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Is America Really Raining Cats and Dogs?

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Six cultural and demographic trends could reduce the demand for pets.



Source: Photo by ermolaev/123RF

Columbia University's Morris Holbrook once wrote, "Assume that animal companions are basically people. You won't go far wrong." When it comes to American pet lovers, he is right. For example, [a recent survey](#) of 13,000 pet owners found that 72% of dog owners and 32% of cat owners said they sometimes canceled plans to hang out with friends so they could stay home with their [pets](#). And between 75% and 90% of pet lovers tell pollsters they consider their companion animals to be full-fledged family members. Even the names we give our pets have changed over the past three decades. You don't run into many Fidos, Spots, or Bowsers any more. Rather, as I described in [this post](#), today's dogs are more likely to be named Freddie, Amos, or Susie.

What caused this shift in attitudes that the pet products industry refers to as "the humanization of pets?" And what are the implications for the future of our relationships with our furry, feathered, and finned friends?

In his new book, *Pet Nation: The Love Affair That Changed America*, pet industry insider Mark Cushing addresses these and other issues related to why pets have become a major "brand" on America's cultural landscape. Cushing is well-suited to the task. He is the founder and general manager of the [Animal Policy Group](#), a pet industry lobbying organization. He is also

advisor to the [Pet Leadership Council](#), a group of the senior executives in what Dr. Steven Zawistowski refers to as “the pet industrial complex.”

Pet Nation offers a valuable and sometimes provocative view of a major segment of the American economy. This includes a compelling discussion of the roles of movies, TV, and the internet in our changing relationships with pets. And Cushing is not afraid to take on issues such as zoonotic diseases, declawing cats, and de-sexing dogs.

But I want to examine whether, as Cushing puts it, “America is raining cats and dogs.” Clearly, there has recently been a run on animal shelter adoptions. But is this increase in the demand for pets a transient blip in response to COVID-related isolation that will subside when the pandemic runs its course? Or is it the permanent manifestation of our love for dogs and cats?

Is America Really “Pet Nation?”

In some ways, yes. Take dog ownership. The United States is at or near the top of countries in terms of dog ownership. (See [this post](#).) And we spend far more on our pets than people in other parts of the world. In 2020, we will collectively shell out \$100 billion on the care and feeding of our companion animals. As Cushing points out, most of the action in the pet market is at the high end. Americans now spend four times as much on “premium” dog foods as we do on run-of-the-mill “mid-priced or economy brands.

How Many Pets Do Americans Own?

This is tricky. Cushing bases his claims about the rising trajectory of pet ownership primarily on data from the American Pet Products Association. They claim that 90 million dogs and 94 million cats live in American homes. The American Veterinary Association, however, puts the numbers a lot lower — 77 million dogs and 58 million cats.

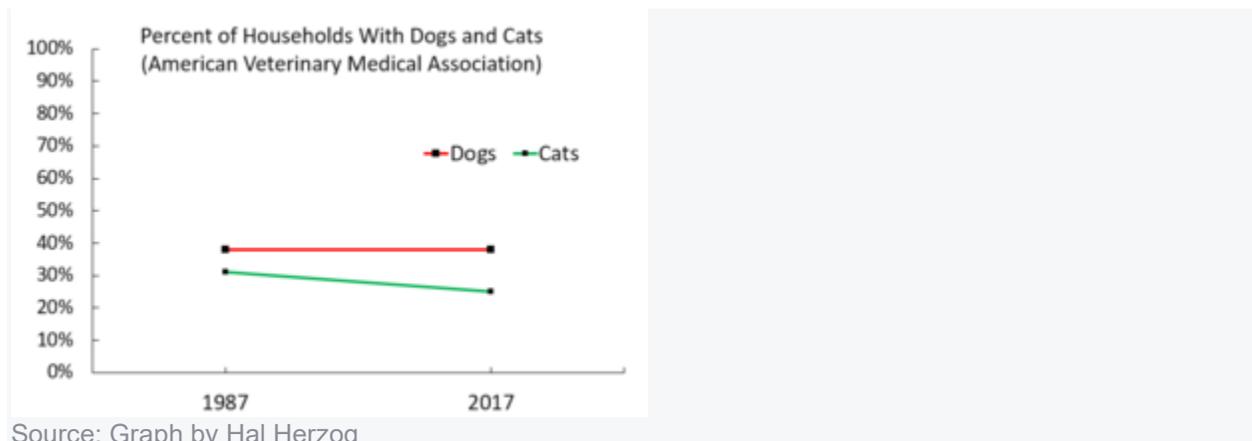
In addition, as the *Washington Post*’s animal beat [reporter Karin Brulliard pointed out](#), when it comes to the percentage of homes that include a pet, the numbers are all over the place. The Pet Products Association claims 65% of American homes include an animal. Yet the most recent Veterinary Medical Association survey found 57% of households in the United States include a pet. A survey by Simmons (a well-regarded [marketing](#) group) put the number

at 53% of homes, and the 2018 estimate of the United States Census was even lower at 49%.

The Number of Pets vs. the Percentage of Households

Mark Cushing writes that pets have become “bigger than Sgt. Pepper, Air Jordans, and Italian gelato on the first hot day of summer combined.” But is he correct in believing that pet ownership in the US is spreading as rapidly as a California wildfire? It depends on how you measure it. According to the Pet Products Association, the number of dogs and cats in the US increased by about 32% between 2000 and 2017. At the same time, the human population grew only 15%. These numbers support Cushing’s view that “America is raining cats and dogs.”

But the percentage of American households that include a companion animal tell a very different story. The American Veterinary Medical Association has conducted regular surveys of pet



ownership since the mid-1980s. Their 1987 survey found that 38% of households in the United States included a dog and 31% included a cat. In their 2017/18 survey, 38% of American homes included a dog and 25% a cat. Basically, no change at all.

Hence the puzzle — while the number of pets has climbed in the United States over the past 30 years, the percent of homes that include a companion animal has been completely stable. This fact was confirmed by Dr. Andrew Rowan, president of the animal protection organization [WellBeing International](#). A foremost authority on pet demographics, he thinks the American Veterinary Medical Association surveys provide the most accurate picture of trends in pet ownership. In an e-mail to me, he concurred that the

percent of homes in the United States that include a dog or cat has not changed for three decades. Indeed, he wrote, “Relative dog ownership has remained remarkably constant in the USA over 70 years.”

Does America Really Need an Additional 140 Million Cats and Dogs?

The answer to the question of whether it is “raining cats and dogs” in America depends on whether you are looking at raw numbers of pets (which have gone up) or the number of households that include a pet (which has not gone up).

I don’t know how to explain this mismatch. But it does raise the question: Do we really need more pets? Mark Cushing enthusiastically says, “Yes!” Indeed, he asks, “As we aim for an additional 50 million to 70 million dogs in the United States (and the same number of additional cats), can we produce enough dogs to meet the demand?”

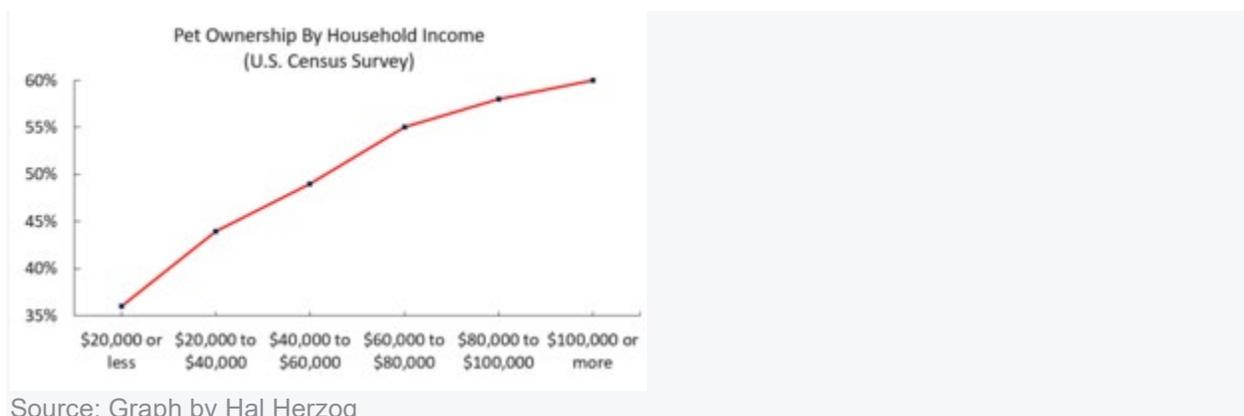
Socioeconomic Forces That Could Reduce Demand

From a pet products industry perspective, an influx of 140 million additional four-legged friends into American homes would certainly be a boon for corporate profits. But do we need that many pets? Cushing is correct that pets have gone viral on our cultural landscape. However, six powerful socio-economic trends could nullify even the impact of TV ads featuring cute puppies and media reports hyping the idea the getting a dog will make you live longer.

- Age. Americans are getting older. And older people are the demographic group least likely to own a pet. As my friend Susan said when her last kid left college, “I don’t want to own anything I have to feed or paint.”
- Race/[Ethnicity](#). It is possible that as the country becomes more racially diverse, pet ownership will decrease. [Rand Corporation researchers](#) found that that whites were three times as likely to own a dog and five times as likely to own a cat than non-whites. Black individuals were half as likely to own a dog and a third as likely to own a cat as other respondents. The pet ownership patterns among Hispanics and Asian-Americans were similar to that of Blacks.
- Urbanization. Americans have been moving to the cities (at least until [COVID-19](#)). And city-dwellers are less likely to have pets. According

to 2017 data from the [US Census American Household Survey](#), only 46% of urban dwellers had a dog compared to 66% of ruralites.

- Fewer Kids. Homes with children are the most likely to include a pet. Today, fewer households include children than in the past. Between 1970 and 2019 the percent of homes that included children under the age of 18 dropped from 54% to 41%.
- Living Alone. One of the biggest factors in pet ownership is whether you live alone or with other people. Between 1960 and 2020, the percent of individuals who live by themselves doubled from 14% to 28%. This does not bode well for the pet products industry. According to the [2018 General Social Survey](#), 53% of married people had a dog compared to only 26% of unmarried individuals.
- Money and the Shrinking Middle Class: The average lifetime cost of owning a dog in the United States is about \$15,000. According to the [US Census](#), the higher your income, the more likely you are to have a pet in your life. The number of Americans living in poverty is going up and the middle class is rapidly shrinking. Our increasing disparity in wealth might be good for doggie day spas and luxury pet food brands, but it might also mean fewer homes will include a pet.



Source: Graph by Hal Herzog

The Bottom Line

Pet Nation is a good read, and Mark Cushing raises a host of interesting issues. But I'm not sure that I agree with him that, "We need more people to have pets...Why stop at 65% of households with pets in America? Why not 100%? Why stop at 185 million cats and dogs for 325 million people? Why not 325 million cats and dogs or more?"

References

Cushing, M. L. (2020) *Pet Nation: The Love Affair That Changed America*. New York: Avery Books.