

Three Decades of People and Pets and Animal Management: A good news story

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The initial Australian research into people-pet urban interactions was conducted over 30 years ago. The 1974 study, 'Pets as a Social Phenomenon', was conducted in Melbourne and examined the role of cats and dogs in society. More than

400 households were initially interviewed of which 286 were involved in a detailed qualitative evaluation. This early study confirmed the widely held belief that responsible pet ownership is a good thing and that dogs and cats are a normal part of life in Australia.

Two decades later, in 1994, the 'National People and Pets Survey' created a more comprehensive understanding of what people identified as the good things and the bad things about having pets in Australia. 1011 people participated in telephone interviews for the 1994 study which sought to develop hard data and meaningful insights into the nature of and benefits resulting from pet ownership as well as community inconvenience attributed to pets.

To ensure a continuum with previous research projects this most recent National People and Pets Survey, 'Socially Responsible Pet Ownership in Australia: A Decade of Progress', conducted in 2006, assesses fundamentally the same criteria. The report confirms the increasing levels of responsibility that have been demonstrated by pet owners during the last decade. It also provides an up to date understanding of the way Australians select, manage and care for their dogs and cats as well as the impact companion animals have on society.

The survey reported progress in the spread of socially responsible pet ownership during the last decade. Progress was measured by comparing adherence to ten guidelines for responsible ownership in 1994 and 2006. The research instrument at both dates was a National People and Pets Survey with a representative sample of about 1000 respondents aged 16 and over. In pet-owning households the respondent was the 'main carer' of the family pet(s). In non pet-owning households, respondents were selected at random.

Socially Responsible Pet Ownership in Australia: A Decade of Progress

This study reports on a decade of progress in the spread of socially responsible pet ownership. Responsible pet ownership involves taking personal responsibility for one's pet(s) and managing it in ways that are in the best interests of neighbours, the local community and the pet itself, as well as in the interests of the main carer and his/her family. In practical terms, we report on socially responsible pet ownership by assessing adherence to the ten guidelines discussed below.

Evidence of progress comes from comparing the results of two National People and Pets Surveys, conducted roughly a decade apart in 1994 and 2006. The surveys asked the same questions at both dates (with a few additions in 2006), they were co-sponsored by the same organisation (the Petcare Information and Advisory Service – PIAS) and conducted by the same research company (Roy Morgan Research). The author of the current report was a co-author on the previous occasion (McHarg, Baldock, Headey and Robinson, 1995).

In short, the two studies are as precisely comparable as possible, so the favourable trends in socially responsible pet ownership which are reported here can be regarded as well measured and reliable.

Ten Guidelines for Socially Responsible Pet Ownership

There are of course no official guidelines, let alone rules, for socially responsible pet ownership. However the list given below may be regarded as reflecting an approach to pet ownership of the kind that would be endorsed by many Local Governments, community groups and veterinarians.

The main focus of the report will be on dog and cat ownership, since dogs and cats are by the far the most common types of pets in Australian families. However, in a general sense, the guidelines set out below may be regarded as appropriate for nearly all types of pets.

1. selecting the right type of pet for the whole family
2. preparing for pet ownership: desexing and vaccination
3. identifying pets: avoiding loss
4. training to obey basic commands
5. managing and controlling pets in public and in private
6. neighbours and the community: being a responsible neighbour with pets
7. complaints: minimizing nuisance and complaints
8. hygiene: cleaning up after dogs and cats
9. health: regular veterinary checks
10. caring for and exercising pets

For the most part, these guidelines require little comment or justification. The first guideline just suggests that selection of a pet – for example, a breed of dog – should be based on the needs of the whole family, not just the owner or main carer. For example, it would not generally be regarded as sensible for a family with young children to acquire a breed of dog known to be hard to control.

The second guideline, like most guidelines, does not apply universally. In most cases it makes sense both to vaccinate and desex one's pet dog or cat, but in some cases of course pets are intended for breeding.

The fourth and fifth guidelines are closely related and deal with the initial training of one's pet and then the subsequent implementation of effective training in public and private spaces.

Guidelines 6-8 all relate to being a good neighbour, not allowing one's pet to be destructive, or be a nuisance or a legitimate source of complaint by neighbours and the local community.

The ninth guideline refers to the importance of regular health checks and the final guideline to the need to care for pets and, where appropriate, groom, play with and exercise them.

The National People and Pets Survey 2006: Methods

The National People and Pets Survey 2006 was conducted by Roy Morgan Research, a well regarded private research company which undertakes a wide variety of research for both Government and the private sector. A national representative sample of 1000 people aged 16 and over was targeted for interview by telephone in November 2006, using Morgan's CATI (Computer Assisted Telephone Interviewing) system. Based on previous surveys (Australian Companion Animal Council, 2006), PIAS informed Morgan's that 53% of Australian households owned a dog or cat or both. So a quota of 530 dog/cat owners (53% of a sample of 1000) was scheduled for interview, together with 470 non-owners. In practice, interviews were conducted with 537 owners and 463 non-owners (a few of whom owned a pet other than a cat or dog). In pet-owning households the designated respondent was in all cases the person aged 16 or older who was regarded by him/herself as the 'main carer' of the pet(s). Where multiple pets were present, the main carer was deemed to be the person who looked after the first dog mentioned, or, if there were no dogs, the first cat.

The 2006 questionnaire, like its 1994 precursor, was designed by Morgan's with additional input from the study authors. As is routine, reported results are weighted to allow ('correct') for small differences between sample demographic characteristics and the national population.

Profile of Pet Ownership in Australia: 1994 and 2006

- More than half of Australian households own a dog and/or a cat
- Typically the main carer of the pet is female
- Pet ownership is more prevalent in rural or regional areas than in metropolitan areas

Pet ownership has declined a little in Australia since 1994. In that year about 59% of families owned a pet dog or cat (McHarg et al, 1995). By 2006 the figure had fallen to 53% with 37.3% owning a dog and 25.3% a cat (Australian Companion Animal Council, 2006). In about two-thirds of cases a woman is the main carer and decision-maker in relation to the family pet(s). The main carer is in fact usually the female partner in couple households or the female head in households where no adult male is present. In 2006, as was true in 1994, people who worked full-time were somewhat less likely to own pets than people who worked part-time or who were not in paid work. Pet ownership remained somewhat more prevalent in regional and country areas than in metropolitan areas.

Socially Responsible Pet Ownership in Australia: Changes Between 1994 and 2006

This section gives the main results of the 2006 survey – results which enable us to make comparisons between observance of the ten guidelines for socially responsible pet ownership in 2006 compared with a decade earlier.

1. Selecting the Right Type of Pet for the Whole Family

- There is now increased diversity of choice of dog breeds and increased prevalence of small and medium sized dogs. These trends may indicate more careful selection to suit the needs of the whole family, or may perhaps indicate that people now feel they have less time to keep large dogs.
- In 2006 82% of dogs were described as small to medium size.
- The majority of cats are of unknown breed, generally referred to as domestic cats or moggie.

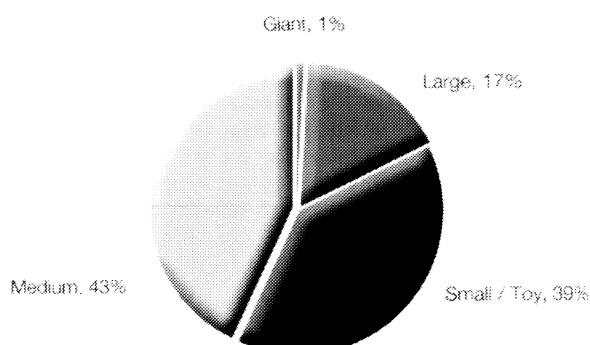
The first guideline is the hardest on which to assess progress because there can be no cut and dried rules about which types of pet – and specifically which breeds of dog – are most suitable for different types of family. However, the evidence of change since

1994 suggests the possibility that families may be giving more thought to the breed of dog they select. In 1994 German Shepherds were easily the most popular breed, being found in 11% of households. Kelpies were the second most popular breed, present in 8% of households. By 2006 there was much greater diversity, with small and medium sized dogs being more prevalent. Maltese dogs (often known as Maltese terriers) were the single most popular breed, found in 7.9% of households, followed by kelpies (7.6%) and border collies (7.0%). German Shepherds were only present in 2.9% of households.

Most Popular Dog Breeds (Comparison 1994 / 2006)

Breed	% 1994	% 2006
Maltese	N/A	7.9
Kelpie	8	7.6
Border Collie	4	7
Labrador	4	5.7
Fox Terrier	N/A	5.3
Jack Russell	3	4.9
Staffordshire Terrier	N/A	3.9
Shitzu	N/A	3.7
Poodle	N/A	3.2
German Shepherd Dog	11	2.9
Chihuahua	6	N/A
Corgi	4	N/A
Cocker Spaniel	3	N/A

Size of Dog (2006)



2. Preparing for Pet Ownership: Desexing and Vaccination

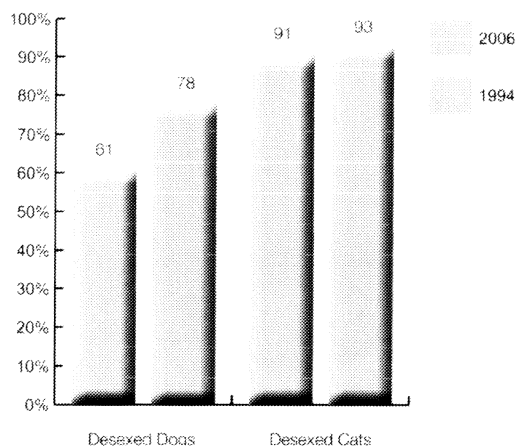
- Desexing of dogs increased from 61% in 1994 to 78% in 2006.
- Desexing of cats remained at very high levels with 93% of cats being desexed in 2006.

The 1994 and 2006 National People and Pet Surveys show that, while attitudes to preparing for pet ownership by desexing and vaccinating were largely unchanged, owner behaviour had substantially improved. In both 1994 and 2006 over 80% of dog and cat owners believed that pets should be desexed unless specifically intended for breeding. So attitudes were unchanged. But owner behaviour had improved markedly. In 1994 only 61% of dogs actually had been desexed. By 2006 this had risen to 78%. The number of desexed cats had also risen slightly, from 91% in 1994 to 93% in 2006.

There was a similar favourable trend in regard to vaccination, which usually occurs when a pet is first acquired and needs repeating at regular intervals. In both 1994 and 2006 almost everybody (97% in 1994, 99% in 2006) agreed with the idea that dogs and cats should be vaccinated against common animal diseases. By 2006 95% of dog owners and 89% of cat owners reported that they actually provided their pets with some preventative care, such as worming and flea treatments. 72% of owners said they took their pets for regular annual check-ups or vaccinations.

So in relation to 'preparing for pet ownership' 2006 results were also generally more favourable than in 1994.

(Comparison 1994 / 2006)



3. Identifying Pets: Avoiding loss

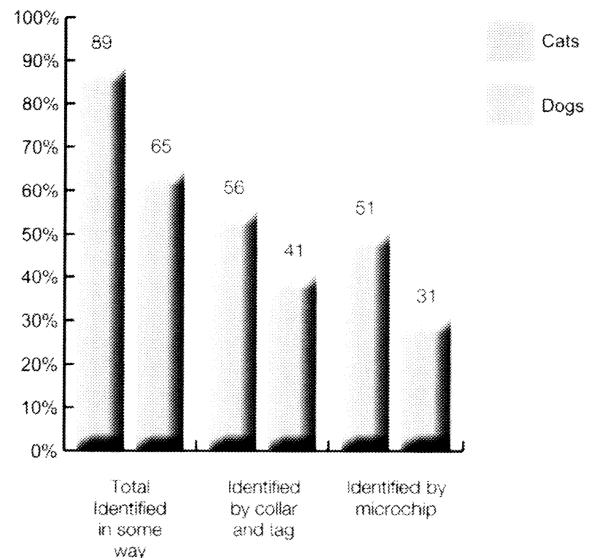
- 79% of owners have never had their pet go missing long enough to cause concern.
- Less than 5% of dogs and cats ever need the services of a pound or shelter.

An important next step, having got a new pet desexed and vaccinated, is to ensure that it has adequate identification so that it can be returned in case of loss. No question about ID was asked in the 1994 survey. In 2006 89% of dog owners reported that their animal had ID, as did 65% of cat owners. The most usual method was a collar with owner contact details, but micro-chipping is now becoming quite common for dogs (51%). Gratifyingly, a very high percentage of owners – 79% – reported that their animal had never gone missing for long enough to cause concern. Among those whose animals had got lost, 23% collected them from an animal pound or shelter.

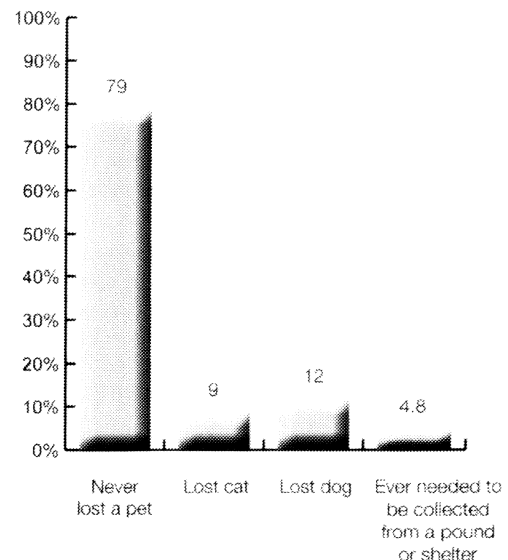
This implies that

About 4.8% ($0.23 \times 0.21 = 0.048$) of owners requires the services of a shelter for this purpose.

Identification of Dogs and Cats (2006)



Loss and Retrieval of Dogs and Cats (2006)



4. Training to Obey Basic Commands

- A very high proportion of dogs – 95% – are now reported to be able to obey basic commands.

Obviously, training is primarily for dog owners rather than owners of other types of pet. In 2006 95% of dog owners claimed their dog could obey basic commands. This was up from 88% in 1994. 62% had provided some kind of training for their dog, most commonly either by doing it themselves, or getting someone else in the family to do it. 38% had taken their dog to some kind of professional training service (usually as a puppy), although this was less common in regional areas where people usually undertook training themselves. Only 14% of owners said their dog had not received any training at all, but, even so, half of these owners still claimed that it could obey basic commands.

5. Managing and Controlling Pets in Public and Private

Survey respondents who owned dogs were asked about the frequency with which their pet displayed nuisance or destructive behaviours. A 5 – point response scale was used, running from 'never' to 'constantly'. In 1994 84% had reported their dog 'rarely' or 'never' displayed undesirable behaviours. By 2006 the figure had declined to 77%. The difference is not large, but it is statistically significant. It is the only adverse trend found between 1994 and 2006 and it is something of a puzzle, given the increase in dog training. Part of the explanation appears to be that, compared with 1994, slightly more dogs were spending 20 – 40 hours per week alone. It is these dogs who are more likely to exhibit undesirable behaviours. It is also possible that standards relating to what constitutes nuisance behaviour have become more strict. This latter factor may also partly account for the trend.

The three most commonly mentioned nuisance behaviours were: 'whining / barking / howling' (38%) 'jumping up on people' (22%) and 'aggression with other dogs' (13%).

6. Neighbours and the Community: Being a Responsible

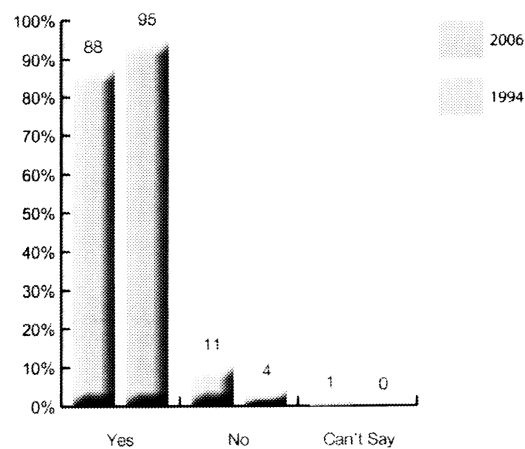
Neighbour with Pets

- In 2006 91% of dog owners reported keeping their dog on a leash in areas where they were required to do so.
- Owners are increasingly likely to confine their cats at night – in 1994 35% of owners reported they didn't keep their cat in at night, by 2006 only 15% reported that they rarely or never kept their cat in at night.

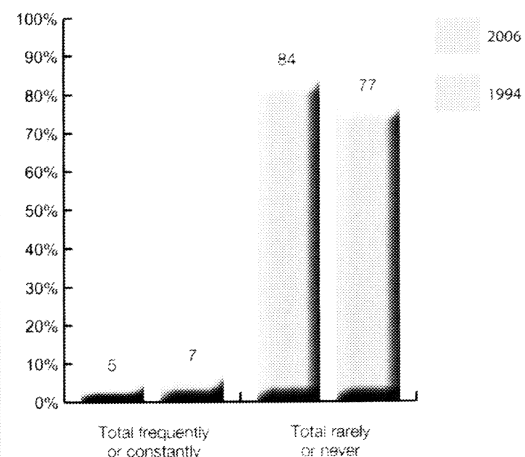
The two issues covered under the heading of 'being a responsible neighbour with pets' are keeping the cat in at night and walking the dog on a leash, or an otherwise responsible way. The reason for keeping cats in at night is of course the risk that they will attack wildlife, get into fights with other cats and suffer road trauma. In 1994 63% of cat owners reported that they kept their cat indoors at night. In 2006 the question was asked more precisely. 60% said they 'always' kept their cat in at night and 18% said they 'sometimes' did so.

Since 1994 there has been a substantial increase in the number of owners keeping their dog on a leash where required. In 1994 74% of owners reported compliance; in 2006 91% did so. 16 – 24 year old owners had particularly high compliance rates; a promising finding for the future. More detailed trends are also encouraging. In 1994 35% walked their dogs in parks or other public places where they must be leashed. By 2006 45% did so. 29% took their dogs to a designated 'off leash' park, indicating a fairly high up-take of these relatively new facilities.

Obey Basic Commands
(Comparison 1994 / 2006)

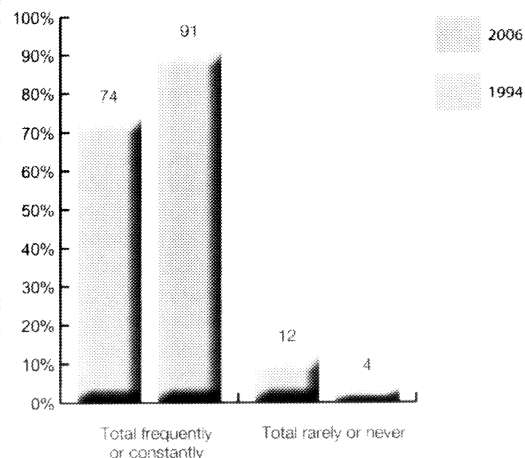


Frequency Dog Displays Undesirable or Nuisance Behaviours (Comparison 1994 / 2006)



1 Significant at 95% confidence level

Keeping Dogs Leashed in Public Places when Required (Comparison 1994 / 2006)



7. Complaints: Minimising Nuisance and Complaints

- 98% of pet owners rarely or never receive complaints about their pets.
- 99% of dog owners can keep a dog secure on their property.

So far in this report, the focus has been on pet owners and their perceptions of their pets' behaviour. But what are the community's reactions to other people's pets? The National People and Pets Survey asked all the respondents in both 1994 and 2006 how much they were bothered or inconvenienced by neighbourhood pets.

All trends between 1994 and 2006 were positive, although some differences were not quite statistically significant ². The proportion of respondents who reported that it was never the case that 'neighbourhood cats coming into my yard are a nuisance to me' rose from 40% to 51%; a trend which could be partly due to a decrease in the owned cat population in this period. Similarly, the percentage who were 'never' disturbed by 'roaming dogs in my neighbourhood' rose from 46% to 51%. There were also small increases in the numbers who were 'never' disturbed by dogs, nor cats howling or fighting. 88% of owners in 2006 reported that they had 'never' had a complaint about any of their pets, and 98% - up from 95% in 1994 - said 'rarely or never'.

8. Hygiene: Cleaning Up After Dogs and Cats

- In 1994 only 33% of owners always picked up dog droppings. By 2006 the figure had increased to 64%
- 'Forgetting to take bags', 'there are no bags provided' and 'there were no bins provided' are all common reasons given for not picking up dog droppings, indicating that the provision of more bags and bins in public places is likely to result in an even greater incidence of pet owners cleaning up after their dogs.

Dog droppings – or rather owners not cleaning up after their dogs – have been a particularly contentious issue in some neighbourhoods, and many Local Governments have taken steps to both encourage and enforce cleaning up. In some areas bags to collect droppings are provided by Councils. In this context, it is particularly gratifying to be able to report that in 2006 64% of owners reported that they 'always' picked up their dog droppings and only 15% 'never' did so. In 1994 the figures were 33% always cleaning up and 42% never doing so. These findings are corroborated by the population at large. 61% of all respondents in 2006 felt that the extent to which dog owners picked up droppings had 'increased a lot' (24%) or 'increased moderately' (37%).

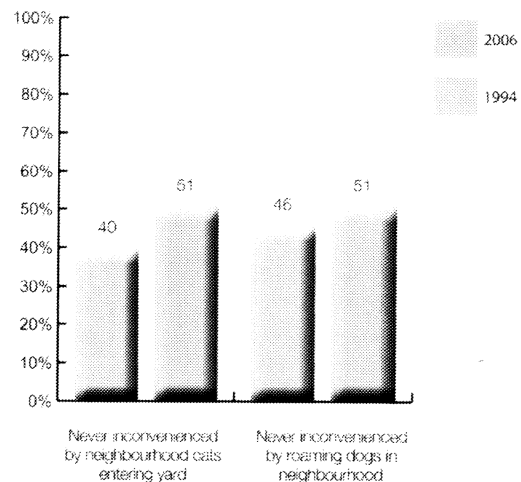
9. Health: Regular Veterinary Checks

- Only 3% of owners surveyed have never taken their dog or cat to a vet.
- 95% of owners provide their pets with preventative health care such as worming or flea treatments.

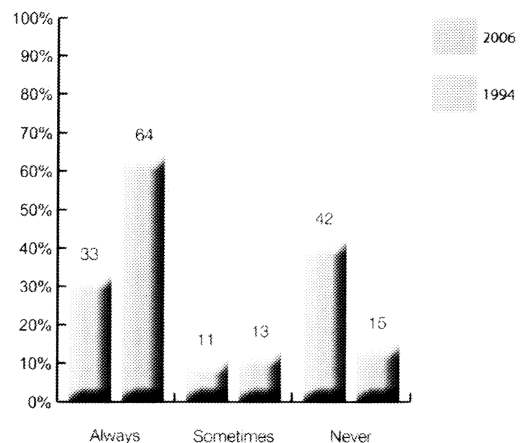
In the past it was probably the case that most dog and cat owners had their pet checked and vaccinated by a vet when they first got it, but may have been reluctant to make vet visits on subsequent occasions. By 2006 the situation was quite positive. 72% of all owners (comprising 77% of dog owners and 52% cat owners) reported that they took their pet to the vet for regular annual check-ups or vaccinations. Less than 10% said they had never been since the pet was a puppy or a kitten.

² At a 95% confidence level.

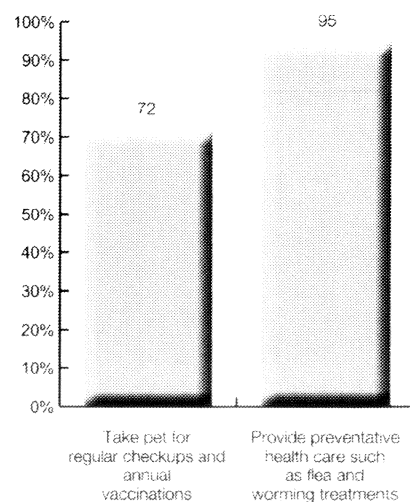
General Population Inconvenience and Nuisance Attributed to Dogs and Cats
(Comparison 1994 / 2006)



Picking up Dog Droppings
(Comparison 1994 / 2006)



Vet Visitation and Preventative Health Care
(2006)



10. Care and Exercise: Caring For and Exercising Pets

- In 1994 74% of dog owners exercise their pet with reasonable frequency. Now the figure is over 80%
- Eight in ten dog owners exercise their dogs, almost half of these exercise their dog once or twice a day.
- Dog owners who live alone are more likely to exercise their dogs than those who live in households with children.
- Only 3% of those surveyed report rarely or never walking their dog.

In 1994 74% of dog owners reported that they walked or otherwise exercised their pet. By 2006 the figure had risen to 80%. Owners who lived alone were more likely than others to give the dog exercise, while those who had children were less likely to do so. When pressed for more detail, 8% of owners in 2006 said they walked the dog more than twice a day, 47% said once or twice a day, and 26% said 'most days but not every day'. So, overall, 81% appear to exercise their dogs with reasonable frequency (although the appropriate frequency of course depends on the breed and age of the dog). In 1994 the corresponding figure was 74%.

There was virtually no change between 1994 and 2006 in the proportion of owners who spent time petting, playing with or grooming their pets. However this was because there was no obvious room for improvement. In 1994 96% reported these activities; in 2006 97%.

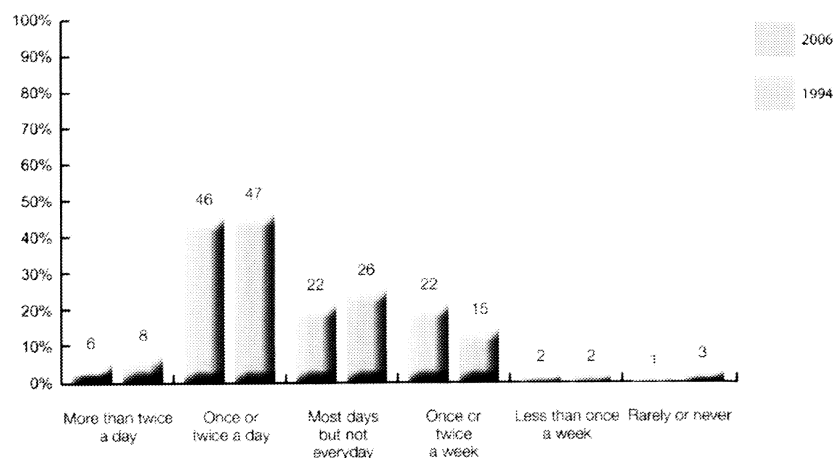
Social and Health Benefits of Pets

- 88% of dog owners agree that having a dog around the house deters burglars.
- 92% of owners report feeling very close to their pet.

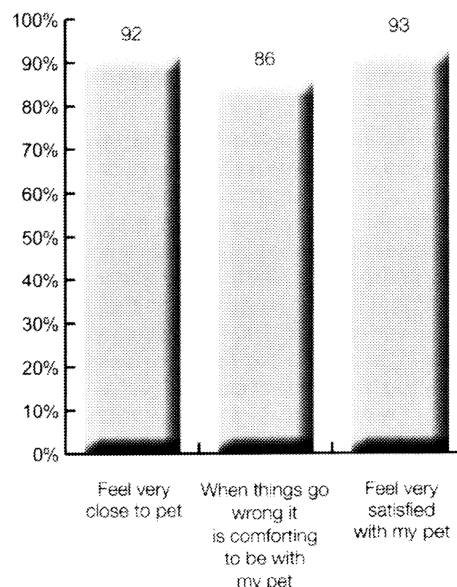
The main focus of the report is on trends in socially responsible pet ownership. However, the 1994 and 2006 People and Pets Surveys both covered broader issues to do with the social benefits of pets, including benefits to the health of owners.

Confirming findings from the 1994 survey, close to 90% of 2006 respondents believed that pet dogs help to deter burglars. A very large majority (92% in both 1994 and 2006) felt very close to their pet. Perhaps as a consequence of this, most owners (56%) felt that having their pets around helped them to meet new people and make new friends. Similarly, 62% felt that the presence of pet made it easier to get in to a conversation and create a friendly atmosphere. Overall, 93% of owners in 2006 (92% in 1994) felt 'very satisfied' with their pets.

Frequency of Walking Dog (Comparison 1994 / 2006)



Attitudes Towards Pets (2006)



Conclusion

The central purpose of this report was to assess progress in socially responsible pet ownership between 1994 and 2006. The progress was measured by comparing adherence to 10 guidelines at the two dates.

Overall, results were highly favourable. Clear progress was made during the decade in relation to six of the ten guidelines: desexing and vaccination, animal training, being a good neighbour with one's pet, minimising nuisance and complaints, hygiene (cleaning up after dogs and cats) and caring for and exercising pets. On trend – relating to the right type of pet for the whole family – was essentially unmeasurable, because it is too subjective and personal a matter to cover in survey research. In relation to two guidelines – pet identification and regular veterinary checks – no trend data were available, because relevant questions were not included in the 1994 Survey. In regard to just one guideline – managing and controlling pets – the trend was negative, and here it seemed possible that the outcome could be partly due to an increase in community standards and expectations.

The reasons for these favourable results cannot be precisely known. However, it seems likely that an important contribution has been made by the efforts of opinions leaders, including Local Governments, veterinarians and their professional associations, and the urban animal management movement. Pet owners themselves have also contributed by exerting peer pressure on others to be responsible.

References:

- Australian Companion Animal Inc. (2006) *Contribution of the Pet Care Industry to the Australian Economy*. Sydney: BIS Shrapnel
- McHarg, M., Baldock, C., Headley, B and Robinson, A. (1995) *National People and Pets Survey: Pets are good for you health*. Owners, typically are responsible and caring. Melbourne: Urban Animal Management Coalition.
- 2006 National People and Pets Survey, Socially Responsible Pet Ownership In Australia: A Decade of Progress. Professor Bruce Heady. Melbourne Institute of Applied Economic and Social Research University of Melbourne

