



# Guide Dogs and the Visually Impaired:

## A Study of Trends, Usage, and Attributes of Guide Dog Users

Executive Summary  
Prepared by the  
Guide Dog Foundation  
for the Blind, Inc.

---

## *About the Market Survey*

“Guide Dogs and the Visually Impaired: A Study of Trends, Usage, and Attributes of Guide Dog Users” was conducted by Wedewer Research and Counsel, an independent research firm, over a three-month period. The goal of the research was to obtain information to help the Guide Dog Foundation be more responsive to the changing needs of its blind consumers and to better serve graduates and prospective graduates. Now that the research has been completed, the Foundation is developing programs and initiatives based on this research.

During the summer of 2000, the research team conducted in-depth interviews with 14 individuals in blindness-related fields; conducted two focus group sessions in New York City; and conducted 500 in-depth telephone interviews. Participants for the research were drawn randomly from a commercially purchased list. The final sample consisted of 200 guide dog users, 200 nonusers, and 100 graduates of the Guide Dog Foundation. The survey results were weighted to reflect the known demographic composition of the visually impaired population in the United States, based on the National Center for Health Statistics’ National Health Interview Survey on Disability (Phase 1, 1994-1995).

To qualify for the final sample for the telephone interviews, which are summarized in this report, participants had to be between 18 and 74 years of age; legally blind; and a current or past guide dog user, or willing to consider working with a guide dog in the future. For nonusers, participants had to report they were both financially and physically capable of working with a guide dog.

Now that the research has been completed, the Foundation can develop and implement specific programs and initiatives that will benefit the Foundation and its consumers for the years to come.

---

## *The Decision To Get A Guide Dog*

In general, guide dog users are positive ambassadors for the guide dog movement. Most nonuser respondents (79 percent) know someone who has a guide dog, and 82 percent of these individuals believe that having a guide dog has been a very positive experience for the person they know. Another 12 percent believe that having a guide dog is at least a somewhat positive experience for the person they know. Virtually no one had the impression that having a guide dog was a negative experience.

Of the nonusers interviewed, almost half reported having seriously considered getting a

guide dog at one point or another. Seventy-one percent of the respondents who have never had a guide dog agree that having a guide dog is beneficial, but they do not want or are not ready for the responsibility.

When making the decision to get a guide dog, nonusers spoke with guide dog users (45 percent) more than any other source. Thirty-nine percent spoke with a representative of a guide dog school, and 11 percent spoke with a consumer group, such as the American Council of the Blind and the National Federation of the Blind. Eight percent spoke with a representative of a guide dog organization, such as Guide Dog Users, Inc., and six percent spoke with an Orientation and Mobility specialist.

## Benefits and Drawbacks of Having A Guide Dog



There are many advantages and benefits associated with having a guide dog, such as increased mobility, independence, and companionship.

When asked to rate a list of benefits, the top two responses were “moving around with more confidence” and companionship (82 percent each). Other benefits to having a guide dog included getting around faster (77 percent), getting around with fewer accidents (76 percent), getting around more accurately (74 percent), being less dependent on others to get around (73 percent), and feeling safer at home and on the streets (67 percent).

Some of the drawbacks to having a guide dog include the financial cost; time and energy necessary for caring for the dog; others’ reactions to the dog, such as in public places; and the possible loss of one’s cane skills and independence.

For those who currently do not work with a guide dog, the top two concerns about guide dogs were leaving home for the 25-day training period (26 percent said this is a major concern) and worries that the dog could get sick or have a health problem (26 percent).

## Guide Dog Foundation Graduates Speak

The Guide Dog Foundation received high marks from its graduates, who did not know the Foundation was sponsoring the research. Ninety-four percent said they were very satisfied with the training program, citing the quality of the training, the great matches between person and guide dog, and the school’s responsiveness to their concerns.

## Demographics & Background of Sample

Almost half of the research participants (41 percent) have been blind since birth. Of those who have not been blind since birth, 77 percent have been blind for 10 years or more, 36 percent have been blind for five to nine years, and the remaining 32 percent have been blind for less than four years.

For the individuals surveyed, mobility is very important. Guide dog users and nonusers alike are very active individuals. In fact, 65 percent travel outside their home five days or more per week.

Twenty-three percent of cane users reported that they disliked using their cane. Individuals from this group are most likely to become guide dog users.

## Fast Facts

**65%** of the participants report being able to read Braille

**56%** attended a school for the blind

**53%** have Internet access

**68%** of guide dog users and 59% of nonusers prefer to receive information via audio tape

Almost half of the nonusers reported having seriously considered getting a guide dog at one point or another.

Although many nonusers have seriously considered getting a guide dog, only 7 percent have taken the step of applying to a guide dog school. An additional 40 percent have sought out information or advice about getting a guide dog.

Has anyone ever advised you against getting a guide dog? No **87%** Yes **13%**

## About the Guide Dog Foundation



Since 1946, the Guide Dog Foundation for the Blind Inc. has been providing guide dogs free of charge to blind people seeking increased mobility, independence and the companionship a guide dog provides. The Foundation's programs are provided completely free of charge, supported by contributions from individuals, foundations and corporations. Blind consumers receive the guide dog and harness, a comprehensive training program, room and board during the 25-day in-residence training session, transportation to and from our campus, and a lifetime of after-care services – all free of charge.

The Guide Dog Foundation, a not-for-profit organization, is internationally known for its excellence in guide dog breeding and training. Students come from all across the United States and abroad to train at the Foundation's Smithtown, N.Y. headquarters and receive the gift of Second Sight®.

Photographs courtesy Pamela Setchell/Viewpoint Photography

### For More Information

To learn more about the research study, the benefits of working with a guide dog, or the Guide Dog Foundation, please contact:



371 East Jericho Turnpike Smithtown, New York USA 11787

Tel: 800.548.4337 / Fax: 631.361.5192

[www.guidedog.org](http://www.guidedog.org)