

Dogs in Society Position Paper

Health and Social Benefits of Dog Ownership

Background

Pets are a normal part of most Australian lives. More than eight out of ten Australians have owned a pet at some stage of their lives. Almost two thirds of Australian households currently own pets, and this country has one of the highest rates of pet ownership in the world. Australia currently has a canine population of about 4 million.¹

Social benefits

Companion animals deliver proven physical, psychological and health benefits for pet owners and have important benefits for society as a whole. Modern lifestyles can create loneliness, isolation and a sense of vulnerability. Dog ownership provides companionship, gives immense pleasure and reduces stress levels, without the demands of human relationships.

Growing up with a dog assists in the social development of children by improving social skills and self-esteem. Children can learn responsibility, empathy and respect by living with and caring for a dog.

Dogs also help to build social networks within the community, creating opportunities for greater social interaction. A shared interest in dogs brings together people from all walks of life. Dogs can help to initiate conversations between strangers in public places, or be the basis more structured social activities such as dog showing and dog obedience classes.

Health benefits

Since the 1960's a plethora of research has arisen proving the value of dogs in various therapeutic settings. Dogs provide a wide range benefits to the sick and disabled, and assist those in need of greater independence e.g. guide dogs for the blind, assistance dogs for the disabled. Dogs are widely used for therapy in hospitals, prisons, psychiatric institutions, nursing homes and schools.

Several Australian studies have shown quantifiable links between pets and better health. Owning a dog is associated with better cardiovascular health and lower levels of stress and depression.² Research conducted in Australia and Germany has shown that pet ownership is associated with better human health.³ Dog and cat owners use the health system less than non-owners; they make fewer annual doctor visits and spend less time in hospital.

Dogs enhance preventative health measures in the community through companionship, stress reduction, exercise and assistance to those who may otherwise depend on Government funded assistance. The long term health benefits of owning pets lead to savings in national health expenditure. For the year 2000, these savings were estimated to be Euros 5.59 billion for Germany and \$3.86 billion for Australia.³

¹ Mangosi, S. (2003). Contribution of the pet care industry to the Australian economy. 5th edition, BIS Shrapnel report for the Australian Companion Animal Council.

² Anderson, W.P., Reid, C.M. and Jennings, G.L. (1992). Pet ownership and risk factors for cardiovascular disease. *Medical Journal of Australia*, 157, 298-301.

³ Headey, B., Grabka, M., Kelley, J., Reddy, P. and Tseng, Y.P. (2002). Pet ownership is good for your health and saves public expenditure too: Australian and German longitudinal evidence. *Australian Social Monitor*, Vol. 5, No.4, November 2002.

Economic benefits

Dog ownership makes a valuable contribution to the Australian economy. In 2002, consumer expenditure on pet care products and services was valued at over \$4.0 billion and the pet care industry employed over 40,000 Australians. Dogs account for around two thirds of this expenditure.¹ The continued ownership of dogs provides employment and the main source of income for a large number of Australian businesses.

The dog care industry covers not only the manufacture of pet food and veterinary products, but also a wide variety of services provided by veterinary practices, pet shops, breeders, professional groomers, boarding kennels, dog trainers and other pet care providers.