

Where do pets come from? Victorian Pet Acquisition Survey

Ms Cathy Pawsey, Bureau of Animal Welfare

Abstract

People acquire their pets from a wide range of sources including pet shops, breeders, acquaintances and adoption of strays. A survey of pet owners was therefore undertaken in Victoria to identify the main sites of acquisition for cats and dogs. This survey identified that the major acquisition sources of dogs and cats were different. Breeders were found to be the major source for dog acquisition while cats were generally acquired from several main sources including shelters, as strays or from friends. This survey also identified that the majority of both cats and dogs were acquired at less than 6 months of age and were generally healthy at the time of acquisition.

Introduction

Victorians have had a long and enjoyable history of dog and cat ownership, from those accompanying early European settlers in the 1830's to today. It is estimated that approximately 52% of Australian households own either a cat, dog or both (petnet, 2005). In Victoria there are an estimated 913,000 dogs and 616,000 cats of these approximately 64% of dogs and 41% of cats are registered with Councils (McMurray, 2004). It has also been identified that there is a pet overpopulation problem in Victoria with an estimated 50,000 cats and 40,000 dogs impounded annually of which approximately 35,000 cats and 13,000 dogs are subsequently euthanased. The cost of this problem has been calculated at something in the order of six million dollars per annum.

There is a common aim amongst those working in domestic animal management to raise the level of responsible pet ownership in the community through targeted education and enforcement programs. These programs aim to reduce the number of animals impounded, increase reclaim rates of dogs and cats, encourage permanent identification and desexing and reduce nuisance problems. In order to develop and target appropriate policy and education programs, that would reach new and potential owners, there was a need to know where cats and dogs are acquired. Despite many theories it was identified that there was little actual data to be found on where people do acquire their pets. Therefore the Bureau of Animal Welfare (BAW) and the Victorian Animal Welfare Advisory Committee's (AWAC) Companion Animal Working Group, with the assistance of Monash University, developed this pet acquisition survey.

Purpose

The specific purpose of this survey was to:

- Determine the sources of acquisition of dogs and cats;
- Determine the age of pets at time of acquisition; and
- Identify the existence of health problems in cats and dogs when acquired

Methods

A questionnaire was developed by Monash University in consultation with the Bureau of Animal Welfare and AWAC's Companion Animal Working Group. This survey was then distributed, via a number of different organisations, to members of the general community to complete.

The organisations involved in the survey distribution were: the Australian Veterinary Association, Cat Protection Society, Lost Dog's Home, Planet K9, Manningham Council, Department of Victorian Communities, Department of Primary Industries and at the Nillumbik and Mornington Peninsula Pet Expos.

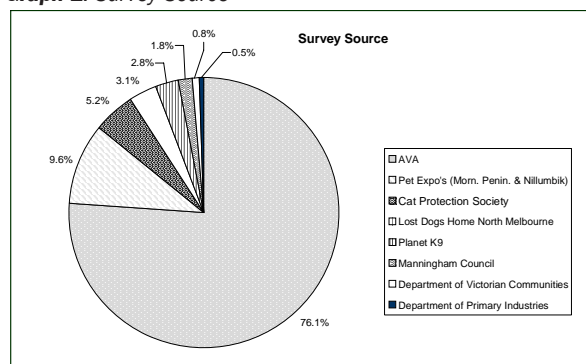
Data was collected from April 2004 to December 2004 (inclusive). Where information was absent from the survey it is denoted in the results as 'unnamed' or 'unspecified'.

Results

Survey Sources

A total of 1,608 surveys were completed during the survey period relating to the ownership of 1396 cats and 1756 dogs. The percentage of completed surveys by source is shown in graph 1 below.

Graph 1: Survey Source

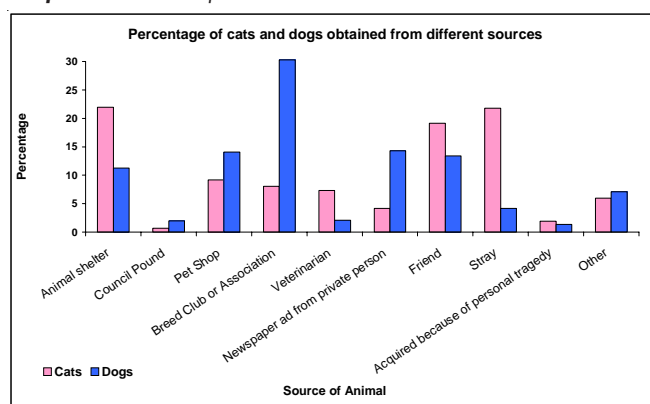


By far the majority of surveys (76.1%) were sourced with the assistance of the Australian Veterinary Association, where they were distributed through veterinary clinics to animal owners, the next major source (11.4%) was through local council events or council reception desks. The remaining organisations together accounted for the remaining 12.5% of the surveys. Given the vast majority of surveys were through the one organisation comparisons of data from the different sources was undertaken to ensure there was no resulting bias. Comparison showed that results were fairly consistent between the survey sources.

Animal acquisition sources

The sources where pet owners acquire their dogs and cats are illustrated in the graph below.

Graph 2: Animal Acquisition Sources



From graph 2 it can be seen that the major sources for acquisition of dogs and cats vary considerably between the two species.

The most common source of dogs was through breeders (30%), while this was one of the smaller sources of cats with only 8% of cats acquired in this manner.

Cats were most commonly acquired through three major sources, animal shelters, adoption of a stray cat (both 22%) or from friends (19%). Whilst in contrast only 11%, 4% and 13% respectively of dogs were acquired through these same sources.

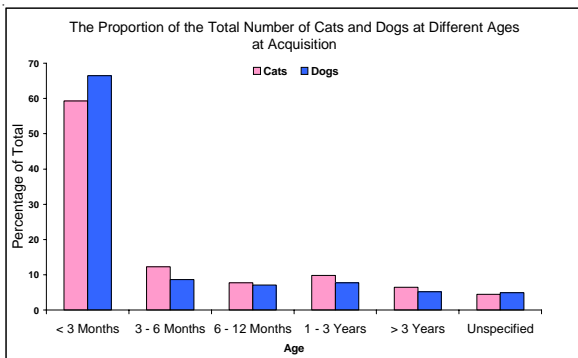
Pet shops supplied 14% of dogs and 9% of cats to pet owners and along with newspapers (14%) and friends (13%) were the next major sources of dogs after breeders. Interestingly only a small number of cats (4%) are sourced through newspapers.

Council pounds and acquisition due to personal tragedy were the least common sources for both cats and dogs accounting for only 1-2% of both types of pets.

Age of acquisition

Results from the survey regarding the age of cats and dogs at acquisition are shown in the graph below.

Graph 3: Age of cats and dogs at acquisition

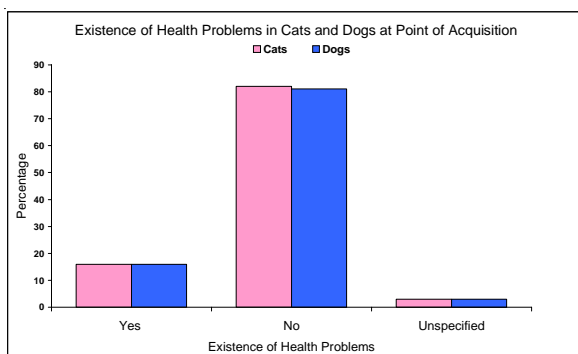


Graph 3 clearly shows that the majority of both cats (59%) and dogs (66%) are acquired at less than 3 months. Add a further 12% of cats and 9% of dogs acquired between 3-6 months of age and over 70% of both dogs and cats are acquired before 6 months of age. In contrast only a small number of pets (5% of dogs and 6% of cats) are acquired at over 3 years of age.

Existence of health problems

As well as source of animal and age at acquisition the survey also looked at whether cats and dogs had health problems when acquired. Results are shown below.

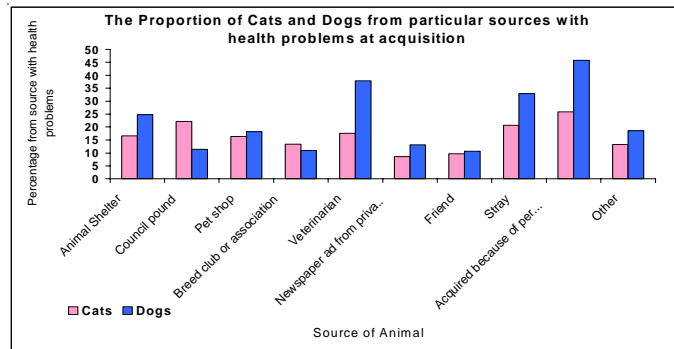
Graph 4: Health problems at time of acquisition



The results of the survey (refer Graph 4) show that the majority of dogs and cats were healthy when acquired with only 16% of both cats and dogs having health problems of some sort (it was not generally recorded what the health problems were) at time of acquisition.

Graph 5 sets out the proportion of animals from each particular source that had health problems when acquired.

Graph 5: Proportion of cats and dogs with health problems at acquisition by source



Of the sources of acquisition for dogs those from vets (38%), personal tragedy (46%) or as strays (33%) were more likely to have health problems at the time of acquisition compared with other methods of acquisition. In contrast the percentages of cats with health problems from each source is much more even over all sources with only slightly higher percentages from cats sourced through personal tragedy (26%), pounds (16%) or as strays (21%).

Discussion

The results of this project show that the main acquisition methods for cats and dogs vary considerably between the two species. The four major sources of acquisition for dogs were in order: breeders, newspapers, petshops, and from friends. While for cats they were from three main sources: as strays, through animal shelters and from friends.

It is possible to label the various methods of acquisition as either 'active' ie where a person specifically seeks out the pet, or 'passive' where a person is not specifically looking for an animal but one presents itself and they accept ownership of that animal. Acquisition methods for dogs tended to be the 'active' types of acquisition, such as specific purchase from a breeder, while those for cats tended more on the 'passive' side, ie a stray cat that just 'turned up' at the owner's property. It is likely that in fact the number of people who have acquired cats as strays is much higher than shown in this project if you factor in the so-called 'semi-owned' cats. There are many people who may not have filled in a survey, or even been at a site where they were being distributed, as they do not consider themselves a cat owner despite feeding and often providing other care for a 'stray' or 'semi-owned' cat.

There is a general belief that people who actively acquire their pet and who are prepared to pay to acquire that animal tend to be the more responsible pet owners. McMurray, 2004 found that there was a greater proportion of dogs registered (64%) compared to cats (41%), which provides support for this theory given that a greater proportion of those people acquiring dogs tended to do so actively.

This survey found a clear preference towards sourcing of dogs from breeders however this same preference was not shown for cats. One explanation for this may be the greater variability in dog breeds, temperament and size compared with cats which regardless of breed are usually a similar size, require a similar level of care (except for perhaps grooming) and are not perceived to be significantly different in temperament. Dogs on the other hand vary considerably in size, level of care (ie exercise, grooming, training) and temperament, particularly in regard to the general public's perception of potential for aggression in some breeds. Those cats that do require a greater level of care (ie long-haired) tend to be those that are more commonly available through breeders rather than the other sources of acquisition and are more likely to be a breed actively acquired.

Interestingly there are twice as many cats acquired through animal shelters (which would be considered an 'active' method of acquisition) than dogs. This may be due to responsible cat owners adopting cats from shelters in order to aid in reducing the numbers of cats euthanased by shelters. It may also be that there are a greater number of unclaimed cats generally available from shelters compared with dogs, the Victorian Benchmarking survey (McMurray, 2004) found that 53% of dogs were reclaimed from council pounds compared with only about 11% of cats. Or it may simply be due to the greater number of kittens available from shelters compared with puppies particularly when you link this with the results of this survey, which showed around 70 - 75% of cats and dogs are acquired before 6 months of age.

There is a growing opposition to the sale of animals through pet shops due to the belief that many of these animals are bought on impulse and are subsequently surrendered or dumped when the animal proves either too expensive, too much work or develops nuisance behaviours.

However the results of this survey showed that pet shops only contribute between 9-14% respectively of the cats and dogs acquired. Given these findings it is unlikely that petshops are such a major source of unwanted animals as previously thought. Therefore it is important that there is not undue emphasis placed on cats and dogs acquired through pet shops when developing strategies to reduce the number of unwanted animals in the community.

The preference of pet owners to acquire their pet at a young age is shown by nearly three quarters of all cats and dogs being acquired at under 6 months of age with the majority actually being under three months of age. Reasons for this could be both the attraction of the young 'cute' animal and the desire to be able to shape or train the pet themselves (rather than take on an animal which may have developed bad habits or nuisance behaviours). Targeting of education and animal management strategies towards encouraging responsible pet ownership to persons acquiring kittens and puppies should mean that a large percentage of new owners would be reached. In Victoria 82% of cats and 76% of dogs are registered at the reduced rate (McMurray, 2004) which means they are most likely to be desexed and/or permanently identified (two of the main qualifiers for reduced registration). Utilising these facts Victoria recently reduced the registration age for cats and dogs to 3 months of age to encourage both desexing and permanent identification of new pets at the time of purchase so owners could qualify for the reduced registration rates.

If you look at the major sources of both cats and dogs they in fact tend to be sources where young animals are available and where the cost and effort of acquisition matches the persons desire for that animal. As discussed earlier there are generally more kittens than puppies available from shelters so this is not a source as widely used by those wishing to acquire a dog. Additionally kittens from shelters are generally cheaper than from breeders and are already desexed and microchipped. Cats seem not to be as widely valued as dogs and thus people are less likely to pay a significant amount or in fact be prepared to pay at all to acquire a cat as a pet. As a result we see that many cats are acquired from friends or as strays where there is generally little or no acquisition cost. This value placed on an animal can also be linked to the level of responsibility that owners take for an animal, by educating these owners on their responsibilities we will hopefully reduce the numbers of unwanted, surrendered or dumped animals.

In general the majority of cats and dogs were healthy at time of acquisition. The results from the comparison of the proportion of animals that had health problems in each method of acquisition were basically what you would expect for dogs where there were higher proportions of health problems in dogs acquired through veterinary clinics and as strays. Cats on the other hand showed a more even proportion of health problems across all methods of acquisition.

As the survey did not require an explanation of what the health problem was it is not possible to make a definitive explanation for this. However it is possible that this more even result for cats may be attributed to the widespread problem of cat flu.

The highest proportion of health problems in both cats and dogs was where they were acquired through personal tragedy. This could well be due to a larger proportion of these animals being older when acquired and thus suffering aged related problems. It is also possible that due to ill health of the owner the welfare of these animals had suffered as a result, leading to health issues when acquired by the current owner.

Conclusion

As discussed earlier, this survey identified that the methods of acquisition for cats and dogs vary considerably. By identifying the differing sources and acquisition habits for the two species we are able to better target policy, enforcement and education programs and identify areas for further research. By targeting new owners at acquisition and encouraging them to be responsible pet owners and registering their animals there will be a consequential flow on with regard to actions such as desexing and identification of pets.

Level of desire for a pet (ie active vs passive acquisition), value placed on the animal (and therefore price people are prepared to pay) and age of animal can be used as a predictor of how people will acquire a cat or dog.

This survey has provided us with the knowledge to target our programs and strategies to where they will be most effective. It will obviously be possible to reach many future dog owners directly through the acquisition source however this will not be so effective in reaching cat owners. In order to reach cat owners it will be necessary to use methods that target the information or strategies directly at the individual owner rather than via an acquisition source. Additionally the knowledge that so many pets are acquired at a young age stresses the importance of promoting activities such as desexing and identification of animals at an early age.

The differences in these acquisition methods between cats and dogs also highlight the need to address animal management and welfare issues for dogs and cats separately rather than as has tended to happen in the past where the same solutions, education and management strategies have been used for both species.

References

- McMurray, R (2004). Benchmarking Victoria - an all Council view & comparison. *Urban Animal Management Conference Proceedings 2004* (pp. 69-74). Australian Veterinary Association Ltd, NSW.
- Petnet, (2005). Statistics. Retrieved 4th September 2005, from <http://www.petnet.com.au/statistics.html>

Cathy Pawsey

Cathy Pawsey is the Coordinator Policy and Legislation for Victoria's Bureau of Animal Welfare. This role involves the development of policy and legislation for both domestic animal management and animal welfare legislation as well as development and revision of codes of practice. Recent projects include the development of legislation and training for microchip implantation, development of general cat and dog welfare codes and the development of a training program for welfare inspectors in Victoria. Cathy has a Bachelor of Applied Science (Agriculture) and has worked in a range of animal related industries including working in both animal health and animal welfare regulation roles.