

# The Information Exchange

## Results of the AVMA survey of US pet-owning households on companion animal ownership

- Companion animal ownership has become more concentrated. Fewer total households own pets, but there are more pets owned per household.
- Among households owning dogs, cats, and birds, an increased number of pets per household has offset a decreased rate of ownership, maintaining stable populations of these pets.
- Among households owning pleasure horses, the number of horses owned per household has not offset decreased rate of ownership, and the total population of pleasure horses has decreased.

The AVMA periodically surveys a large sample of US households to determine the rate of companion animal ownership, the demographics of households that own companion animals, and the use of veterinary medical services by those households. In January 1997, a revised questionnaire was distributed to 80,000 US households, from which 59,998 (75%) usable responses were obtained. Respondents were compared with the total population and were determined to constitute a representative sample.

The number of US households that owned companion animals on December 31, 1996 was estimated by multiplying the estimated December 31 rate of pet ownership (percentage of households) in each geographic area (dogs and cats, state; birds and horses, region; all other pets, nation) by the total number of households in each state or region or in the nation, respectively. The number of households in each geographic area was determined from estimates made by the US Census Bureau. The number of pet-owning households was then multiplied by the mean number of pets owned per household, and values were summed across states or regions

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Table 1—Pet ownership and pet populations in US households, as of Dec 31, 1991 and 1996

Type of pet	Rate of ownership* (%)		No. of pet-owning households† (millions)		Mean No. of pets owned per household†		Pet populations‡ (millions)	
	1991	1996	1991	1996	1991	1996	1991	1996
Dogs	36.5	31.6	34.6	31.2	1.52	1.69	52.5	52.9
Cats	30.9	27.3	29.2	27.0	1.95	2.19	57.0	59.1
Birds	5.7	4.6	5.4	4.6	2.16	2.74	11.0	12.6
Horses	2.0	1.5	1.9	1.5	2.54	2.67	4.9	4.0
Other pets‡	6.7	10.7	6.3	10.6	ND	ND	ND	ND

\*For each row, the percentage of households that owned the type of pet indicated in the first column.  
 †For each row, refers only to the type of pet indicated in the first column. ‡See table 3. ND = not determined.

(when necessary) to arrive at a total population.

It was estimated that 58.2 million (58.9%) US households owned ≥ 1 companion animal at some time during 1996. The largest percentage of these households owned dogs (31.6%) or cats (27.3%). However, this number also included households that owned birds, horses, fish, rabbits, ferrets, hamsters, gerbils, guinea pigs, other rodents, turtles, snakes, lizards, other reptiles, and many other animals kept primarily as companions. Between 1991 and 1996, population estimates increased for dogs (0.4 million, 0.8%), cats (2.1 million, 3.7%), and birds (1.6 million, 14.5%), but the population estimate of pleasure horses (−0.9 million, −18.4%) decreased (Table 1). Thus, the population of 52.9 million dogs and 59.1 million cats kept as companions has remained stable, but the

Table 2—Percentage of US pet-owning households in which > 1 type of pet was owned, 1996

Type of household (primary pet)*	Percentage of those households that also owned:			
	Dogs	Cats	Birds	Horses
Dog-owning	—	42.0	9.2	3.9
Cat-owning	48.5	—	8.0	3.9
Bird-owning	63.0	47.5	—	4.8
Horse-owning	81.3	69.1	14.6	—

\*Primary designation does not imply owner preference for that particular species of pet.

number of pleasure horses kept as companions has decreased from approximately 4.9 million in 1991 to 4.0 million in 1996.

Households that owned dogs, cats, birds, or horses also commonly owned another species of pet (Table 2). For this analysis, assignment to a primary pet-ownership category did not imply that owners preferred that species. Thus, the results were not interpreted as dog owners who also owned other pets, but were inter-

Table 3—Pet ownership and populations of specialty and exotic pets in US households, as of Dec 31, 1991 and 1996

Type of pet	Rate of ownership*		Mean No. of pets per household†		No. of pet-owning households‡ (1,000)		Pet populations† (1,000)	
	1991	1996	1991	1996	1991	1996	1991	1996
Fish‡	2.8	6.3	9.05	8.92	2,652	6,228	23,997	55,554
Ferrets‡	1.5	0.4	1.45	2.00	189	395	275	791
Rabbits‡	1.0	1.9	3.22	2.63	1,420	1,878	4,574	4,940
Hamsters	0.5	1.0	1.39	1.86	947	1,008	1,316	1,876
Guinea pigs	0.3	0.6	1.77	1.87	473	583	838	1,091
Gerbils	0.2	0.3	2.18	2.76	284	277	619	764
Other rodents	0.4	0.4	2.31	2.42	379	435	875	1,053
Turtles	0.4	0.5	1.87	1.78	379	534	708	950
Snakes	0.2	0.2	3.88	4.14	189	217	735	900
Lizards	0.2	0.5	1.66	1.55	189	455	314	705
Other reptiles	0.1	0.3	2.97	2.75	95	336	281	924
Other birds	0.4	0.3	13.78	13.16	379	336	5,220	4,423
Livestock	0.5	0.5	7.12	11.61	473	524	3,371	6,083
All others	0.2	0.4	3.37	3.26	189	376	638	1,225

\*For each row, the percentage of households that owned the type of pet indicated in the first column. †For each row, refers only to the type of pet indicated in the first column. ‡Fish, ferrets, and rabbits were specifically listed on the 1996 survey, but were not specifically listed on the 1991 survey.

puted as pet owners who owned a dog and also owned other pets. Furthermore, the base for the reported rates of ownership was not the entire US population, but was the population for each primary species. For example, it was indicated that 41.4% of dog-owning households, which represented only 31.6% of all US households, also owned cats.

Additional rate of pet ownership may also be useful, especially concerning dogs and cats. It was estimated that 18.3% of US households owned dogs, but did not own cats; and that 14.1% of US households owned cats, but not dogs; and that 13.3% of US households owned both. From these results it can be inferred that 45.7% of all US households owned dogs, cats, or both. These rates were estimated

directly from the data, but it is possible to estimate additional rates of this nature by using rules of conditional probability and the rates reported (Tables 1 and 2).

Between 1991 and 1996, the populations of specialty and exotic pets increased, except for other birds (doves, pigeons, and poultry). Populations increased as a result of increases in the number of households or the number of pets per household and changes in rates of ownership. The number of households owning specialty and exotic pets increased for all categories except gerbils and other birds, whereas the number of pets per household increased for all categories except rabbits, turtles, lizards, other reptiles, other birds, and all other pets (Table

3). Finally, rate of ownership decreased for ferrets and other birds, was unchanged for other rodents, snakes, and livestock, and increased for all other categories.

Major changes in the number of fish should not be interpreted as a substantial increase in fish ownership. There appeared to be bias against reporting fish as a pet when fish were not specifically listed on a survey. Questionnaires used for the 1983 and 1996 surveys specifically listed fish, whereas questionnaires used in 1987 and 1991 did not. Rates of fish ownership in 1983 and 1996 were 7.3 and 6.3%, respectively, compared with 2.8% in 1987 and 1991. These results implied that fish populations were underestimated in 1987 and 1991.