

But where will the dog live? Animal management and the shrinking Australian backyard

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Abstract

Almost a quarter of Australians currently live in medium to high density housing - a situation that is predicted to dramatically increase in the future.

Australians will continue to want to own pets whether they live in a house with a large backyard or a townhouse or apartment. This will bring new challenges for many people as they learn to live in smaller spaces and compete to use public services and public open space. Pet owners will face unique issues, as will those involved in animal management.

A research project undertaken by PIAS in 2008 examined the ownership and management of dogs and cats in high density living environments. This paper discusses the research findings; how many people keep pets in the city, how they manage them, the difficulties they experience and how they overcome those difficulties. Statistical data is presented along with a discussion of strategies and resources available to assist with the management of pets in high density surrounds. This information will help AMOs to better understand and plan for the needs of all residents, particularly those living in smaller spaces with pets.

The great Australian dream

Australians love their pets, in fact we have one of the highest rates of pet ownership in the world with more than half of all households owning a dog and/or a cat. Pet ownership seems to have always been part of the Australian way of life, something so normal we almost take it for granted. But things are changing.

The great Australian dream was once a vision of families owning their own home on a quarter acre block with a BBQ, a Hills Hoist and a Blue Heeler in the backyard. But these days that quintessential Australian scene seems to be changing; Australians are more frequently living in townhouses, apartments and units, often within big cities. They're increasingly likely to live in a strata development with a Webber on the balcony and a communal laundry. While this may not seem conducive to owning animal companions we know Australians love dogs and cats so much that they will continue to want to keep them no matter where or how they live.

The great Australian reality

Almost a quarter of Australians currently live in medium to high density housing – 9% live in semi-detached, row, terrace or town houses and 13% live in flats, units or apartments¹. The remaining three quarters of the population live in separate houses.

Between 1991 and 2001 the number of separate houses in Australia increased by 18%. During the same period the number of higher density dwellings increased by twice as much - 37%. During this time there was a greater increase in the number of dwellings compared with overall population growth. This was due to social and demographic changes leading to smaller households. Fewer group households, declining marriage rates, an increasing number of divorces and an ageing population have all contributed to a growth in the number of smaller households. In fact during this period there was a 43% increase in the number of lone person households. This trend is set to continue, so in future we can expect to have even more people living closer together and in smaller groups or alone.

Numerous studies have provided a comparison of the incidence of pet ownership in city and rural areas. The 2006 National People and Pets Report indicated that dog and cat ownership is significantly less prevalent in metropolitan areas (45%) and significantly more prevalent in country areas (55%)². This is consistent with ABS data identifying that dwelling type and available space affects the likelihood of owning a dog or cat. The ABS statistics indicate that while 38% of Australian households had a dog and 27% a cat, this increased to 43% of households living in a separate house owning a dog and 30% owning a cat³. Other research further reveals that people living in medium density housing (semi-detached, row, terrace or town houses) are more likely to own dogs and cats than those living in high density housing (flats, units or apartments). So basically the smaller the backyard or apartment, the less likely people are to own a dog or a cat.

Nevertheless a significant percentage of the population will still choose to own dogs and cats even though they may live in a small space and perhaps alone. Learning to live in smaller spaces and competing to use public services and public open space will present challenges for pets and their owners, for non-pet owners and those involved in animal management.

The research

Armed with the knowledge that Australian housing and household types are changing, the Petcare Information and Advisory Service (PIAS) recently commissioned research to examine the ownership and management of pets in medium to high density living environments. We wanted to find out more about the reasons people were unable own dogs and cats, the types and breeds of dogs and cats people choose to keep, their living environment, the problems they encounter and their coping strategies.

The participants in the study included dog and cat owners and also those who would like to own a dog or cat but did not. The study didn't look into ownership of other pets, it referred only to dogs and cats. All respondents were residents of medium or high density dwellings. The research included both qualitative and quantitative components – the quantitative being the primary focus and incorporating 801 online surveys.

The findings

Housing limitations

Not surprisingly when we asked non-pet owners (people that didn't own a dog or a cat but would like to) the reason why they didn't own a pet, more than two thirds of them said that the key reason was due to housing limitations. This included not being allowed to own a pet, not having enough space or because they were renting from a landlord who prohibited pets.

When both pet owners and non-pet owners were asked whether they were actually allowed to keep pets where they lived we learned that just 47% were permitted to keep a dog and 58% were allowed to keep a cat (this included people who own their own residence). So permission to keep pets in strata and rental accommodation has a big impact on ownership as does the perception of having enough room for a pet. It would seem that for many people pet ownership is not a choice they are permitted - they may want pets but are unable to keep them because of restrictions imposed by landlords and Owners' Corporations.

Satisfaction

One very important thing we learned from the research was that the people who do keep dogs and cats in high rise apartments and small dwellings do so successfully and responsibly and report very little difficulty. In fact, dog and cat owners in highly urbanised surrounds reported high levels of satisfaction with dog and cat ownership (94% and 93% respectively), with just 1% of dog owners and 2% of cat owners expressing dissatisfaction.

These levels of satisfaction are equal to that achieved amongst the general population in another large survey, the 2006 National People and Pets Survey. This tells us that satisfaction with pets is no lower in higher density housing than in less urbanised areas. In other words, plenty of people keep pets in densely populated urban areas and enjoy it just as much as those who keep pets in larger houses with bigger backyards.

Keeping dogs and cats indoors

The research also revealed that many would-be pet owners find it hard to reconcile their previous experiences of pet ownership with what may now be appropriate for their new inner suburban lifestyle. That is to say many people simply cannot envisage having a different breed of dog to the one they had as a child, nor can they imagine keeping a dog or cat almost entirely indoors.

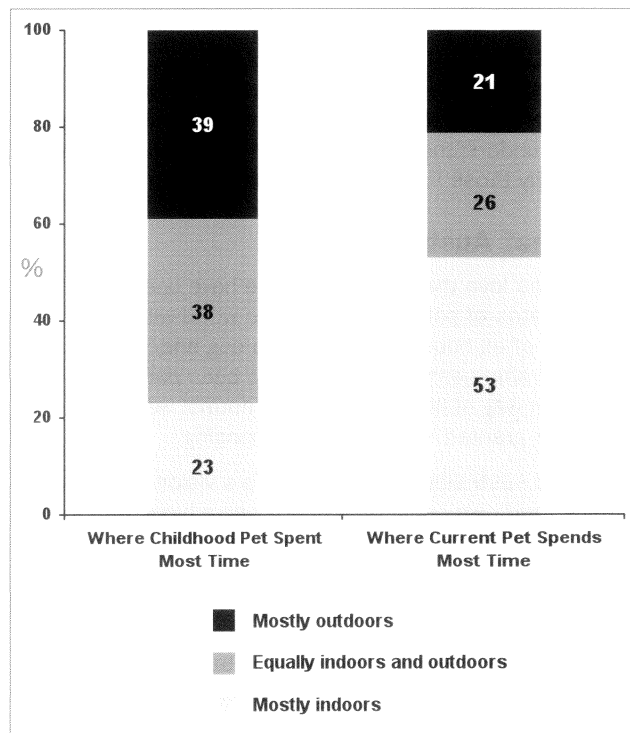
The way Australians kept pets a decade or two ago is very different to the way they are kept now – the dogs we had in our childhood were likely to have been larger breeds that were more energetic and spent most of their time

outdoors. The cats we grew up with may have been free to roam in and out of houses and yards and may even have been locked out of the house at night.

The fact that many Australians grew up on a typical suburban quarter acre block may have helped perpetuate the myth that you need to have a large backyard to own a dog. Our research revealed that only a few short decades ago 39% of respondent's family pets spent most of their time outdoors and only 23% spent most of their time indoors. In stark contrast the new research revealed only 21% of pets spent most of their time outdoors whilst 53% spent most their time indoors. In fact, almost a third of all dogs spent virtually all their time indoors.

It's obvious that these days our pets are spending increasing amounts of time indoors, are regarded as family members and are often treated as such. Yet many people still believe dogs need a big backyard to run around in, even though keeping dogs (and cats) with limited outdoor space is not only possible but can actually work very well for both humans and animals.

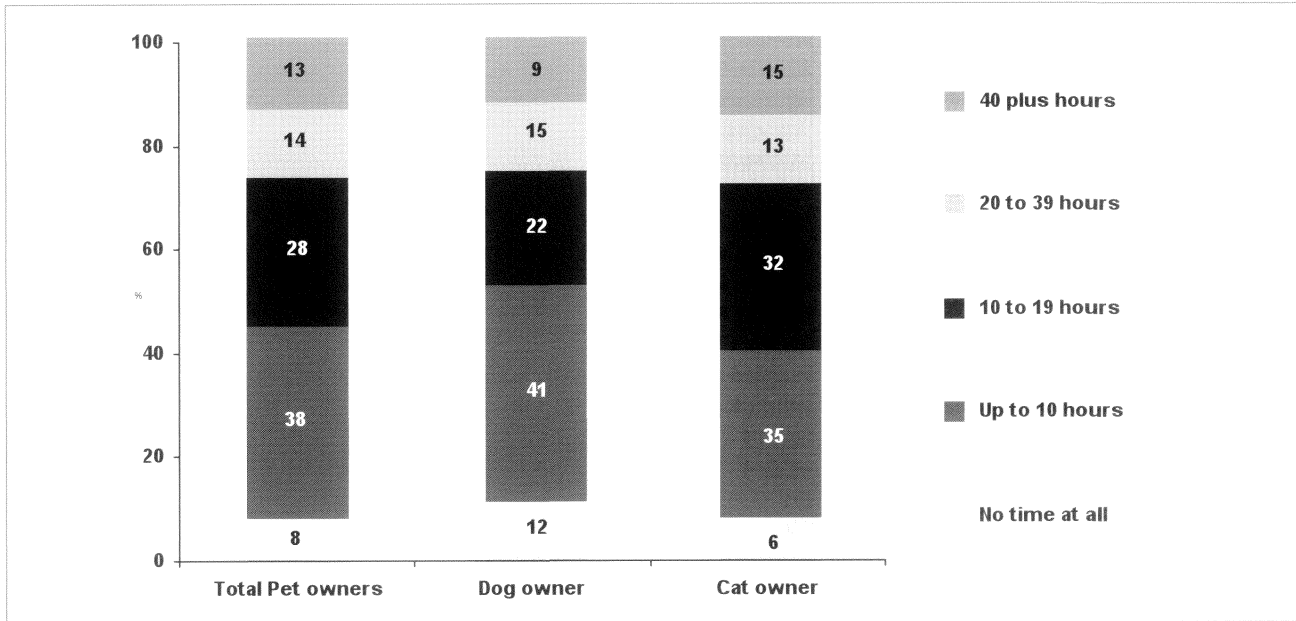
Comparison – where childhood and current pets spend their time



Home alone pets

These days it's not uncommon for multiple members of a household to work full-time. Then there are other commitments like sport and social activities – not all of which are pet-friendly – that can require extended periods out of the house. In fact, the research showed that concerns about leaving pets home alone ranked second only to not being allowed to keep a pet in a property as a reason for not keeping a pet at all. Indeed, 37% of non-pet owners said that fears their pet would be alone too much kept them from sharing their lives with a dog or cat.

Approximate hours in 7 day week dog/cat left alone



So how much time did the pets in our survey actually spend "home alone"? Well, surprisingly few. It's worth noting that 8% of owners in our survey reported that their pet was never home alone. In some cases this was because one member of the household was always home at any given time. In other cases it was because the animal attended a day care or minding facility, or went with the owner when the owner left the house. But when it comes to the majority of owners who left their animal at home at some point during the week, around 38% of pet owners reported that their animal was home for less than 10 hours in any given seven day period. Another 28% of pet owners reported that their pet was home alone for between 10 and 19 hours a week. Less than one third of owners reported that their animal was home alone for more than twenty hours per week. This includes 14% of owners who reported that their animal was home alone for between 20 and 39 hours per week. Only 13% of owners left pets at home by themselves for more than 40 hours per week.

Interestingly 36% of the pet owners surveyed worked full time, yet as indicated above, only 13% of pets were home alone for more than 40 hours. It would appear that whilst many pets have the potential to be left alone for long periods of time, in reality their owners make arrangements to ensure they are not.

Breed selection

One unexpected finding from the research was that sentimentality can have a big impact on would-be dog owners; many people can only imagine owning the same breed or type of dog that they grew up with. Despite the desire to replicate a childhood pet it's a simple fact that some breeds of dogs and cats are more suited to inner city lifestyles than others. The Golden Retriever or Cross Kelpie that the respondents grew up with is often just not a viable choice for apartment living.

The qualitative component of our research indicated that respondents' levels of knowledge with regards to the range of appropriate dog breeds seemed quite low. At the same time the quantitative research indicated that friendliness, loyalty and appearance were the three most important attributes dog owners considered when choosing their pet. Only a quarter of owners indicated the fact that the breed was good for small spaces was important.

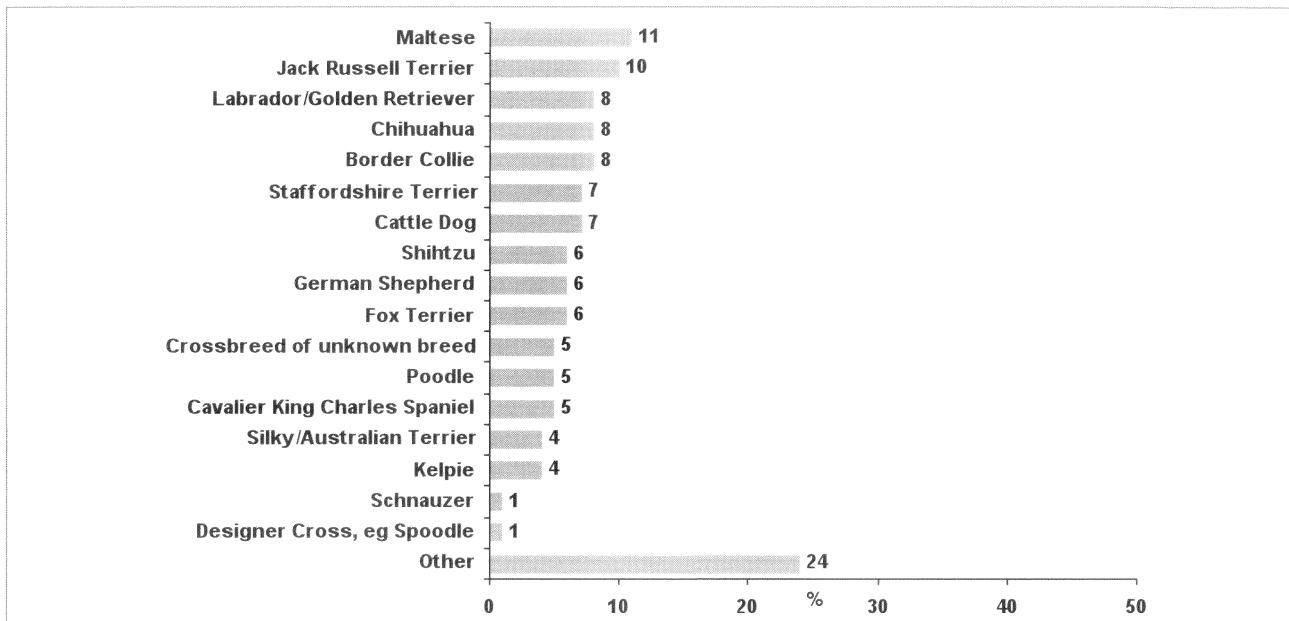
When seeking an alternative dog breed for small spaces people sometimes automatically assume a small breed is a good idea when in fact many small dogs are extremely energetic and noisy. In contrast some of the larger dog breeds are quiet, calm, require little exercise and are actually well suited to homes with limited outdoor areas.

Most popular breeds

Fifteen years ago the 1994 National People and Pets Survey found that German Shepherd Dogs were the most popular breed in Australia. The same survey undertaken in 2006 found Maltese Dogs to be at the top of the list. Times have certainly changed and there is an increased diversity of choice of dog breeds and an increased prevalence of small and medium sized dogs.

Our new research into the most popular breeds owned in medium to high density dwellings showed that whilst three of the top breeds were small, Labradors and Border Collies were also popular. In fact it would seem that ownership of breeds does not vary greatly between housing density – eight of the top ten breeds in the new higher density research were also in the top ten in the 2006 survey of the general population.

Breed of dog/s owned



Our research also investigated the sources of information people use in their decision of which type of dog or cat to get. Interestingly almost half stated no sources were used. Amongst the remainder personal experience or the experience of family and friends and the internet were quoted as popular sources of information. Dog owners tended to use many more sources of information than cat owners. Their decision seemed to be more considered and they were more likely to contact breeders and read books.

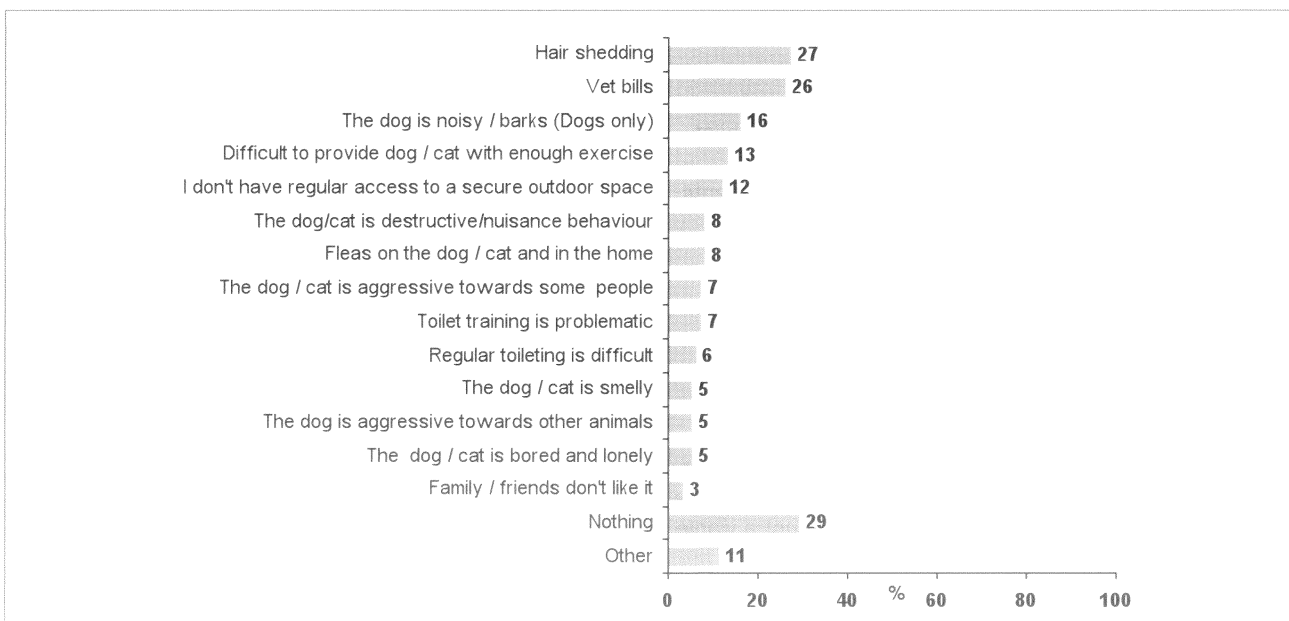
Common problems

The research showed that the vast majority of dog and cat owners cope very well keeping their pet in a medium to high density dwelling. Only 10% found it difficult, with dog owners more likely to experience difficulties than cat owners. The most commonly mentioned problems were minor and the major issues were only mentioned by a few.

Pet owners were asked to identify the three biggest problems they encountered and what coping strategies they used to overcome them. The most common problems associated with keeping pets in an urban environment included hair shedding (reported by 27% of owners); vet bills (26%); noise and barking (16%); difficulty providing their pet with enough exercise (13%); lack of regular access to a secure outdoor space (12%); destructive or nuisance behaviour (8%); toileting troubles (13%); and a perception that the pet is bored or lonely (5%).

The types of problems that bothered owners most varied depending on the species. Cat owners were more concerned with lack of regular access to outdoor space (16%), while dog owners had more difficulty providing exercise (16%) and with noise issues (16%). It was great to find that 29% of owners responded that they had no problems.

Common problems reported by city-dwelling pet owners



Coping strategies

The research found that owners who were most successful at keeping their dog (those for whom dog ownership was the least difficult) were more likely to:

- a) have many more strategies to reduce pet boredom, in particular, spending time with their dog when at home, and
- b) have an outdoor area the dog can access whenever it wants (including for toileting).

The coping strategies most likely to be utilised by dog owners were (in order of priority):

1. Having access to an outdoor space whenever the dog wants for toileting (65%);
2. Spending as much time as possible with the dog when at home (57%);
3. Regularly walking around the streets (47%);
4. Having a secure outdoor area that the dog can go to whenever they want (45%);
5. Having lots of toys to occupy the dog when alone (34%);
6. Training to avoid nuisance behaviour (34%) and barking (34%);
7. Leaving the radio or television on when the dog is alone (18%);
8. Having someone call in and check on the dog during the day (11%);
9. Arranging for the dog to visit family or friends when the house is going to be empty (11%).

The coping strategies most likely to be utilised by cat owners were (in order of priority):

1. Train the cat to use a litter tray (76%);
2. Provision of a scratching post to reduce nuisance behaviour (59%);
3. Letting the cat outside regularly (59%);
4. Spending as much time as possible with the cat when at home (57%);
5. Having lots of toys to occupy the cat when alone (33%).

Through the research it became apparent that many pet owners' emotional attachment to their pet and the enjoyment they receive means they cannot imagine life without their animal companion. Many of them have adapted their lives to meet the needs of their pets, putting coping strategies in place often without being aware they are doing so.

What do pet owners need?

So it would seem that less people choose to keep pets in high density areas and those that do report few problems and high levels of satisfaction. The fact remains though that increasingly people will be living in smaller spaces, living closer together and more frequently living alone. What can be done to plan better for the needs of all residents and to assist with the management of pets in high density surrounds?

Help with pet selection

Pet owners need education to help them find an appropriate breed or type of dog or cat to suit their lifestyle and housing type. They should be encouraged to do their homework before they obtain a dog or cat. Some prospective pet owners should possibly not consider owning a dog or cat, for example those who live in high rise apartments and work full time. Some owners should be encouraged to consider owning a cat or even two cats instead of a dog. PIAS provides the free Selectapet service to help people identify the breed of dog or cat that might best suit their lifestyle www.petnet.com.au

Education to help them understand the importance of socialisation, training and good pet management

Pet owners, especially those buying puppies, need to be aware from the outset of the commitment needed to socialise, train and manage a dog from puppy to adult and in the longer term. They need to have a realistic expectation of the difficulties they are likely to encounter when keeping a pet in an apartment or a smaller space and ways to solve problems. Owners of pets living in smaller spaces especially need to appreciate the importance of regular exercise for dogs and the need for companionship, mental stimulation and environmental enrichment for both dogs and cats.

Help with training and socialisation

The 2006 National People and Pets Survey indicated that almost 20% of owners had taken their puppy to Puppy Preschool™ or puppy socialisation classes. These classes help increase owners' knowledge of puppy care and preliminary training and also provide an opportunity for puppies to socialise with other puppies in a supervised environment. These classes are relatively new in Australia so it is encouraging to see their increasing popularity. The benefits of puppy socialisation should be promoted. The same 2006 survey indicated some 38% of dog owners had taken their dog to professional training services and 62% has provided some sort of training for their dog, although not professionally. Research has shown that training improves dog sociability and may have significant implications for companion animal owners through reducing problem behaviours. Training may also have significant benefits for companion dogs, whose welfare is likely to be considerably improved if they are sufficiently well mannered and sociable to engage in shared activities with their owners. Activities which aim to increase involvement in dog training would appear to be worthwhile.

Access to housing suitable for pets

Pet owners are often frustrated because of a lack of willingness from property owners, rental agents and owners' corporations to permit pets in rental and strata housing. Pet friendly developments are becoming increasingly popular but more could be done by local government, town planners and developers to ensure buildings are designed to accommodate pets and provide good access to private and public open space.

Access to professional help

Pet owners need to know how to locate and access assistance from skilled professionals in their local area. Veterinarians and Vet Nurses should be important sources for information to help owners manage their pets. Veterinary Behaviourists can help resolve more serious behavioural problems. Many sectors of the pet care industry are unregulated and pet owners need help to differentiate between service providers. Care should be taken that dog trainers have qualifications and preferably use reward based training methods. Professional boarding establishments, pet minders and walkers, groomers and trainers can all provide support to help owners care for pets appropriately.

Informal support networks

Pet owners benefit when they have friends, family and neighbours willing to assist with the care of their animals on a regular or adhoc basis. In many instances the reciprocity of favours amongst pet owners and others in the local community can also enhance relationships and help create new social networks. Websites such as www.dogtree.com.au and www.doggymates.com.au can help facilitate this process.

Access to services and facilities in their immediate area

In higher density areas people are more likely to take their dogs with them on outings in preference to leaving them at home in a small space. Dog owners in these areas need even greater access to facilities and services than the general population. Laws and facilities that encourage owners to take dogs on outings can help to ensure dogs are well exercised, receive adequate companionship and create less nuisance. Well trained and well behaved dogs on leash should be able to accompany their owners into most public areas. Opportunities for dogs to be exercised on and off leash, to be walked to the local shops and even to accompany their owners to outdoor food and beverage areas should be maximised. Agility and other training areas encourage owners to exercise and train their dogs. Provision of dog poo bags and disposal bins located in areas where owners are known to walk dogs will encourage people to walk their dogs regularly and clean up responsibly⁶. Simple facilities such as a shady bench where owners can sit and chat and access to fresh water for dogs can encourage dog owners to gather and socialise. Research has proven dogs increase the likelihood of their owners meeting other people within their immediate street and the wider suburb, they often serve as an ice-breaker and a neutral topic for conversation.

The social contacts derived from dog walking do not accrue only among dog owners but often extend to residents generally, including those without a dog. Basically pets are a great way of creating social connectedness⁷.

Conclusion

Our groundbreaking research made it apparent that successfully keeping dogs and cats in highly urbanised areas is possible with some thoughtful care and management. Ideally the best way to cope with a pet in this living situation is frequent exercise (for dogs), good access to outdoor space and not leaving the pet alone for long periods of time. Yet many people manage their pets very well in less than ideal situations and with successful outcomes.

Changing demographics and the insights provided by our research indicated a real need for specific information. This encouraged PIAS to develop a resource for high density dwelling pet owners - the new and free resource '*Pets in the City*' will be released in early 2010. The *Pets in the City* resource is a 'how to' guide to assist would-be pet owners meet the challenges of keeping pets in inner urban areas. The guide is a free booklet supported by a comprehensive website providing information to help people determine whether they should own a dog or cat, identify suitable breeds and learn ways to better manage pets with limited or no outdoor space. It includes case studies, expert comments and tips on how to solve common problems. The resource will be available at www.petsinthecity.net.au from early 2010 onwards.

About the author

Susie Willis is the NSW Consultant for Petcare Information and Advisory Service (PIAS) Susie works with the media, local and state government as well as industry, welfare and community groups to promote socially responsible pet ownership. Susie has worked with PIAS since early 1995 and has been involved in the urban animal management movement for most of that time. Prior to joining PIAS Susie worked in the grain and animal production industries, she has a Bachelor of Applied Science, Agriculture and is the Secretary of the Australian Companion Animal Council.

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