands, 79% of handlers reported multiple access refusals within the last year; followed by Russia (71%), Ireland (60%), and Australia (58%). These figures underscore the necessity for a global approach to address these challenges uniformly.



"Have been refused until explained legislation and the legal liability"

Refused Access in the Last 12 Mos



"It amazes me how many people do not know what a harness means or what role a Guide Dog plays"

DEFINING ASSISTANCE DOGS

To build a case for a standardized global definition, this report defines assistance dogs as:

Dogs that are specifically trained to perform tasks that mitigate the effects of a disability, including guiding, alerting, medical response, mobility support, and psychiatric assistance.

This distinction excludes emotional support animals (ESAs) which provide comfort but are not trained to perform disability-related tasks.



“I have had numerous places try to refuse access and I assertively explain ADA and consequences of not adhering”

THE SURVEY

The survey has a global scope and seeks to gain data on areas where insights into assistance dog handlers experiences are currently lacking. The survey received responses from over 1,000 dog handlers across 20 countries. The countries with the highest number of respondents (10+ respondents) included the USA, Australia, Russia, Canada, Ireland, Spain, the Netherlands, UK, and Japan.

The types of assistance dogs used by respondents were diverse, including:

- Guide dogs, for people with visual impairments.
- Hearing dogs, for people with hearing impairments.
- Service dogs, assisting with physical disabilities, mobility support, retrieval.
- Service dogs assisting with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or other psychiatric disabilities.
- Medical alert/response dog.

KEY FINDINGS

ACCESS ISSUES

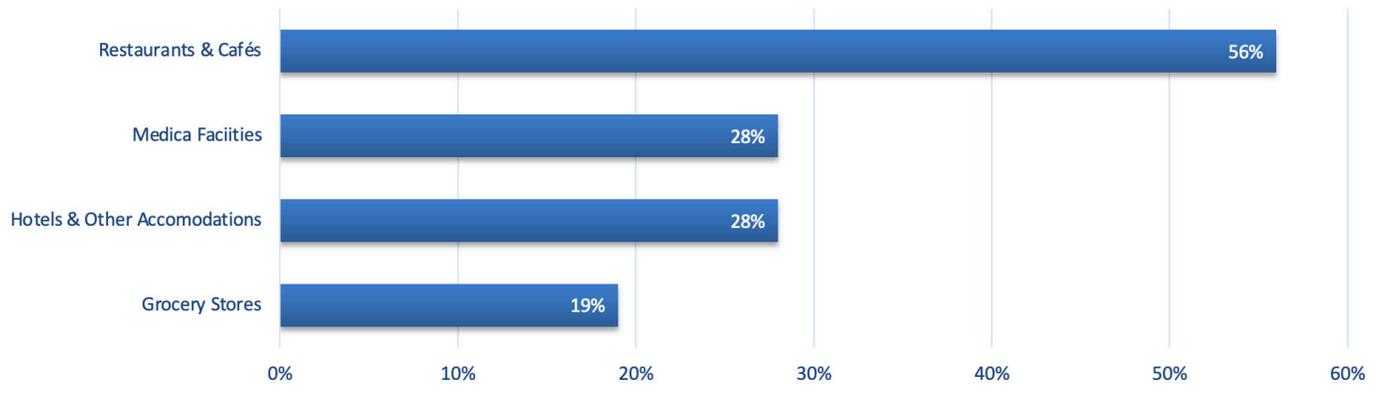
The most common places where access issues were reported include restaurants and cafes (56%), hotels and other accommodation (28%), medical facilities (28%), and grocery stores (19%).

Respondents shared personal experiences of being refused access, often due to misconceptions about assistance dogs.



“I was refused entry to a restaurant because they said my dog would cause allergies to other customers.”

Most Common Public Spaces Where Assistance Dog Users Encounter Issues



VERIFICATION AND JUSTIFICATION

Handlers frequently need to verify or justify their assistance dogs, especially those with invisible disabilities or non-traditional assistance dog breeds. This need for verification adds to the emotional burden and frustration experienced by handlers.

The type of assistance dog also influenced the frequency of access issues. Guide dog handlers and those with psychiatric service dogs reported higher rates of refusals compared to handlers of other types of assistance dogs. For example, 48% of guide dog handlers and 40% of handlers with service dogs that support physical disabilities and psychiatric disabilities reported access issues, compared to the global average of 43%. In addition, people with invisible disabilities face additional pressure to justify the legitimacy of their assistance dog. This indicates a need for targeted awareness campaigns to address misconceptions about these specific types of assistance dogs.



"I was turned away from a hotel because they didn't believe my dog was a legitimate service animal"



"'But you don't look disabled' is a big one"

TRANSPORT

Transportation poses significant challenges for assistance dog handlers. Issues remain when accessing transport options, with 56% of respondents globally experiencing refusals in taxis or rideshares like Uber and Lyft. Guide dog handlers reported even higher refusal rates at 63%.



"Uber and Lyft are the most difficult. I've been refused, driven away from, almost run over, you name it"

Reasons for refusals include allergies and concerns about dog hair in vehicles. Such issues can create a significant barrier to completing important daily tasks. For instance, being regularly rejected from transportation services decreases the ability to commit to scheduled arrival times. With these challenges being reported globally, there is a clear need for international advocacy and education efforts.

SKEPTICISM & FAKE CERTIFICATIONS

Doubt around the legitimacy of assistance dogs remains a persistent issue, exacerbated by the rise in fake assistance dogs in recent years. The growing popularity of assistance dogs adds an additional layer of complexity when gaining access to public spaces since it reduces the perceived credibility of genuine assistance dogs.



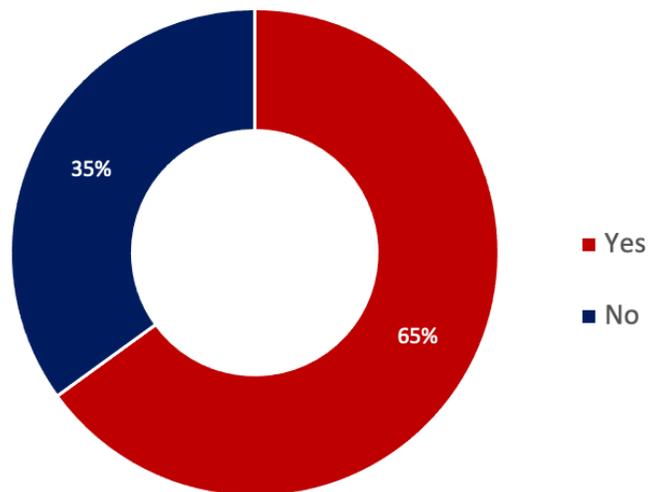
“People often question if my dog is really a service animal because of all the fake ones out there.”

This confusion is particularly compounded when vests are worn by untrained and fake assistance dogs, which takes away the integrity of what used to be clear imagery of an assistance dog. In the survey, over half (65%) of respondents encountered skepticism regarding their dog’s legitimacy as an assistance dog. The majority of these (81%) feel this has been a result of the increase of untrained assistance or emotional support dogs over time.



“Undertrained or fake “service dogs” wreaking havoc for legitimately trained service dog teams”

Have encountered interference (such as biting, lunging, snapping) from untrained assistance dogs, disrupting them/their dog from working safely.



Untrained assistance dogs are creating disruption to legitimate assistance dog handlers and have been adding to negative experiences in public spaces. Well over half of respondents (58%) have encountered interference (such as biting, lunging, snapping) from untrained assistance dogs, disrupting them and their dog from working safely.



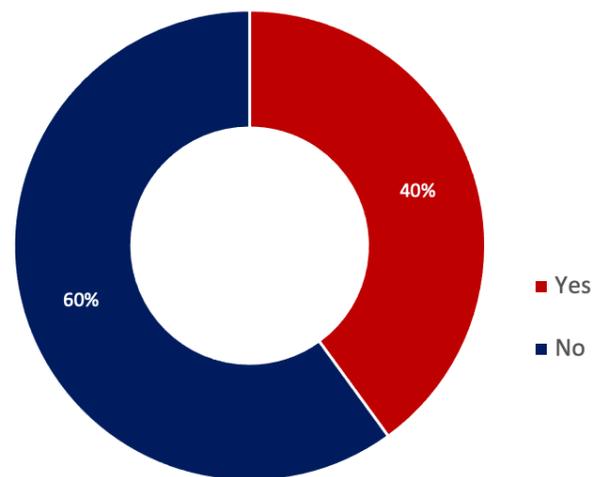
“They are even in the airplane cabin. They bite and bark at my dog and it’s very difficult for him to do his job”

EMOTIONAL & BEHAVIORAL IMPACT

The repercussions of being denied entry to a venue with an assistance dog extend beyond immediate practical inconveniences. While a rejected individual may be required to find another cafe, grocery store or bus, the emotional and subsequent behavioral impact of such experiences can linger. Many handlers reported feeling burdened, frustrated, and anxious.

As a result, 40% of respondents considered avoiding public places altogether, with higher rates in Australia (59%) and among guide dogs' users worldwide (48%).

Considered Avoiding Public Places Altogether



“A lot of people (especially business owners) have so many encounters with fake service dogs that they are skeptical”

PERCEPTION OF UNITED NATIONS RIGHTS

A significant portion of respondents globally felt that their rights under UN Conventions and Mandates were not being upheld in their respective countries (28%). This sentiment was particularly strong among those who faced frequent access refusals and skepticism about their assistance dogs. This increases significantly to 63% in the UK, and to 54% in Canada. It's also significantly higher than average amongst guide dog users, at 34%.

The lack of enforcement and awareness of these rights contributes to the ongoing challenges faced by dog handlers. As with many international laws, enforcement is an issue, however greater standardization of rules is an important objective on the road to ensuring equal treatment for dog handlers in public and should continue to be advocated for.

COMPARATIVE STATISTICS ACROSS COUNTRIES

The survey data provides a comparative view of access issues across different countries with over 10 respondents (see graph on next page for full breakdown):

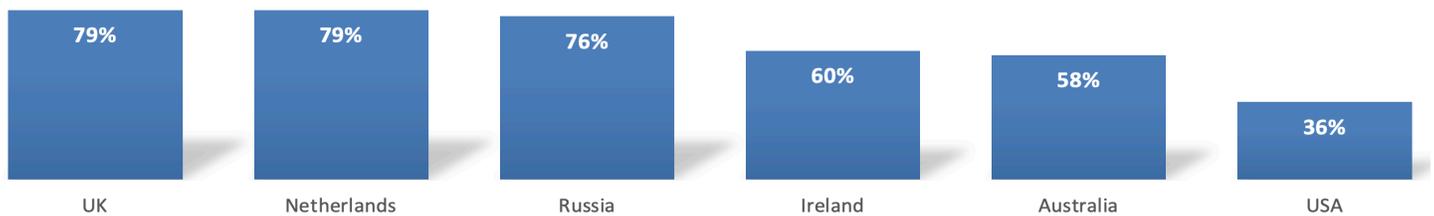
- Netherlands: reported notable issues in public transport and medical facilities.
- Australia: 58% of respondents faced access refusals, 56% experiencing multiple refusals within the last year.
- USA: reported a significant focus on airlines.



“I often feel anxious and frustrated because of the constant refusals and skepticism”

% of Assistance Dog Users that Experienced a Public Access Refusal in the Last Year

*By Country



ADVOCACY & NEXT STEPS

To address the challenges highlighted by the survey, respondents suggested five central measures to be taken. These solutions are targeted at improving base knowledge levels in businesses and the public at large, as well as simplifying the identification of legitimate assistance dogs to minimize confusion.

1. Public Education: Confusion regarding what constitutes an assistance dog is a significant factor driving rejections. Awareness campaigns are essential to clarify the roles of assistance dogs and dispel common misconceptions. Most respondents believe that public education is crucial for increasing inclusion. These campaigns should emphasize that assistance dogs can support individuals with both visible and invisible disabilities, and come in various breeds, not just traditional types like Labradors or Retrievers.



"I also walk away or avoid confrontation to keep SD [service dog] safe"

- 2. Standardization & Regulation:** It is crucial that a consistent global definition of assistance dogs and their roles is developed. Respondents support the need for standardization and regulation. Additionally, stricter penalties should be introduced for fake certifications and untrained dogs that do not match this definition. This is particularly crucial to ensure that dogs are afforded the welfare they deserve, which isn't necessarily maintained when they are not part of one of IGDF or ADI's graduate programs.
- 3. Improved Identification:** Again, clarity around the appearance of dog vests was a source of confusion. A redesign of vests and ID cards to prominently display "assistance" labels would be highly

"I don't feel like my rights are being respected or upheld"

beneficial. It may also encourage handlers to carry ID cards which can be used to validate their dog's legitimacy. Respondents feel that improved identification would help reduce skepticism.

- 4. Small Business Training:** Educate businesses about legal rights and responsibilities regarding assistance dogs. Train staff to recognize legitimate handlers and manage access requests appropriately. Respondents believe that small business training is essential for reducing access refusals.



“Hotels didn’t know about my service dogs’ access until I spoke to manager”

- 5. Legislative Reforms:** The biggest push from respondents was for legislative reforms to protect their rights. This includes advocating for better enforcement of UN conventions protecting the rights of assistance dog users and pushing for laws that clarify distinctions between emotional support animals, service, and assistance dogs.



“Legislation and legal enforcement are necessary to make the other activities impactful”

CONCLUSION

This global survey has highlighted critical access issues faced by assistance dog handlers in public places, businesses, and public transport. This underscores a widespread need for greater societal awareness, enhanced legislative frameworks, and educational efforts. Despite legal provisions aimed at facilitating access, many handlers still face undue challenges and discrimination, which not only hinders their daily activities but also impacts their emotional well-being.

This report provides a foundational analysis, revealing that such issues are not isolated incidents but part of a broader systemic problem that requires a multifaceted approach, including public education, standardization, improved identification, small business training, and legislative reforms. By implementing these measures, we can create a more inclusive and understanding environment for assistance dog handlers, preserving their dignity and rights.