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MASSACHUSETTS PUBLIC OPINION STUDY

ON SPAYING AND NEUTERING PETS

Conducted for the
Massachusetts Society for the Prevention
of Cruelty to Animals

October, 1991

MSPCA

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INTRODUCTION

This report contains the findings from a study of pet owners in Massachusetts conducted for the Massachusetts Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals during the period of October 21-27, 1991. The objectives of the research focused on the issue of spaying/neutering pets and focused on the following topics:

- Some background data on owners and pets
- Attitudes and behavior relating to spaying/neutering pets
- Motivators and deterrents in decisions of whether to spay/neuter

A telephone screening process was utilized to locate 500 cooperating households owning cat(s) and/or dog(s). Random-digit dialing ensured that unlisted telephones were included in the correct proportion. The degree of cooperation of people who were contacted was relatively high, as only 27% refused even to answer the question on pet ownership. The screening revealed that 36% of the households owned cats and/or dogs: 15% cats only, 14% dogs only, and 7% both cats and dogs.

As in any research involving a sample rather than a census, sampling tolerances must be observed in the interpretation of data. For data based on all 500 responses, we can be quite certain that any statistic from the survey is within +/- 5 percentage points of what a census would have yielded. For example, if 48% of the survey respondents answered 'Yes' to a Yes/No question, we may be highly confident that a census would have produced a corresponding statistic between 43% and 53%.

The sampling tolerance increases as the number of respondents decreases. For instance, in the cross-tabulations for this study, the number of appropriate respondents is as small as 56 in one category. The maximum tolerance on data from this subsample is +/- 14 points.

A copy of the questionnaire, which was thoroughly pretested prior to use, appears at the end of this report.

CONCLUSIONS

- Incidence of claimed spaying/neutering among these Massachusetts residents is higher than the corresponding figures in national studies. There may have been some stretching of the truth; however, respondents backed up their claims with ready answers about the sterilizing experience. It may also be that houses without telephones (and thus not included in this study) comprise a substantial proportion of nonsterilized pets.
- Dogs are more likely than cats to have been actively wanted by their households. A relatively high percentage of dog-owners procures dogs by going to places such as breeders and shelters; a comparatively substantial proportion of cat-owners has cats Offered to them by acquaintances.
- The dominant reason for having spayed/neutered a cat or dog is to avoid offspring. Avoiding over-population or exercising social responsibility is the number two reason (but mentioned only half as widely). The third reason involves the effect on pets' behavior or desirability.
- While cat-owners are more concerned than dog-owners about preventing pregnancy in their pets, cat-owners also have more expense-related reluctance. This is another indication of the apparently lesser degree of commitment among cat-owners toward their pets.
- Many dog-owners who avoid or delay sterilization deliberately because they want to have litters. reassured by the belief that their dogs will not of their pets do so Other dog-owners are run loose.
- Only 42% of the cat-owners and 39% of the dog-owners agree that there is pet overpopulation.
- When asked about the cost of spaying/neutering, those who had not done so guessed in the \$54-\$59 range for cats and the \$76-\$93 range for dogs.
- From a list of six possible spaying/neutering "arguments", two are credited by respondents as more persuasive than others: (1) keeps males away from the house and (2) knowing that a small proportion of animals in shelters finds a home.
- Other potentially influential 'arguments' include: (3) reducing risk of runaways/fights, (4) health benefits to pet, and (5) enhancement of pet's disposition.
- Education about lack of expense is claimed not to be such a strong "hot button" as the other five inducements.

IMPLICATIONS

A certain proportion of pet owners will probably never be convinced to spay/neuter their animals. However they appear to be in a fairly small minority, and many seem committed to keeping their pets indoors. It could be useful to remind these people that even a brief outdoor "potty" trip can result in a pet's pregnancy.

Simply appealing to people's social consciousness about pet overpopulation may fall on deaf ears more often than not. They need to learn of the specific consequences of shirking this responsibility, such as the low pet survival rates in shelters.

Dog-owners need to be informed about benefits to pets (e.g. health) and to the owner (e.g. keeping males away, reducing runaways/fights, enhancing pets' dispositions). Cat-owners may also be influenced by such arguments, but they also need some reassurance in terms of the expense of sterilization.

DETAILED FINDINGS

CHARACTERISTICS OF PET OWNERS

As indicated in the Introduction, 15% of Massachusetts households own cats and 14% own dogs. Among the combined cat/dog-owners, 7% have both cat(s) and dog(s).

The typical pet-owner is a female, age 40, living (with another adult) in a household with approximately \$43,000 annual (pretax) income, and about 39% likely to have a child in the home. Cat-owners and dog-owners have the same age profile, but dog-owners and multiple owners of either cats or dogs are a bit more affluent.

The vast majority (more than 8 In 10) have owned the same category of pet before. Among cat-owners, 39% own more than one cat; and the average number of cats per cat-owning household is 1.6. Among dog-owners, 19% own more than one dog; and the average number of dogs per dog-owning household is 1.2.

Most of the cat-owning households (86%) have a mixed breed cat, while purebreds occupy the majority (59%) of dog-owning households. The typical cat or dog in respondent households is 4 or 5 years old.

Indications are that dog-owners had been more proactive than cat-owners in seeking out pets. More than half (56%) of the cat-owners obtained their cats from acquaintances, and presumably the donor was seeking a home for the animal in many of these situations. Strays accounted for another 20% of cat acquisitions and household litters another 4%. In only a minority of cases had cats come from animal shelters (12%) or pet stores (9%).

On the other hand, upwards of two-thirds of the dog-owners cited sources reflecting effort or selectivity on the owners' parts to own dogs: private breeders (27%), animal shelters (13%), pounds (9%), pet stores (7%), and kennels (5%). A minority received their dogs through other channels: acquaintances (30%) and strays (5%).

To the extent that dog-owners exhibit more commitment in procuring their animals, they may arguably assume greater responsibility in caring for their pets as well.

LITTERS

The incidence of litters was 19% in cat-owning households and 18% in dog-owning households.

Among households where cats have had litters:

- 74% have given kittens away
- 26% have kept kittens
- 13% have placed kittens in a pet store
- 7% have given kittens to animals shelters
- 6% have sold kittens
- 6% reported kittens' deaths

Among households where dogs have had litters:

- 45% have given puppies away
- 43% have sold puppies
- 5% have had puppies run away
- 2% took puppies to animals shelters
- 2% reported puppies' deaths

SPAYING/NEUTERING PETS

Most cat-owners (87%) claimed to have spayed/neutered their cats. Among dog-owners, 73% claimed to have spayed/neutered their dogs. In both cases, residents of Western Massachusetts (the 413 Area Code) indicated a somewhat lower incidence of this activity than their Eastern/Central Massachusetts counterparts.

Respondents throughout Massachusetts claimed a much higher propensity for spaying/neutering than has been the case in national studies. There may have been some stretching of the facts in an effort to paint socially acceptable self-portraits; however, our experience is that the public is surprisingly candid in their feedback on animal issues (even a topic as volatile as vivisection). We suspect much of the difference between national and Massachusetts figures relates to the general tendency of Massachusetts residents to be (a) relatively informed about and (b) comparatively sympathetic toward social causes of most types.

Among cat-owners, there is a correlation between relative affluence (and probably advanced education) and incidence of spaying/neutering. There is no such skewness by income in the case of dog-owners.

Undoubtedly motivated at least partly by Massachusetts Law, 97% of the dog-owners claimed to have provided rabies shots for their dogs. Even in the absence of a similar law governing cats, 80% of the cat-owners claimed their cats had had rabies shots.

The figure on cats is much higher than the national average. Once again, we believe much of the difference is due to a relatively greater social conscience among the Massachusetts public. Some respondents could have taken some liberties with the facts in order to appear in a favorable light. Moreover, there could have been some confusion of rabies shots with other inoculations.

ATTITUDES AND MOTIVATIONS RELATED TO SPAYING/NEUTERING

When asked which sex of pet they would be most likely to spay/neuter, only slightly better than half mentioned one sex or the other. Among those people, females were mentioned by a 5 to 1 margin:

- 46% Females
- 9% Males
- 41% Both equally
- 3% No opinion

Sterilization

The dominant reason for having spayed/neutered pets (based on an unaided question) was a desire to avoid offspring. An indication of social responsibility of some sort was a strong number two:

<u>Cat-owners</u>	<u>Dog-owners</u>	
59%	59%	Did not want offspring
32%	27%	To avoid overpopulation, homelessness/Matter of responsibility
15%	13%	To control behavior
9%	5%	To keep as pets/To keep animals from running wild
8%	3%	To avoid their being in heat
6%	6%	Animal already sterilized when obtained
4%	7%	Thought animal would be healthier
3%	7%	Suggested by vet/pound/shelter

After this unaided question, a list of possible reasons for spaying/neutering was given to respondents, who were asked to rate each reason on a scale from zero (not at all important) through nine (highly important). This exercise ranked concern for pet overpopulation number one:

<u>Cat-owners</u>	<u>Dog-owners</u>	
7.7	6.9	Did not want to add to pet overpopulation
6.5	6.5	Thought that finding homes for young would be difficult
6.3	5.7	To prevent male from spraying/roaming/fighting
6.2	6.2	Didn't want young animals around the house
5.6	5.5	Didn't want to deal with female in heat
5.4	4.7	Thought animal would be healthier
2.7	2.3	Found low-cost veterinarian
1.8	2.1	Animal already sterilization when obtained
1.6	1.9	Required by place where animal obtained

In other words, before they were prompted with possible reasons, many respondents admitted that their prime motivation was to avoid offspring. When presented with a reason that underscored their feelings of social responsibility, people did not want to appear irresponsible and thus gave this factor a high rating. We attach more credibility to the results of the unprompted question (emphasizing a desire not to have young puppies or kittens).

Nonsterilization

Among the 13% who had not sterilized their cats, almost half implied (unaided) that they intended to do so when the cat was old enough; nearly another one-quarter expressed reluctance related to perceived expense.

Among the 27% who had not spayed/neutered their dogs, there seemed to be virtually no concern about expense. One-third felt secure in the belief that the dogs would not run freely outdoors; and nearly as many expressed a desire to breed their canines.

<u>Cat-owners</u>	<u>Dog-owners</u>	
44%	13%	Pet still too young/Planning to do so
22%	0%	Too expensive
17%	27%	Want to breed
14%	32%	Will always be inside house
6%	11%	Not a top priority

In short, there seems to be relatively more concern about the susceptibility of cats to pregnancy; yet there is also much greater expense-based resistance to sterilizing cats. Many people seem to regard proliferation of cats as a problem -- but one on which they do not want to spend money to prevent.

On the other hand, just as it appears that dogs are initially more wanted than cats (discussed earlier in this report), there is more desire to breed dogs than cats; and the relative controllability of dogs' whereabouts permits many dog-owners to rationalize that spaying/neutering is not necessary.

When respondents were given a list of possible reasons for not having their pets spayed/neutered, with a request to rate them on a scale from zero (not at all important) through nine (highly important), no factor received a high rating from these predominately pro-sterilization people.

The mean ratings suggest that reluctant cat-owners simply do not regard sterilization as a priority, with perceived expense being a consideration in many cases. The reasons most widely selected for not spaying dogs reinforce the apparently greater commitment of dog-owners: feelings that sterilization is cruel to dogs, homes can be found for dogs, and it is desirable to breed dogs:

<u>All pet owners</u>	<u>Cat-owners</u>	<u>Dog-owners</u>	
3.1	1.9	3.6	It's unnatural
2.9	2.2	3.3	Homes can always be found
2.8	3.0	2.7	Haven't gotten around to it
2.6	1.0	3.3	It's cruel
2.4	1.0	3.2	Wanted to breed
2.4	1.6	2.7	Thought pet should have one litter
2.2	2.8	1.9	Too expensive
1.6	1.1	1.9	It's not safe
1.5	1.0	1.8	Inconvenient
1.3	1.7	1.2	Wanted kids to witness birth
1.2	1.0	1.5	Afraid animal would get fat
1.0	0.2	1.1	Previous bad experience

The Expense Factor

Respondents were asked about the perceived cost of spaying/neutering. The mean answers suggested that people feel the expense is roughly 50% higher for a dog than for a cat. Only in the cases of female dogs did those who had not spayed/neutered think the expense was much higher than those who had sterilized:

For a female cat:

- \$56 among all cat-owners
- \$55 among those who had spayed/neutered a cat
- \$59 among cat-owners who had not spayed/neutered a cat

For a male cat:

- \$49 among all cat-owners
- \$48 among those who had spayed/neutered a cat
- \$54 among cat-owners who had not spayed/neutered a cat

For a female dog:

- \$78 among all dog-owners
- \$74 among those who had spayed/neutered a dog
- \$93 among dog-owners who had not spayed/neutered a dog

For a male dog:

- \$74 among all dog-owners
- \$73 among those who had spayed/neutered a dog
- \$76 among dog-owners who had not spayed/neutered a dog

Generally speaking, the cost guesses were somewhat lower among people who are older and/or more affluent.

Overpopulation

We have reported that approximately 3 in 10 of the pet owners spontaneously mentioned some aspect of social/overpopulation concern as a reason for having had their pets spayed/neutered. When respondents were directly asked whether they felt there was pet overpopulation in their community, 39% replied in the affirmative:

- 42% of the cat-owners
- 43% of those who had had cats spayed/neutered
- 39% of the cat-owners who had not had their cats spayed/neutered

- 39% of the dog-owners
- 39% of those who had had dogs spayed/neutered
- 38% of those who had not had dogs spayed/neutered

There was some correlation of affirmative answers with higher income and younger respondents:

- 40% among those with household income of less than \$25,000
- 37% among those with household income of \$25,000-\$49,999
- 47% among those with household income of \$50,000-\$99,999
- 50% among those with household income of \$100,000+

- 41% among those under age 34
- 41% among those age 35-54
- 29% among those age 55+

Those who felt there was pet overpopulation were generally convinced by the number of strays they see (mentioned on an unaided basis by 69% of those perceiving overpopulation). Very secondary factors included knowledge of overfilled shelters (10%), readings (9%), and unleashed neighbors' pets (6%).

Respondents were given six possible reasons to consider spaying/neutering a pet. They were asked to assign a rating from zero through nine to indicate how poor or good each reason was. Based on mean ratings, two statements were particularly persuasive:

- 7.2 Spaying keeps males away from the house
- 7.1 Only one in five shelter animals finds a home

Three other considerations exceeded our minimum benchmarks for points that are likely to have "market viability":

- 6.6 It makes it less likely to run away and get into fights
- 6.4 There are health benefits to the pet
- 6.2 It makes pets friendlier and less aggressive

Only one -- education about lack of expense -- fell well below our benchmark:

- 4.2 It can be quite inexpensive

SURVEY FINDINGS: LITTERS OF KITTENS AND PUPPIES

Massachusetts Cat-Owning Households (494,364)

8% have had 1 litter (4 kittens)	=	158,196 kittens
6% have had 2 litters (8 kittens)	=	237,294 kittens
6% have had 3 litters (12 kittens)	=	355,942 kittens
1% have had 4 litters (16 kittens)	=	79,088 kittens
1% have had 5 litters (20 kittens)	=	98,860 kittens
1% have had 9 or more (45 kittens)	=	<u>222,435 kittens</u>
		1,152,815 kittens

Massachusetts Dog-Owning Households (471,893)

10% have had 1 litter (4 puppies)	=	188,756 puppies
2% have had 2 litters (8 puppies)	=	75,502 puppies
1% have had 3 litters (12 puppies)	=	56,616 puppies
1% have had 4 litters (16 puppies)	=	<u>75,488 puppies</u>
		396,362 puppies