



The Ash Storage Reckoning

What happens after the cremated remains come home, and why a third of American families cannot decide what comes next.

Based on a national survey of 1,000 American adults who have received a loved one's cremated remains.

Conducted by **Parting Stone**, a Public Benefit Corporation.



Executive Summary

Cremation has quickly become the way most Americans' bodies are cared for after death. According to the **Cremation Association of North America**, the national cremation rate reached **62.8 percent** in 2025 and is projected to keep climbing. The **National Funeral Directors Association** expects that rate to approach **82 percent** by 2045. With each cremation, a family is left holding their person's cremated remains, and no clear answer for what happens next.

This report looks at how families answer that question, and how many never do. In a national survey of 1,000 adults who have received a loved one's cremated remains, roughly one in three told us they have not been able to reach a decision about what to do with them. They are not careless or indifferent. They are caught in a quiet, common, and largely unspoken experience we have come to call the **ash storage reckoning**.

The findings that follow describe a population that is larger than most people imagine, more emotionally burdened than the calm surface of a shelf-bound urn suggests, and more alone in the experience than they should be. They also point to something hopeful: most families would welcome a path forward, if one were offered at the right moment and in the right spirit.

One in three families who receive a loved one's cremated remains have not been able to decide what comes next.



Six findings anchor this report:

- 1 The scale is national. About a third of families who receive cremated remains are in a state of limbo, and the population grows by hundreds of thousands of households every year.
- 2 Indecision carries a real emotional cost. Families in limbo report markedly more guilt, uncertainty, and distress than those who have resolved the question.
- 3 People carry this in silence. More than four in ten wish they had more people to talk to about it.
- 4 The cremated remains are both a comfort and a weight at once. The same urn that offers connection also carries guilt, a contradiction that defines the experience.
- 5 The barrier is emotional, not informational. Families are not waiting for facts. They are waiting until they are ready.
- 6 The readiness is there. Two in three would welcome a way to honor their loved one that felt right to them.

PART I

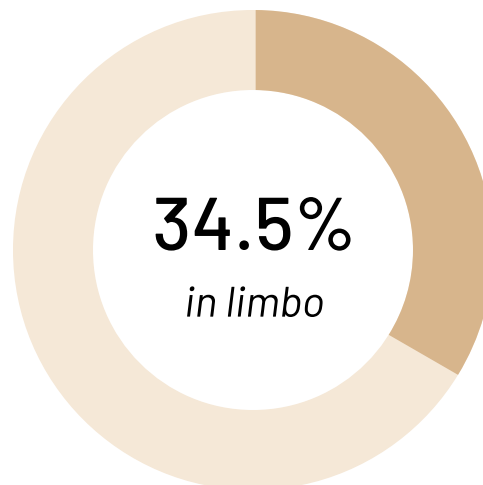
The Hidden Population

For most of American history, what happened to a body after death wasn't really a decision. It was tradition: you were buried, in a plot, under a headstone that carried your name. Cremation broke that pattern. It hands a family their person's cremated remains, and no established answer for what comes next.

That's now the reality for more families than ever. The cremation rate has more than doubled in a generation, passing burial for the first time around 2015 and reaching 62.8 percent of all deaths in 2025. With roughly **3.07 million deaths a year** in the United States, that means about two million families annually receive a loved one's cremated remains.

We asked 1,000 of them where they stand. The answer is the foundation of this report.

Where families stand with a loved one's cremated remains



34.5% in limbo (some ideas, stuck, or not engaged).

The remaining 65.5% resolved (acted, planned, or intentionally kept).

Figure 1. Among adults who have received a loved one's cremated remains. Survey base n=1,000.

34.5 percent of families are in limbo: some have ideas but haven't committed, some have thought about it and feel stuck, some haven't really engaged with the question at all. The rest have reached a resolution: acting on a plan or intentionally choosing to keep their person's cremated remains close at home, which is its own meaningful decision.

That third adds up fast. Roughly two million families receive cremated remains annually, which means several hundred thousand new households land in limbo each year. Compound that across more than a decade of rising cremation rates, and the standing population of families holding unresolved cremated remains climbs into the millions.

This isn't a rare predicament, and it isn't a fringe one. It's a national crisis, hiding in plain sight in closets and on shelves across the country, and it's still growing.

PART II

The Weight of Waiting

It would be easy to assume that an urn on a shelf, decision unmade, is a neutral thing, a simple matter of logistics deferred. The data says otherwise. Indecision carries real, measurable emotional weight, and that weight falls hardest on the families still carrying the question of what to do next.

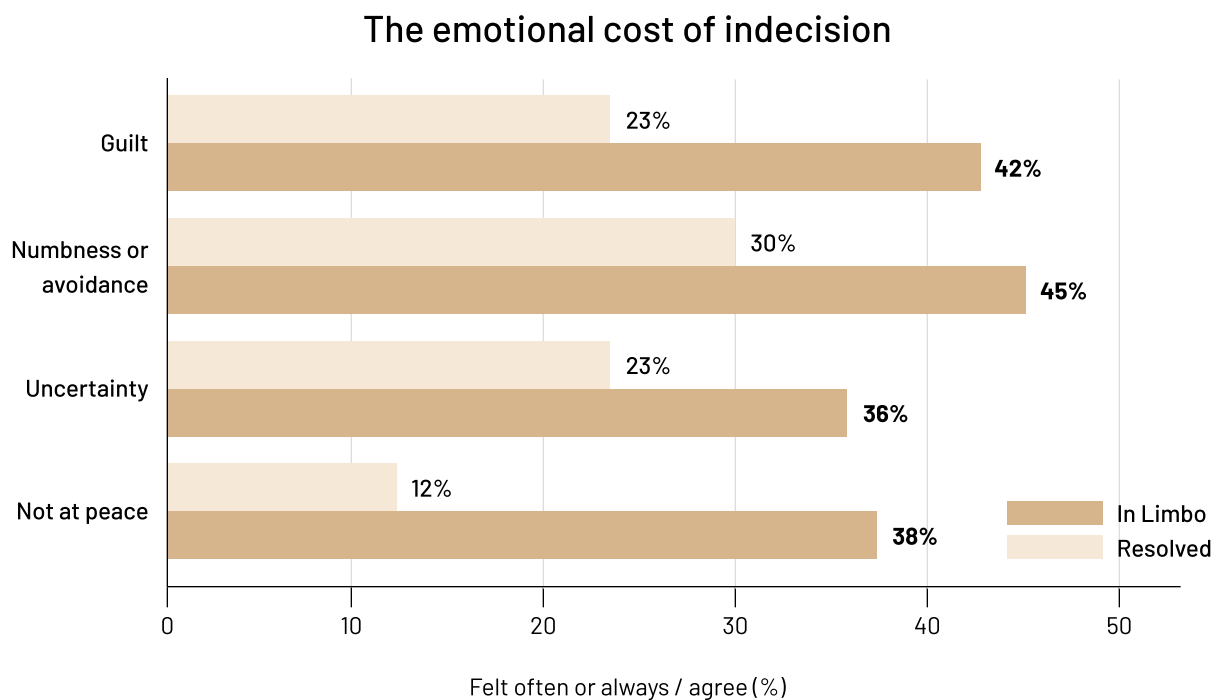


Figure 2. Share reporting each feeling often or always, or agreeing with the statement. In limbo n=358; resolved n=642. All gaps significant at $p < .01$.

The starkest gap is peace itself: **38 percent of families in limbo say they're not at peace with the situation**, compared with just 12 percent of those who've made a decision. They're also nearly **twice as likely to feel guilt about not having made a decision on where to place their person yet**, and far more likely to feel uncertain about what the right thing even is. Deciding, it turns out, is closely tied to peace. Not deciding is closely tied to its opposite.

There's a quieter current running underneath all of it: avoidance. The urn gets moved to a closet, a shelf, a spare room, somewhere it can be loved without being looked at directly. More than eight in ten respondents, **83.5 percent**, say they **feel numbness or avoidance at least occasionally when they think about their person's cremated remains**. The decision doesn't get made because the subject doesn't get faced.

The comfort-burden paradox

This is the deepest contradiction in the data: the cremated remains are a source of real difficulty, and, overwhelmingly, a source of real comfort. Both at once.

HOW FAMILIES FEEL ABOUT THE CREMATED REMAINS	OFTEN OR ALWAYS
A sense of connection to my loved one	66.1%
Comfort from having them nearby	58.7%
Guilt about not having done something	29.4%
Uncertainty about the right thing to do	27.4%

Figure 3. Survey base n=1,000.

Two thirds of families feel connected to their person through the cremated remains. Nearly six in ten draw comfort just from having them nearby. Those aren't the numbers of a population burdened by an unwanted object. But the guilt and uncertainty are just as real, and they live with the same people, often at the same time. Among those who feel a strong connection, a third also feel guilt often. More than a quarter of all respondents **hold connection and guilt or uncertainty** simultaneously.

*The urn is not a problem to be solved.
It is a relationship to be carried.*

This is why the well meaning instruction to simply decide misreads the moment. For millions of families, their person's cremated remains comfort them and haunt them in the same breath, along with the sense of having failed to honor them properly. That's not dysfunctional. That's grief, handed an open question with no clear way to answer it.



PART III

Grieving Alone

Of everything this survey surfaced, the most underreported is also the most human. Families are not only undecided and uneasy. Many are profoundly alone with it.

Grieving in silence: isolation runs deepest among the stuck

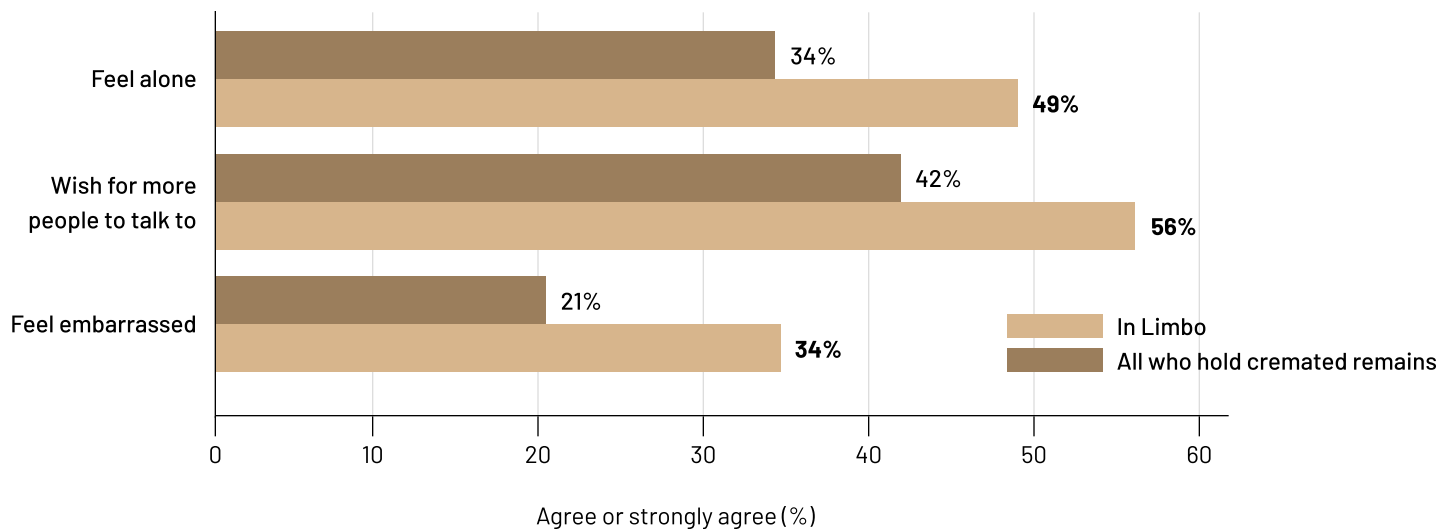


Figure 4. Share agreeing or strongly agreeing. All who hold cremated remains n=1,000; in limbo n=358.



More than four in ten Americans holding their person's cremated remains **wish they had more people to talk to about it**. Among families still in limbo, more than half wish the same thing. A third feel embarrassed that they haven't decided where to place their person yet, as if the delay were a personal failing rather than something nearly everyone goes through.

Nearly half feel completely alone in it.

These feelings compound. Embarrassment discourages conversation, and the silence that follows deepens the sense of being alone. The result is a strange kind of mass solitude: an experience shared by millions of people, almost none of whom feel they can speak about it openly. When we invited respondents to tell us what they wished more people understood, the answers came in a rush.

"It does not feel real. The urn full of ashes feels like an item that does not exist in my house even when I know it is there. It feels like it should not be there, and I try to ignore it, still hoping it is not real."

Anonymous survey respondent, lost a sibling,
5 to 10 years ago

"I wish people understood that my grief has no time limit. Everyone heals differently and at their own pace."

Anonymous survey respondent, lost a sibling,
less than 6 months ago

"I am so conflicted. I feel like it is the right thing to let go and put them in a permanent place, but the death was so sudden and unexpected it seems so much harder right now. I need to know what I do is the right thing for them, not me."

Anonymous survey respondent, lost a close friend,
6 months to 1 year ago

These are not the words of people who have forgotten their loved ones. They are the words of people holding them very close, and carrying the weight of an open question without anyone to share it with.

PART IV

Why Families Get Stuck

If the experience is this common and this heavy, why do families stay in it? The intuitive answer, that they lack information about their options, turns out to be largely wrong. We asked directly.

WHY FAMILIES HAVE NOT DECIDED	SHARE OF ALL	WITHIN IN LIMBO
Comfortable the way things are	32.9%	25.2%
Deciding feels like letting go, and I am not ready	22.8%	38.0%
It feels too emotionally difficult right now	20.9%	36.4%
Family members disagree about what to do	12.2%	20.4%
I know some options but not enough to choose	12.8%	25.0%
I cannot afford the option I would prefer	9.8%	18.1%
I do not know what my options are	7.3%	13.5%

Figure 5. Multiple selections allowed, so columns total more than 100 percent. Survey base n=1,000.

The reasons families give are about readiness and relationships, not facts. Only 7 percent say they do not know their options. By contrast, the dominant answers are emotional: it feels like letting go, it is too difficult right now, they are comfortable as things are. The reckoning is not an information gap. It is an emotional one. Any effort to help that leads with logistics, with brochures and price lists and step-by-step instructions, will miss the families it most wants to reach.

Ambiguous custody

There's another reason families get stuck, and it has nothing to do with grief itself: who the decision belongs to. When one person clearly holds that role, a spouse, an adult child, **a decision tends to come faster**. When more people have a claim, more siblings, a blended family, extended relatives, the decision is more likely to stall.

RELATIONSHIP TO THE DECEASED	SHARE IN LIMBO	BASE (n)
Parent who lost a child	20.7%	82
Spouse or partner	26.0%	103
Adult child who lost a parent	35.4%	395
Close friend	38.3%	63
Sibling	38.6%	95
Grandparent	39.0%	124
Other family member	42.0%	124

Figure 6. Survey base n=1,000. The contrast between the most and least resolved relationships is statistically meaningful; the intermediate ordering is directional.

Spouses and bereaved parents, the people who most often hold that decision alone, are the least likely to be in limbo. Adult children, siblings, grandparents, and extended family, where the decision is more often shared among several people, are the most likely to stall. Family disagreement reinforces the pattern: it is cited by 12 percent of all respondents but 20 percent of those in limbo. When it is not obvious whose decision it is, the decision **tends not to get made**.

"I wish people understood how hard it is to reason with family over these kinds of matters. I cared for my grandfather for years and loved him dearly, and my family really cut me out of every choice."

Anonymous survey respondent, lost a grandparent,
6 months to 1 year ago

PART V

The Limbo Curve

Does this resolve on its own? For most families, eventually, yes. But the path is neither quick nor universal, and its shape carries a lesson.

The limbo curve: most resolve over time, but one in five never does

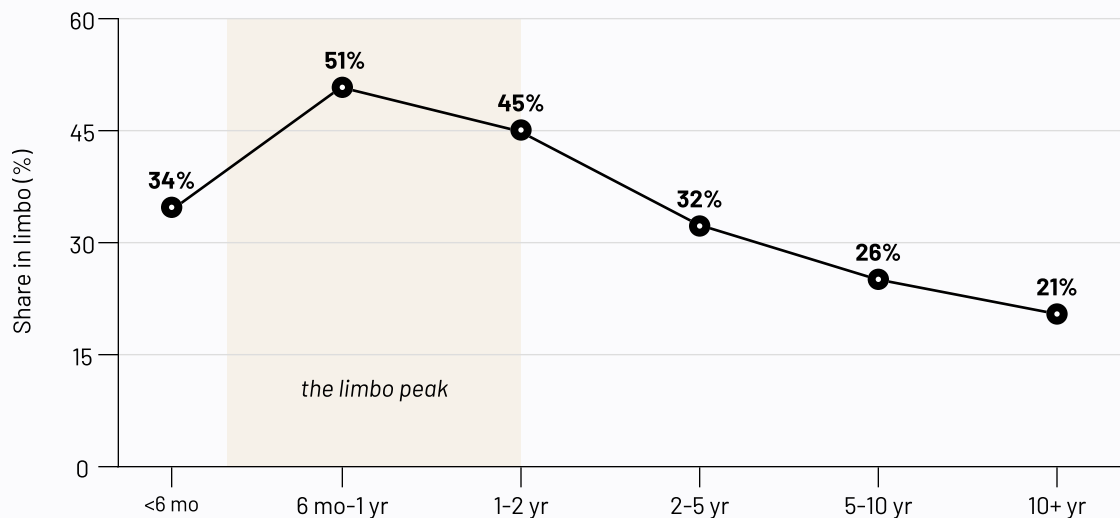


Figure 7. Share in limbo by time since receiving the cremated remains. Survey base n=1,000.

Limbo doesn't hit hardest in the first raw days of loss. It builds. Somewhere between **six months and two years** after their person's cremated remains come home, about half of families are still stuck, still holding an open question they don't know how to close. This is often after the flowers are gone, after the casseroles stop showing up, after everyone else has moved on and the house goes quiet. That's exactly when **the weight of it settles in**, and exactly when families **hurt the most**.

Time does help, eventually, for most people. By five to ten years, only a quarter are still stuck. Past a decade, it's down to one in five. But "most" isn't "all." Some families carry this question for the rest of their lives, and the survey tells us something painful about that: the ache fades, but it never fully goes away.

Here's the part that matters most: the first two years are when families are hurting the hardest, and also when they're most ready to be reached.

And that's the problem. Funerals happen in the first few weeks. But families aren't ready to talk about what comes next until months later, long after everyone assumes the hard part is over. Conventional deathcare shows up too early and then goes silent, right when families need it most.

PART VI

A Generation Entering the Reckoning

This isn't a problem holding steady in the background. It's a wave building, and it's about to hit harder than it ever has before.

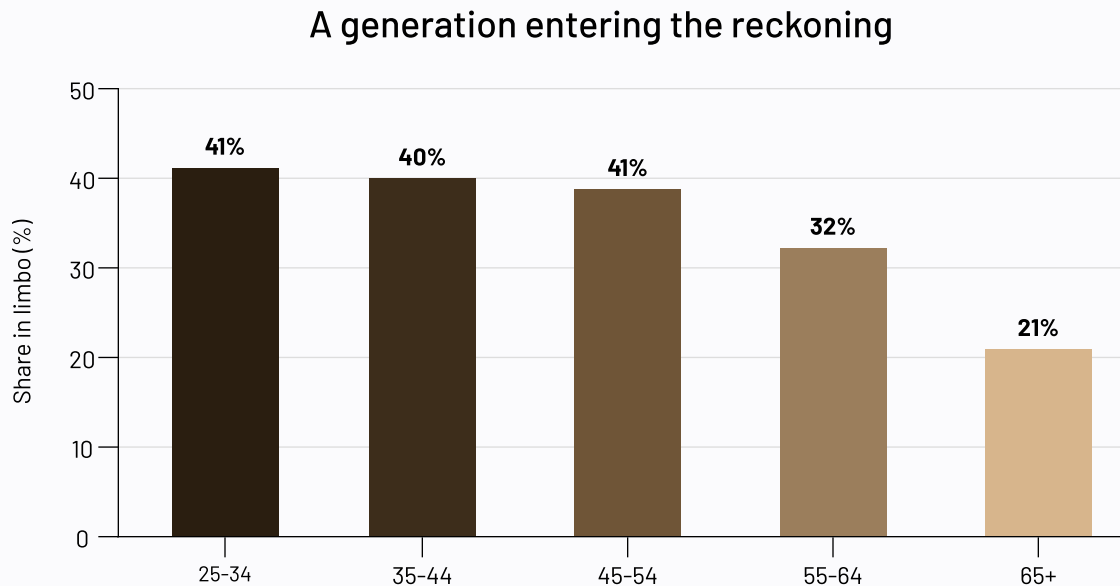


Figure 8. Share in limbo by age. Survey base n=1,000. The age gradient is significant at $p < .01$.

Younger families are far more likely to be in limbo. Among adults under 55, roughly **four in ten are unresolved**. Among those 65 and older, the figure is half that, around one in five. The contrast is not subtle, and it points in a direction that should concern anyone who cares about how families grieve.

Two forces are colliding. Cremation is spreading fastest through the exact generations most likely to get stuck with what it leaves behind. And it's not slowing down: the NFDA projects 82 percent of Americans will be cremated by 2045. Every year, that wave picks up more families, and without a real change in how deathcare supports them through this, **it will keep growing long after this generation is gone.**

The urn on the shelf isn't a relic. It's the leading edge of a wave that's becoming a national crisis, and it hasn't crested yet.

PART VII

Awareness, Not Aversion

It's not that families have considered every path and rejected it. The established options, burial, scattering, keeping cremated remains at home, are nearly universally known. But the newer ones aren't, and that gap in awareness, not a lack of interest, is what's actually keeping families stuck.

Awareness, not aversion: low recognition, real openness

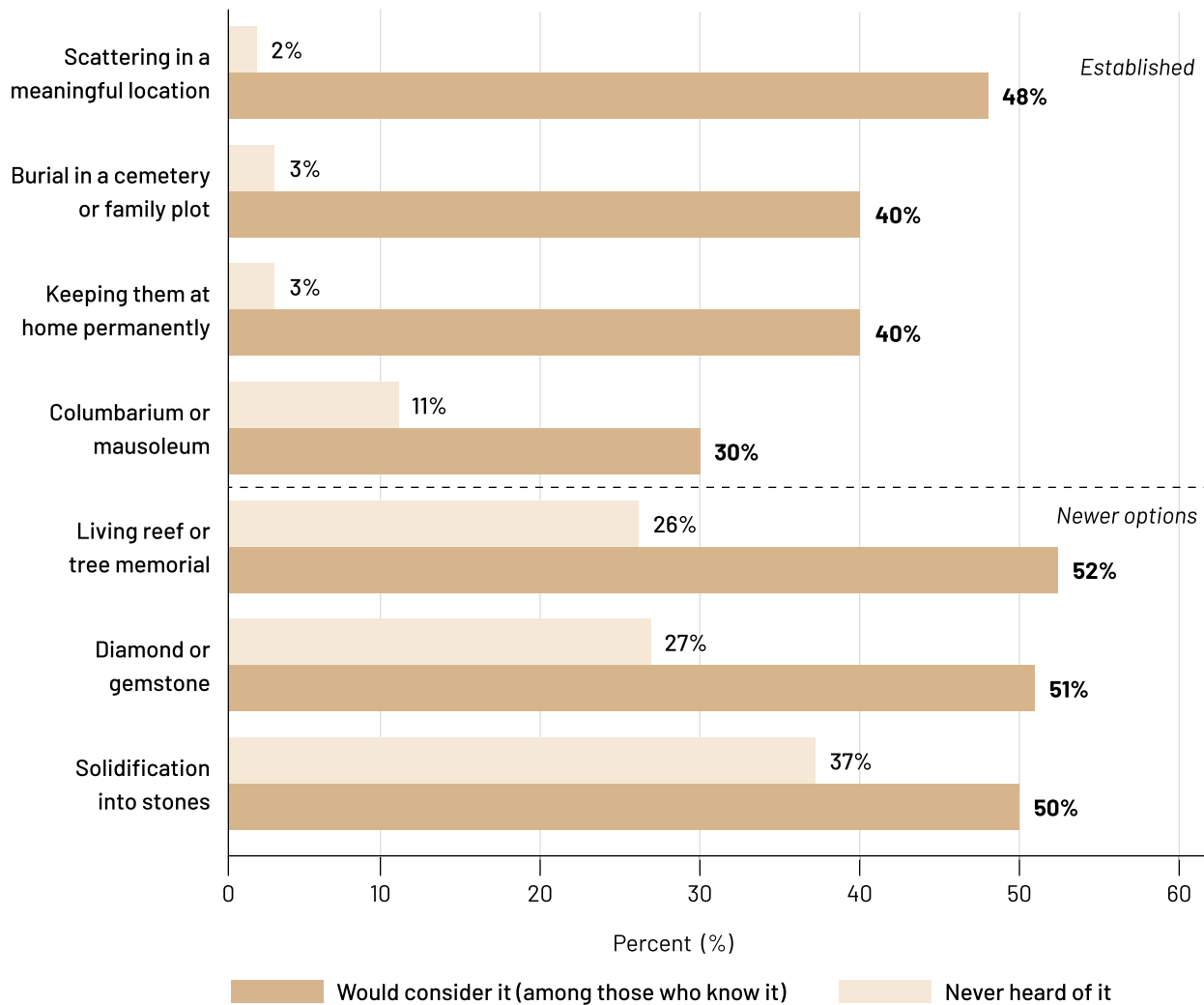


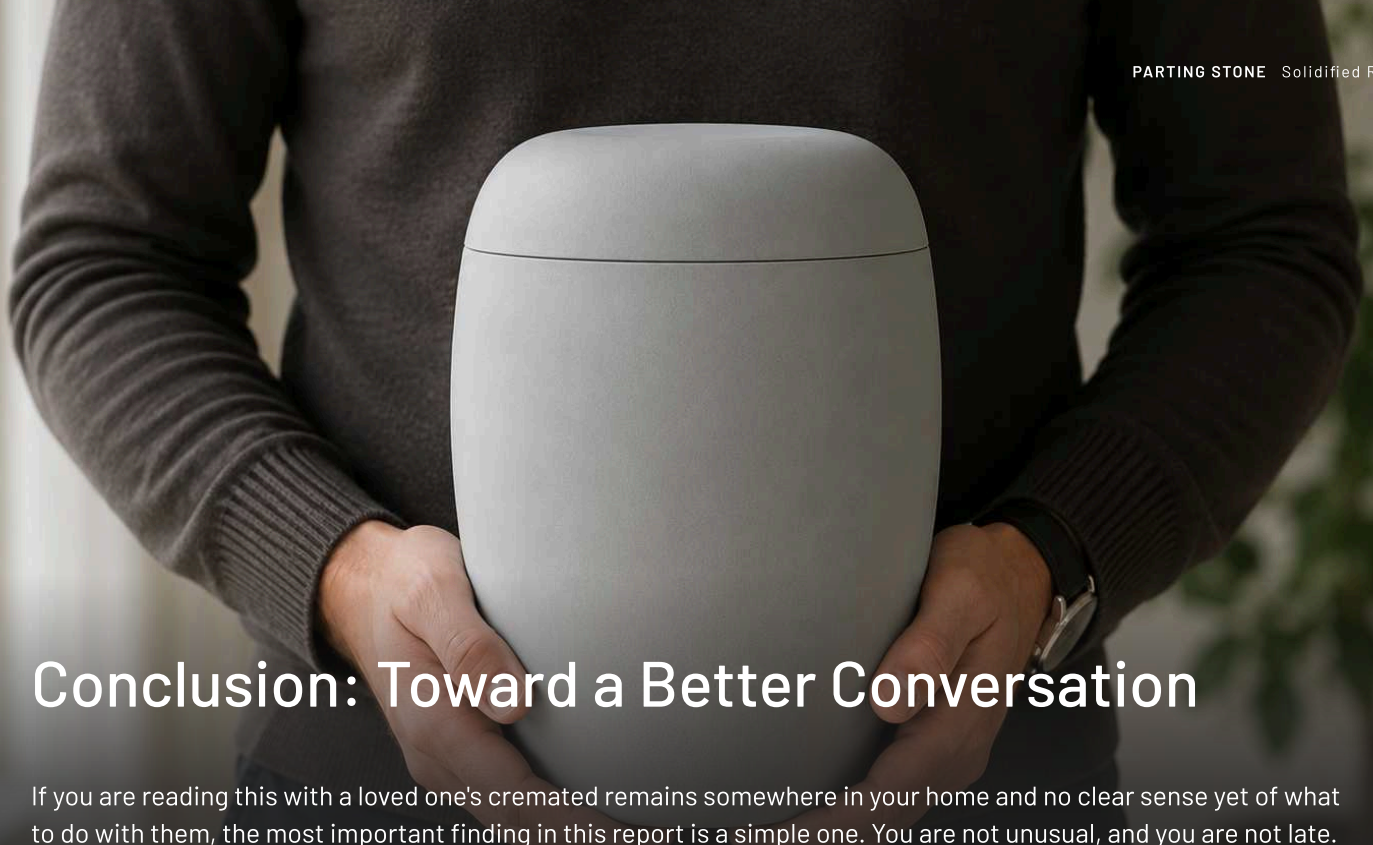
Figure 9. Awareness and openness across all seven memorialization options tested, ordered from most to least familiar. Survey base n=1,000; consideration figures are among those aware of each option.

The numbers show just how wide that gap is. A quarter of Americans have never heard of a living reef or tree memorial. More than a quarter don't know about diamond or gemstone transformation. Nearly four in ten have never heard of **solidified remains**, an alternative to conventional cremated remains that resembles a collection of stones.

But among families who do know about these newer options, about half would consider them, right in line with scattering and burial, and ahead of a columbarium. The ceiling here isn't appetite. It's knowledge.

And the **appetite for something new runs deep**. 65 percent of all respondents, and 70 percent of families in limbo, say they'd explore a new way to honor their person if it felt right. One in seven are carrying both unease about their current situation and genuine openness to something else, at the very same time.

There's no single right answer here. The NFDA finds Americans split: 37 percent lean toward keeping cremated remains at home, 38 percent toward burial, a third toward scattering, and more than one in ten want their person's cremated remains shared among family. What families need isn't a verdict. It's an invitation: to learn what's possible, and to choose, on their own timeline, whatever feels true to the person they're honoring.

A person wearing a dark grey sweater is holding a white, rounded, modern-style urn with both hands. The urn has a simple, minimalist design with a horizontal line near the top. The background is softly blurred, showing indoor plants and a window.

Conclusion: Toward a Better Conversation

If you are reading this with a loved one's cremated remains somewhere in your home and no clear sense yet of what to do with them, the most important finding in this report is a simple one. You are not unusual, and you are not late.

About a third of everyone who receives a loved one's cremated remains has not settled the question. Among them, more than half wish they had someone to talk to about it, and a third feel embarrassed that they have not acted. That embarrassment is worth setting down. There is no schedule here. Indecision is most common between six months and two years after a death, and about one in five families is still holding the question a decade later. Whatever pace you are moving at, someone else is moving at it too.

It may help to know what families actually said was holding them back. Only 7 percent said they did not know their options. The far more common answer, given by nearly four in ten of those still deciding, was that making a decision felt like letting go, and they were not ready.

Letting go was never required.

Keeping them where they are, deliberately and for as long as you want, is a decision, and one in five families has made exactly that one. Scattering is a decision. Burial is a decision. Sharing them among people who loved the same person is a decision. So is waiting until something feels right. What the families in this study who found peace had in common was not speed. It was that the path they chose felt true to the person they were honoring.

Two thirds of families would welcome a path that felt right. What they need is the invitation.

If you take one thing from this report, let it be permission. Permission to talk about it with someone. Permission to stop apologizing for the urn on the shelf. Permission to wait until you are ready. And when you are ready, to know that there are more ways to honor someone than most people realize.

Methodology

This report draws on a national survey of 1,000 United States adults conducted through the Pollfish survey platform. Every respondent confirmed two things before answering: that they consented to participate, and that they had personally received a loved one's cremated remains after a cremation. The analytic base is therefore the full sample of 1,000 adults, all of whom belong to the population the report describes.

Results are weighted to better reflect the target population. Throughout, percentages are population-weighted while the reported base sizes (n) are unweighted counts. Questions that allowed multiple selections are reported as a share of respondents and can total more than 100 percent. Five-point scales were grouped for clarity: frequency items report the combined often and always responses, and agreement items report the combined agree and strongly agree responses.

The in-limbo segment is defined as respondents who described their situation as having some ideas but no commitment, having thought about it but feeling stuck, or not having really thought about it. Families who had acted on a plan, settled on a clear plan, or intentionally chosen to hold their loved one's cremated remains where they are were counted as resolved, because each represents a decision. No subgroup is reported below an unweighted base of 30, and the headline contrasts between the in-limbo and resolved groups are statistically significant at the $p < .01$ level.

Verbatim responses are drawn from an open-ended survey question and are reproduced anonymously, identified only by the respondent's relationship to the deceased and the time since they received the cremated remains. They have been lightly edited for spelling and clarity only, with no change to meaning. Cremation-rate figures are drawn from the Cremation Association of North America 2026 Annual Statistics Report and the National Funeral Directors Association 2025 Cremation and Burial Report.

A Note on the Terms in This Report

The ash storage reckoning: The name we're giving to a common but rarely discussed experience: the period after a family receives a loved one's cremated remains, when they haven't yet decided what to do next. It's not a medical or legal term. It's ours, and we coined it because this experience didn't have a name before now.

In limbo: Our term for a family that hasn't reached a decision yet. That includes people who have some ideas but haven't committed, people who've thought about it and feel stuck, and people who haven't really engaged with the question at all. Being in limbo isn't a failure. It's the most common experience this report describes.

Resolved: The opposite of in limbo. A family counts as resolved if they've acted on a plan, settled on one, or intentionally chosen to keep their person's cremated remains at home for good. That last one counts too. Choosing to hold onto someone is still a decision, and a meaningful one.

Cremation rate: The percentage of deaths in a given year where the body was cremated rather than buried. It climbed fast: over 60 percent as of 2025, and projected to approach 82 percent by 2045.

Columbarium: A structure, often at a cemetery or place of worship, built specifically to hold urns. Think of it as the cremation-era equivalent of a mausoleum.

Living reef or tree memorial: A newer memorialization option where cremated remains are incorporated into a coral reef structure (to support ocean ecosystems) or used to nourish a planted tree, so the memorial keeps growing after the person is gone.

Solidification: The process Parting Stone offers: transforming cremated remains into a set of smooth, solid stones that can be held, displayed, or shared among family members, rather than staying as loose cremated remains in an urn.

CANA: The Cremation Association of North America, the industry group that tracks and reports on cremation statistics, including the rate figures cited in this report.

NFDA: The National Funeral Directors Association, the largest professional association for funeral service providers in the U.S., whose research is also cited here.

Every family we serve
through a partner
stays that partner's family.



About Parting Stone

FOR FUNERAL PROFESSIONALS

Parting Stone is a Public Benefit Corporation in Santa Fe, New Mexico. We offer solidification, a patented process Parting Stone pioneered that gently transforms virtually all of a loved one's cremated remains into a collection of 40 to 80+ smooth, holdable stones.

We work alongside funeral homes, not around them. Solidification is offered as one more meaningful way for a family to hold, display, scatter, share, or place a loved one's cremated remains, alongside the options you already provide.

14,000+
families served

1,800+
funeral home partners

40 to 80+
stones per person

8 to 12
weeks to return

How partnership works

1. You introduce it

Presented on the arrangement table alongside your existing offerings, or later, when a family returns with the question still open. Samples, materials, and training at no cost.

2. We handle the process

The cremated remains are transformed through our patented process. You stay the point of contact, and our Partner Success team supports you throughout.

3. The family receives stones

Their loved one's solidified remains return in 8 to 10 weeks, ready to hold, display, share among family, place, or scatter.

Start a conversation.

Scan the code to learn more about partnering with us, or reach out directly. We are happy to send sample stones or walk your team through the process.

Chad Kaiser, Partner Success

📞 505-772-0634 ✉️ chad@partingstone.com 🌐 partingstone.com

📍 9 Plaza La Prensa, Santa Fe, NM 87507



SCAN TO LEARN MORE

Parting Stone is a Public Benefit Corporation. Solidification is one of several meaningful ways a family may choose to honor a loved one's cremated remains. Partner pricing and program details are shared directly with funeral professionals on request.