



Research

Pet dog management practices among a representative sample of owners in Victoria, Australia



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ABSTRACT

It is often assumed that pet dogs experience better welfare than livestock production animals because many owners consider them to be members of the family and, collectively, spend billions of dollars on them annually. However, this assumption is not based on scientific evidence, and a scientifically validated tool for assessing the welfare of companion dogs is currently lacking. Because dogs are extremely variable in type, and because they live in human homes and their owners engage in a variety of management practices, developing a standardized audit system may be impossible. However, the 5 freedoms, often used to evaluate the welfare of animals in livestock systems, could provide a simple framework for starting to develop such an instrument. A first step is establishing baseline data on ways in which dog owners attempt to meet their pet's needs. For this reason, we used a representative sample of participants ($n = 645$, representing 800,000 dog owners) from Victoria, a state in south-eastern Australia, and administered an online survey to determine how owners manage their dog's environmental, diet and exercise, behavioral, social, and health needs. Descriptive statistics enabled us to identify patterns in the data. From these results, some dog management variables which could impact the welfare of a large number of dogs in Victoria were selected for comparison based on owner gender, using t tests, and owner age groups, using 1-way analyses of variance. Owners typically appear to be effectively meeting their dog's needs, but with notable exceptions. For instance, 26% of owners report that their dog roams free when outside the home. In addition, 85% of owners indicate that their dog is neither overweight nor underweight, even though research suggests that up to 40% of dogs are obese. This may mean that some owners are unaware of what an ideal body condition looks like. Nearly, half (49%) of our sample reported that their dog sometimes or often exhibits fear of loud noises, and 35% reported that it sometimes or often barks excessively. Male owners were more likely than female owners to report that their dog frequently exhibits a range of undesirable behaviors, such as excessive anxiety or distress when left alone, destructive behaviors, and aggression. However, female owners leave their dog at home without human company for longer periods of time than male owners. Younger owners were more likely than older owners to agree that taking care of their dog is more difficult than they expected it to be, and less likely to report that they are satisfied with their dog's behavior. These results can be used to inform educational campaigns, and they can be compared to results of similar studies across time or different places, although we recommend that future research should incorporate additional objective measures of welfare.

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Introduction

Since the mid-1960s, the “five freedoms” have provided basic guidelines for improving farm animal welfare (Farm Animal Welfare Council, 2009). The freedoms include freedom from discomfort; freedom from fear and distress; freedom from hunger and thirst; freedom from pain, injury, and disease; and freedom to express normal behaviors (Farm Animal Welfare Council, 2009).

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The 5 freedoms have been used mostly in livestock production industries to create welfare auditing systems which ensure that animals in intensive systems are not experiencing a poor welfare state (e.g., Barnett et al., 2004; Edge et al., 2009; Grandin, 1998; Grandin, 2000; Johnsen et al., 2001). However, they should theoretically apply to any animal and under any circumstances, such as a pet dog living in a human home.

Welfare audit systems for pet dogs have not yet been developed, perhaps because dogs are assumed to experience better welfare than livestock production animals. After all, most Australians consider pet dogs to be a member of the family and, collectively, Australians spend AUD \$4.7 billion per year caring for pet dogs (Animal Health Alliance, 2013). However, because a pet dog resides in 39% of Australian households, with an estimated 4.2 million dogs in total (Animal Health Alliance, 2013), pet dog welfare deserves attention. Indeed, there is evidence to suggest that dogs do not universally have excellent welfare outcomes. Dogs are sometimes surrendered to shelters because they exhibit behaviors that owners consider undesirable, but such behaviors may be reflective of anxiety or distress (Marston et al., 2004; New et al., 2000; Salman et al., 2000). Shelters may then euthanize the animal, with reported euthanasia rates ranging from 30% (Marston et al., 2003) to as high as 68% (Russell, 2009). It appears that, despite being considered members of the family, some owners are not adequately meeting their pet dog's welfare needs.

Unfortunately, there is no standardized method of keeping dogs in human homes, and dogs vary widely in their morphology and behavior. This makes creating an objective, valid audit system very difficult. Basic owner practices will almost certainly affect the pet dog's welfare state because pets rely wholly on owner decisions regarding food, exercise, social interactions, environmental factors, and health care. Despite this, there is little research examining how owners currently manage the welfare needs of their pet dogs.

In the United Kingdom (UK), the People's Dispensary for Sick Animals (PDSA) conducts annual surveys to determine how owners attempt to meet their pet's environmental, diet and exercise, behavioral, social, and health needs (PDSA, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014). These data are compared across time and used to inform educational campaigns targeted at improving certain aspects of pet welfare. This survey is instructive, but it is primarily aimed at owners in the UK. Pets in the UK might have different needs from pets kept elsewhere, due to different climates or different breeding practices. Pet management practices may also differ widely across different social demographics. Therefore, we felt that representative research outside the UK was necessary and that the state of Victoria, in Australia, provided a suitable location for this research to be undertaken.

Victoria is a state in south-eastern Australia, covering 22.7 million hectares of land. Most of the state's population of 5.5 million people live in the state capital of Melbourne and its surrounds, which has a population of 4.2 million. There are an estimated 1 million dogs in Victoria (Australian Companion Animal Council, 2007a). In 2013, the Victorian Department of Environment and Primary Industries (now the Victorian Department of Economic Development, Jobs, Transport and Resources), commissioned a study to examine how well Victorian pet owners meet their pet's needs. Owing to a lack of behavioral research on dog welfare, it is not known which practices are associated with good welfare outcomes for dogs. However, understanding the ways that people manage their pets may allow future research to examine the effects of these practices on welfare. The aim of this study was to provide baseline data, including information about how dog owners manage their dog's environmental, diet and exercise, behavioral, social, and health needs.

Methods

Participants

A sample of 1,500 people living in Victoria, Australia, was recruited by an established market research company to participate in a survey examining pet-keeping practices of cats, dogs, birds, and rabbits. Of the 1,500 respondents, 975 reported that they owned at least one of these animal types, including 39% who reported owning a dog. Based on existing recruitment processes used by the company, these 975 respondents are assumed to accurately represent 1,187,000 Victorian households.

An additional 129 participants were recruited to provide a "boost" sample of bird and rabbit owners, as these pet types are not common in Victoria. Therefore, data were obtained from a total of 1,629 respondents. For the purposes of this publication, only results from dog owners ($n = 645$) will be reported.

Materials

An online survey was created to determine the various pet-keeping practices engaged in by owners of cats, dogs, birds, and rabbits. The survey contained 6 sections, including 2 demographic sections of 7 questions each, and 1 section about pet management practices for each animal type. The pet-keeping practices sections included items related to ways in which owners may attempt to manage their pet's environmental, diet and exercise, behavioral, social, and health needs. Information about the bird and rabbit sections has been reported elsewhere (Howell et al., 2015b), and information about the cat section will be reported in a future publication.

The dog management section contained 60 items, covering a wide range of owner practices. For example, owners were asked how much they expect to spend on their pet dog over the course of its lifetime, from 1 (less than AUD \$1,000) to 6 (more than AUD \$50,000). Some items related to perceptions of caring for the pet dog, such as "Taking care of my dog is more difficult than I expected it to be," with response options ranging from 1 (strongly agree), to 5 (strongly disagree). Owners were also asked how careful they were to keep their dog away from hazardous items, or how well they supervised interactions between the dog and children. Response options for these items ranged from 1 (extremely) to 5 (not at all).

Level of satisfaction with the dog's behavior was rated from 1 (very satisfied) to 5 (very dissatisfied), and Table 1 shows a list of items related to the frequency of undesirable behaviors, along with

Table 1

Frequency with which pet dog displays behavioral problems, according to owner reports ($N = 645$)

Behavioral problem	Very often (%)	Quite often (%)	Sometimes (%)	Rarely (%)	Never (%)
Excessive fear of loud noises (e.g., fireworks, vacuum cleaners, storms, etc), people, or animals	7	15	27	29	23
Excessive aggression toward adults, children, or other animals	2	4	10	25	60
Excessive anxiety or distress when left alone	4	6	20	33	37
Excessive destructive behaviors	1	3	11	32	53
Inappropriate urinating or defecating in the house	2	3	10	28	57
Barking excessively	3	8	24	38	28

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