

The Information Exchange

Results of the 1997 AVMA survey of US pet-owning households regarding use of veterinary services and expenditures

- Female household members were the primary people responsible for pet care in nearly three fourths of all pet-owning households.
- Nearly nine tenths of dog-owning households, three fourths of cat-owning households, and two thirds of horse-owning households used veterinary medical services at least once during the past 2 years.
- Between 1991 and 1996, expenditures by US pet-owning households for veterinary medical services increased at a rate greater than the increase in the Consumer Price Index.

Since 1983, the AVMA has periodically surveyed a large sample of US households to determine the rate of companion animal ownership, demographics of households that owned companion animals, and use of veterinary medical services by those households. In January 1997, a revised questionnaire was distributed to 80,000 US households, and 59,998 (75%) usable responses were returned and processed. The response group was compared with the total population and was determined to be a representative sample.

Rates of companion animal ownership and estimated populations of animals kept as pets have been reported (JAVMA, July 15, 1997, pp 169–170). The objective for the information reported here was to review the age and gender of the household member most responsible for pet care, rates at which households used veterinary medical services, number of veterinary visits per animal, and expenditures per visit.

Person Responsible for Pet Care

Regardless of age, female household members had primary responsibility for pet care by a ratio of 2.6:1. Female household

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Table 1—Age and sex of the primary person responsible for pet care in US households, 1996*

Age	All pets		Dogs		Cats		Birds		Horses	
	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male
≤ 18	2.1	1.8	1.5	1.5	1.6	0.8	1.9	1.4	2.5	1.3
19 to 29	7.8	2.6	8.1	2.7	9.2	2.2	8.7	2.1	7.1	2.0
30 to 49	38.6	13.2	41.9	14.0	43.4	12.1	47.1	11.5	42.8	15.2
50 to 64	15.4	6.2	14.5	6.2	15.5	5.6	15.4	4.9	12.1	9.9
≥ 65	8.3	4.0	6.1	3.5	6.8	2.9	5.0	1.9	2.4	4.7
Total	72.2	27.8	72.1	27.9	76.4	23.6	78.2	21.8	66.9	33.1

*Values reported are percentages.

members were the primary pet caretakers in 19,632 of 27,191 (72.2%) pet-owning households. The rate ranged from 536 of 801 (66.9%) horse-owning households to 1,899 of 2,429 (78.2%) bird-owning households (Table 1).

Analysis of these results by age revealed an interesting pattern in the evolution of pet care responsibilities. Primary pet care responsibilities were almost equally divided between females and males for caretakers ≤ 18 years old. This group was only slightly more likely to be female than male (ratio, 1.2:1). However, between the ages of 19 and 29, the primary caretaker was much more likely to be female (ratio, 3.0:1). The ratio decreased as age increased, but primary caretakers ≥ 65 years old were still more than twice as likely to be female (ratio, 2.1:1). The same pattern was evident among

all species, except for horse owners, with males more likely to be the primary caretakers among those ≥ 65 years old.

Use of Veterinary Services

Rates at which households used veterinary services during the past 2 years were determined. Dog-owning households (88.7%) were the most likely and bird-owning households (15.8%) were the least likely to have used veterinary services during the past 2 years. However, rates reported did not necessarily mean that 88.7% of all dogs, 72.9% of all cats, 15.8% of all birds, and 66.3% of all horses received veterinary care during the past 2 years. This would only have been the case if each household had only 1 animal. For example, in a household with 2 dogs, a veterinary visit for 1 dog during the past 2 years would have placed this household in the services-

Table 2—Use of veterinary medical services by US households, 1991 and 1996

Type of pet	1991		1996	
	Mean No. of veterinary visits per animal	Mean expenditure per visit (\$)	Mean No. of veterinary visits per animal	Mean expenditure per visit (\$)
Dogs	1.88	49.96	1.80	73.60
Cats	0.88	44.81	1.01	66.58
Birds	0.10	34.24	0.13	55.67
Horses	0.94	68.10	0.99	100.07

used category, even though 1 of the dogs had not had a veterinary visit during the past 2 years.

Veterinary Visits and Expenditures

Respondents were asked to report the number of veterinary visits their animals had in 1996 (Table 2). When 2 animals were taken to the veterinarian simultaneously, this was reported as 2 veterinary visits rather than 1. Respondents also were asked to report the total amount of money spent on veterinary visits in 1996. To compare visits and expenditures across time, statistics were calculated on a per-animal and per-visit basis, rather than on a per-household basis, to re-

move the influence of the increasing number of animals owned per household.

Between 1991 and 1996, mean number of veterinary visits per animal increased for cats (14.7%), birds (30.0%), and horses (5.3%), but decreased for dogs (-4.3%). When multiplied by the number of animals in each population, this represented 95.22 million veterinary visits for dogs, 59.69 million for cats, 1.64 million for birds, and 3.96 million for horses.

During the same period, mean expenditure per visit increased for all species. Expenditures for dogs increased by \$23.64 (47.3%), a compound annual rate of 8.05%. Expenditures for cats increased by \$21.77 (48.6%), a compound annual rate of 8.24%, whereas expenditures for birds and horses increased by \$21.43 (62.6%) and \$31.97 (46.9%), respectively, a compound annual rate of 10.21 and 7.99%, respectively.

An increase in expenditures did not necessarily imply an increase in the quantity of services purchased, because prices may have increased during the same

period. This distinction was important, because if the increase was in expenditures associated only with an increase in prices, then the demand for services that veterinarians supplied may not have increased over time.

Detailed data on fees for veterinary services were not available to enable the development of an index specific to veterinary medical services. Veterinary expenditures by consumers could not be adjusted to compare quantities directly; therefore, the Consumer Price Index for all urban consumers was used for this analysis. On the basis of the assumption that fees for veterinary services increased at the same rate as the Consumer Price Index, real (inflation adjusted) expenditures for veterinary services increased between 1991 and 1996. Real value of expenditures increased for dogs by \$16.05 (27.9%) per veterinary visit, for cats by \$14.96 (28.9%) per visit, for birds by \$16.23 (41.2%) per visit, and for horses by \$21.62 (27.6%) per visit. These values represented compound annual increases of 5.04, 5.21, 7.14, and 4.99%, respectively.