

Companion Animals (volume 1)

An HRC Research Primer



Report in Brief

This primer summarizes the latest research regarding companion animals in the United States and elsewhere, including estimates of population sizes by animal type, demographics, and attitudes and behavior linked to companion animal ownership (or “guardianship”). For more information, see volume 2 of this primer, which focuses on companion animal overpopulation. The second volume and all of HRC’s research primers can be found at HumaneSpot.org.

The Bottom Line

In the United States, an estimated 154 million dogs and cats (the most common companion animals) live in 60% of U.S. households. The profile of owners’ demographics varies by country, but in the U.S. pet owners are more likely to be women, Generation Xers, and Baby Boomers. In some countries, companion animals are considered a “luxury,” and majorities of people in almost all surveys say they relate to their pets as members of the family.

How to Use this Information

An understanding of the numbers of animals and the relationship between companion animals and their people is essential to address important issues like pet overpopulation and companion animal abuse. By better understanding these dynamics, animal advocates can study how to address the factors that lead to unwanted, abandoned, and abused companion animals.

HRC Information

HRC is a nonprofit organization dedicated to maximizing the effectiveness of animal advocates by applying professional, cost-efficient, and informative consumer and market research methods.

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Introduction and Overview

Animal companionship is common in U.S. households. An estimated 153.8 million dogs and cats (the most common companion animals) live within 60% of households in the country. Although problems with irresponsible ownership clearly exist, the majority of those with companion animals consider their pets to be members of the family. This primer summarizes all available research estimating the population sizes of companion animals (primarily dogs and cats) and the number of households in which they reside. It also covers the demographics of people who have companion animals and finally the attitudes of people toward their animals. Data relating to overpopulation, irresponsible ownership, and relinquishment of companion animals are examined in a separate primer, *Companion Animals (volume 2)*.

How Many People Have Companion Animals?

Companion animals are common both within the United States and elsewhere. A recent survey by the American Association of Pet Product Manufacturers (AAPP) estimates that there are about 72 million dogs living within 37% of U.S. homes (an average of 1.7 dogs per household). The cat population is somewhat larger, estimated at 82 million cats living in 32% of U.S. homes (an average of 2.2 cats per household). According to the AAPP, the number of dogs and cats in U.S. households has increased over the past 20-25 years, but the *proportion* of households with companion animals did not change significantly over that time period.

Another recent study called the *Animal Tracker*, conducted by the Humane Research Council, found that 65% of U.S. households have a companion animal. The HRC survey identified 42% of individuals who have one or more dogs, 33% who have one or more cats, and 17% who have one or more fish. Other research conducted by Harris Interactive shows that people who have companion animals are likely to have more than one; 35% of people with companion animals have only one, while the majority (64%) have multiple pets, including 26% who have four or more pets.

RESEARCH ON COMPANION ANIMAL POPULATIONS AND HOUSEHOLDS*

Year	Source	Findings
2010	Ipsos Reid (Cattle Ranching a Green Profession, Survey Finds)	Canadians surveyed chose not to live with a companion animal because they: don't want the responsibility/just don't want one (58%); travel too much/doesn't fit lifestyle (41%); have health reasons (22%); are too expensive (22%); building doesn't allow pets (12%)
2009	Alley Cat Allies (Population Characteristics and Neuter Status of Cats Living in Households in the United States)	32% of respondents have at least 1 cat, yielding an estimated population of 82.4 million cats living in 36.8 million US households.
2008	American Association of Pet Product Manufacturers (Companion Animal Statistics, Everything You Did Not Think You Needed to Know as a Shelter Director)	An estimated 154 million dogs and cats (82 million cats, 72 million dogs) live within U.S. households.

RESEARCH ON COMPANION ANIMAL POPULATIONS AND HOUSEHOLDS*, CONTINUED

Year	Source	Findings
2008	HRC's Animal Tracker (Wave One)	Two thirds (65%) of U.S. households have at least one companion animal in the home. 42% of individuals have one or more dogs, 33% of individuals have one or more cats, and 17% have one or more fish. 2-5% of people have one or more birds, gerbils, reptiles, or horses.
2007	Harris Interactive (Pets are "Members of the Family" and Two-Thirds of Pet Owners Buy Their Pets Holiday Presents)	63% of U.S. households have at least one companion animal. 35% of those with pets have one animal, 25% have two, 13% have three, 7% have four, 6% have five, and 13% have six or more. 70% of those with pets have a dog(s), 52% have a cat(s), 15% have (a) fish, 7% have a bird (s), and 12% have other animals.
2007	Fetch! Pet Care (Survey Reveals Majority of Pet Owners Consider Kennel Boarding a "Necessary Evil")	71 million U.S. households own one or more companion animals.
2003	Naikakufu Daijinkambou (Public Opinion Survey on Animal Protection [Japan, July 2003])	62% of Japanese companion animal owners have dogs, 29% have cats, and 12% have fish.
1997	Queen's University of Belfast (Pet Ownership and Adults' Views on the Use of Animals)	Nearly two-thirds (63%) of those in Northern Ireland own a pet, including dogs, cats, and fish.

What Kinds of People Have Companion Animals?

Researchers have also studied the demographics of people who have companion animals. According to Harris, 63% of U.S. residents have a companion animal, with women, Generation Xers (roughly defined as anyone born between 1965 and 1980), and Baby Boomers (anyone born between 1946 and 1964) being more likely to have one. Geographically, this same research shows that Midwesterners are the most likely to have a companion animal (67%), while Easterners are the least likely (58%). More education and higher income also come into play and these people are more likely to have a companion animal. With respect to type of animal, Harris found that Baby Boomers are more likely to have dogs (74%) while Gen Xers are more likely to have fish (21%).

The profile of pet owners outside of the U.S. seems to vary significantly. The desire to have a companion animal may be driven by a variety of issues including companionship, but also as "luxury" item or for practical purposes. The economics, lifestyle, and cultural norms affect the perceptions and relationships between humans and animals within any particular country. Some studies have been conducted to this affect, for example, research by the Queen's University of Belfast, which found that 63% of surveyed respondents have a companion animal. These people are more likely to be married, younger, have children in the household, or live in a detached home.

What is the Relationship Between People and Companion Animal?

The relationship between humans and their companion animals is typically quite close and would be described by the owners as positive. Certain demographic variables such as gender, age, education, and the amount of time spent with the animal appear to affect the bond. Most studies find that the majority of people who live with animals indicate that companionship is the number one reason for having an animal. Most people consider their pets family members, for whom pet owners are often willing to sacrifice their own needs. Other reasons cited for having a companion animal are to enhance personal health, for leisure time, and social reasons including and child-rearing.

Other studies show further evidence of the close relationship between companion animals and their people. Example behaviors include sleeping or traveling with pets, buying gifts for pets, and taking animals into account when making major life decisions (i.e. where to live, what type of car to buy, etc.). Additionally, one of the major fears of dog and cat owners is the potential trauma of losing their pet, as identified in a Schering Plough study. Respondents said the loss of a companion animal would be more traumatic than events such as car accidents (79%), breaking a bone (63%), or losing a job (61%).

RESEARCH ON ATTITUDES TOWARD COMPANION ANIMALS*

Year	Source	Findings
2009	Associated Press (The AP-Petside.com Poll)	People incorporate companion animals into their families in a variety of ways: 42% have taken a pet on vacation; 35% have included their pet in a family portrait; 33% have included their pet in a holiday card; 30% of respondents allow their pets to sleep in their bed; 27% of pet owners celebrate their pet's birthday or the day it came to live with them; 17% have taken a pet to work.
2007	American Kennel Club (American Kennel Club 21st Century Dog Owners Study)	40% of dog owners have made arrangements for their dogs in the event that they pass away before their dog does. Nearly half look for dog-friendly accommodations when booking travel. 47% consider their dog's comfort in deciding which car to buy. 72% of dog owners look for the highest quality dog food brands.
2007	Harris Interactive (Pets are "Members of the Family" and Two-Thirds of Pet Owners Buy Their Pets Holiday Presents)	69% of people with companion animals allow companion animals to sleep in their beds. 65% of people with companion animals have bought their animals a holiday present; 37% have bought their animals a birthday present. 23% of owners have cooked for their animals; 18% have dressed their animals in clothing; 10% have brought their animals to work.
2006	Schering Plough (National Survey Reveals that Losing a Pet can be more Traumatic than Losing a Job)	85% of dog and cat owners would consider losing their animal to be extremely or very traumatic. Dog and cat owners would consider the loss of their animal to be more traumatic than a car accident (79%), breaking a bone (63%), or losing a job (61%).

RESEARCH ON ATTITUDES TOWARD COMPANION ANIMALS*, CONTINUED

Year	Source	Findings
2006	American Kennel Club (AKC Survey Finds Majority of Owners Would Defy Emergency Evacuation Orders and Stay with Pets)	Those with companion animals overwhelmingly consider the animals to be family members and if forced to evacuate their home without their animals, 62% would defy the order and stay; 97% would take their animals in case of an evacuation.
2004	American Animal Hospital Association (American Animal Hospital Association 2004 Pet Owner Survey)	93% of companion animal owners say that they are likely to risk their own life for their pet, while 64% believe their pet would come to their rescue if needed.
2002	Ketchum Research (Animal Magnetism)	68% of those with companion animals traveled with their pet in 2001, compared to 58% in 1995.
2001	Purina (The State of the American Pet Survey)	Companionship is the greatest benefit to owning a companion animal, according to 68% of dog owners and 61% of cat owners.
1994	Hirschman	80% of survey respondents feel that companion animal(s) are family member(s).
1994	Endenburg	The most commonly cited reasons for having a companion animal among owners in the Netherlands are companionship (79%), used to it (29%), social/attachment (20%), social/taking care of an animal (20%), social/child rearing considerations (14%), usefulness (13%), companionship for other animals (13%), social/tactile (12%), and health reasons (12%).

How Companion Animals Affect Other Perceptions

Relationships between people and their companion animals tend to “humanize” and elevate animals in ways, which in turn may affect their perceptions or attitudes toward other animals. Relevant factors may include familiarity with the species and the perceived functions and roles of the animals for humans. Certainly, ownership of specific types of animals as companions influences attitudes toward some uses of animals, in particular the use of animals similar to those owned. For example, the following research observations have been made correlating animal companionship with other uses.

- People with companion animals are more likely to disagree with animal testing than those without, although no difference was found with respect to the use of animals in non-medical research.
- The majority of Americans oppose both the cloning of companion animals (80%) and the genetic engineering of animals for sale as companions (84%).
- Violent criminal offenders are more likely than non-violent offenders to have mistreated companion animals, strays, farm animals, or wildlife during childhood.
- Domestic violence may be related to abuse of animals; women who seek shelter commonly mention abuse of companion animals as well. A majority of shelters indicate a similar finding among child victims of abuse.

The extent of the effects of the bond between humans and their companion animals is yet to be fully understood. However, it is obvious that positive human-pet relationships are more likely to encourage more sympathetic views of animals in areas other than just companionship. Increasing the number of relationships between humans and companion animals would arguably help improve the situation for other animals by spreading the appreciation of and concern for all animals in general.

RESEARCH ON HOW COMPANION ANIMALS AFFECT PERCEPTIONS*

Year	Source	Findings
2009	Berg Publishers (Empathetic Differences in Adults as a Function of Childhood and Adult Pet Ownership and Pet Type)	Adults who currently have pets and those who had pets as children were found to rate higher on empathy scales than those who either do not have pets or never had pets.
2009	American Humane Association (Understanding the Link Between Animal Abuse and Family Violence)	Violent offenders incarcerated in a maximum security prison were more likely than nonviolent offenders to have committed childhood acts of cruelty toward pets.
2007	Harold Herzog (Gender Differences in Human-Animal Interactions)	A review of research that investigates gender differences in human-animal interaction finds that women are more likely than men to hoard animals while men are more likely than women to hunt recreationally, to have abused animals in childhood and to have abused animals in adulthood.
2004	American Anti-Vivisection Society (Animal Patents, Summary of Survey Findings)	80% of U.S. adults oppose the cloning of companion animals, while 13% are in favor. Women (86%) are more opposed than men (74%) and those aged 55 or older (88%) are more opposed than younger adults (78%). 84% of U.S. adults do not believe that companies should be allowed to genetically engineer animals for sale as companion animals, versus 12% who believe it is acceptable.
2003	University of San Francisco (USF Study Finds Childhood Animal Cruelty is Indicator for Violent Offenders)	Experiences mistreating animals including pets and stray animals, as well as wild and farm animals, were higher among violent criminal offenders than non-violent offenders.
2003	American Veterinary Medical Association (A Global Survey of the Human-Animal Bond)	The nine basic human attitudes toward animals include an appreciation of the beauty of animals, a desire to master them, strong affection, a sense of kinship, feelings of dislike, and treatment of animals as a means to an end.
1998	Ontario Society for the Prevention and Cruelty to Animals (OSPCA)	48% of Ontario women who had left their abusive partner said that concern for the safety of their pets delayed their decision to leave an abusive partner; 61% stated that their partners had brutalized or killed a pet.

RESEARCH ON HOW COMPANION ANIMALS AFFECT PERCEPTIONS*, CONTINUED

Year	Source	Findings
1998	American Humane Association	71% of abused women seeking shelter at a safe house noted that their partner had threatened, hurt, or killed their companion animals.
1997	Queen's University of Belfast	<p>People with companion animals are more likely to disagree with animal testing than those without pets regarding the use of animals in medical research; no difference was noted for non-medical uses.</p> <p>Demographic variables were found to correlate to attitudes toward the use of animals, although the primary factor was the type of animal use under consideration.</p>
1997	Utah State University	85% of women and 63% of children who seek shelter from abuse also mention abuses of companion animals.

* Source: Details for all of the research studies cited in this primer, as well as volume 2, are available to registered users of HRC's HumaneSpot.org.