

WellBeing International

WBI Studies Repository

3-13-2020

The Odd Demography of Loving Pets: Sex, Money, and Race

Harold Herzog

Western Carolina University

Follow this and additional works at: https://www.wellbeingintludiesrepository.org/sc_herzog_compass

Recommended Citation

Herzog, Harold, The Odd Demography of Loving Pets: Sex, Money, and Race. (2020), 'Animals and Us' Blog Posts, Psychology Today, 13 March, 111. <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/animals-and-us/202003/the-odd-demography-loving-pets-sex-money-and-race>

This material is brought to you for free and open access by WellBeing International. It has been accepted for inclusion by an authorized administrator of the WBI Studies Repository. For more information, please contact wbisr-info@wellbeingintl.org.



The Odd Demography of Loving Pets: Sex, Money, and Race

Pet ownership in the U.S. is mostly a matter of sex, race, age, and housing.

Posted Mar 13, 2020



Source: Karel Miragaya/123RF

Why do some people love [pets](#) while others want nothing to do with our four-legged friends? [Genes](#) play a role in pet ownership. (See [Do Our Genes Really Influence Our Relationships with Pets?](#)) But how do factors like [gender](#), race, and money affect our decisions to bring animals into our lives? A new study by Jennifer Applebaum and her colleagues at the University of Florida provides some answers to these questions.

There is surprisingly little accurate information on the demographics of pet ownership in the United States. The most extensive data on pet ownership are not available to the public because they are based on private surveys conducted by the pet products industry. According to [an analysis by the Washington Post](#), these surveys have yielded contradictory results. For instance, according to the American Pet Products Association, pet ownership has been growing steadily in the United States, and 68% of homes include a

companion animal. In contrast, polls conducted by the American Veterinary Medical Association have found that pet ownership has been holding steady at about 57% of households for nearly a decade.

A Better Measure: The General Social Survey

The good news is that new data from the National Opinion Research Center offers a more accurate perspective on pet ownership in the United States than industry-sponsored polls. Every two years since 1972, the center conducts [the General Social Survey](#). On the website, the GSS is described as “the only full-probability, personal-interview survey designed to monitor changes in both social characteristics and attitudes currently being conducted in the United States.” Some of the items vary from year to year but the questions focus on the demographics, health, lifestyle, and political views of a representative sample of Americans. These data are publicly available. In 2018, the survey included questions about pet-ownership.

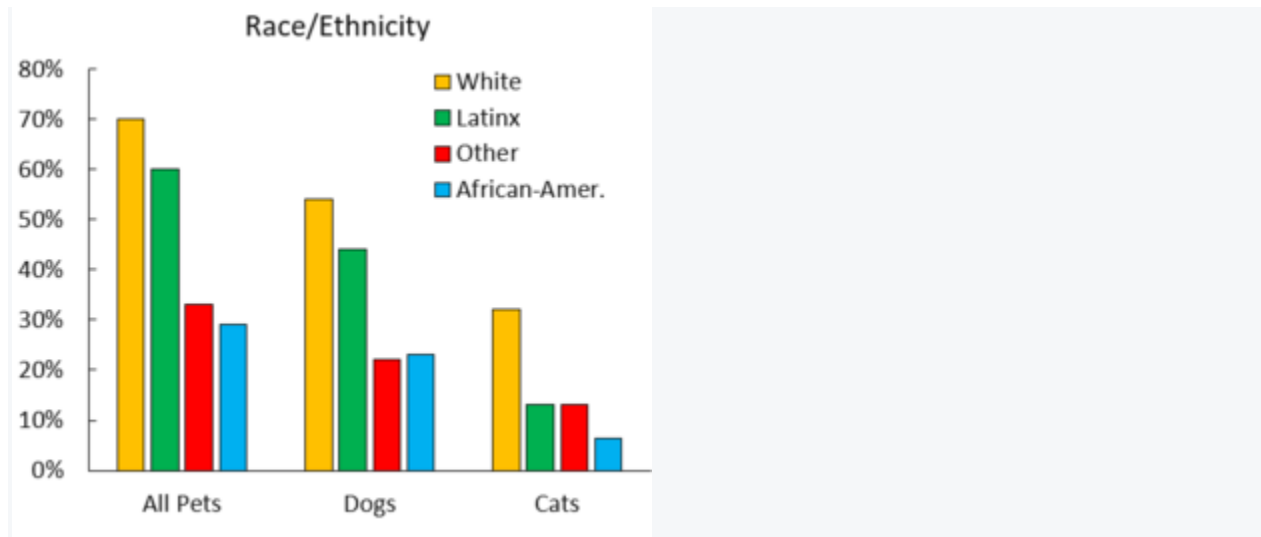
Jennifer Applebaum and her colleagues mined this new GSS data for information on who owns pets in the United States, and they recently [published their findings in the Social Science Journal](#). The results were interesting and surprising. For example, if you want to predict whether a person has a pet, don't bother to ask about their [education](#). Years of schooling don't make any difference in pet-ownership.

But here are some questions that would be helpful.

What Is Your Sex?

One of the surprises in the GSS data concerned [sex](#) differences in pet ownership. I would have predicted that men would be more likely than women to have a dog in their life and women more likely to live with a cat. Wrong. According to the GSS, 51% women in the United States have a dog compared to 41% of men. But in contrast to conventional [wisdom](#), there was no sex difference when it came to cats; 25% of males and exactly 25% females in the survey had a feline animal companion.

What Is Your Race and Cultural Background?

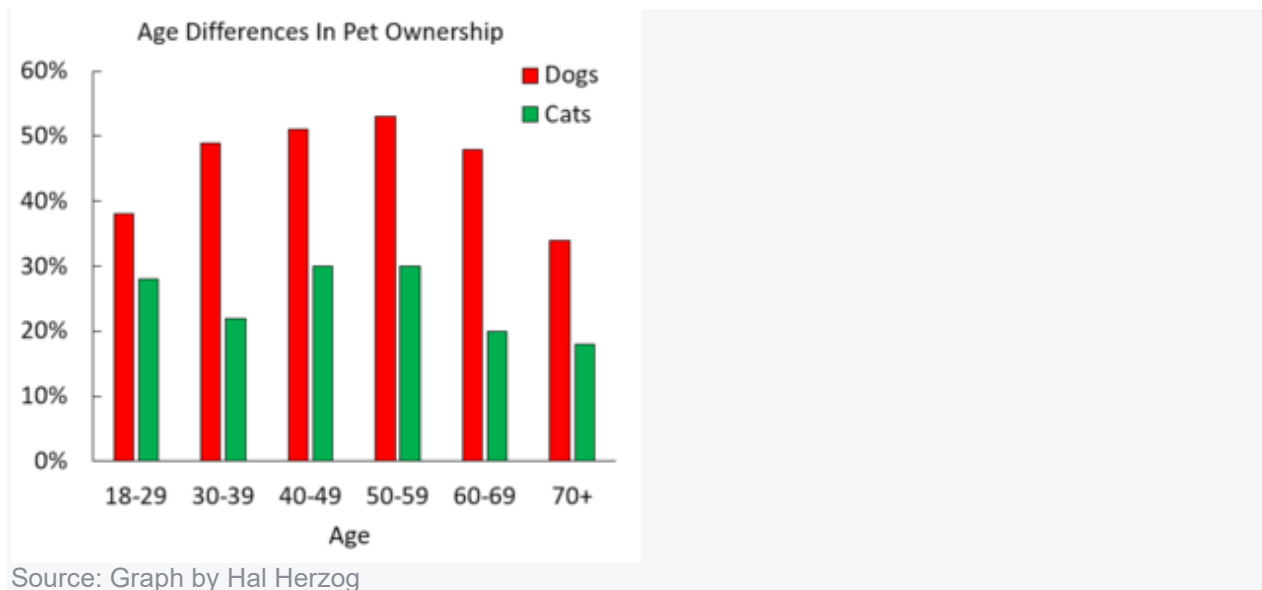


Source: Graph by Hal Herzog

The biggest differences among groups in pet ownership were associated with [race and ethnicity](#). As shown in this graph, white Americans are most likely to own pets and African Americans least likely. Indeed, cat ownership was nearly five times more common among white and African Americans. Hispanic individuals were in the middle.

How Old Are You and Do You Have Kids at Home?

Adults in the middle of their lives are more likely to have a pet than people who are under 30 or over 70. This is particularly true of dog owners. One reason is that more younger and older people live alone, and individuals who live by themselves are more likely to be pet-less. For example, only 26% of single adults in the survey had a dog compared to 53% of married couples.



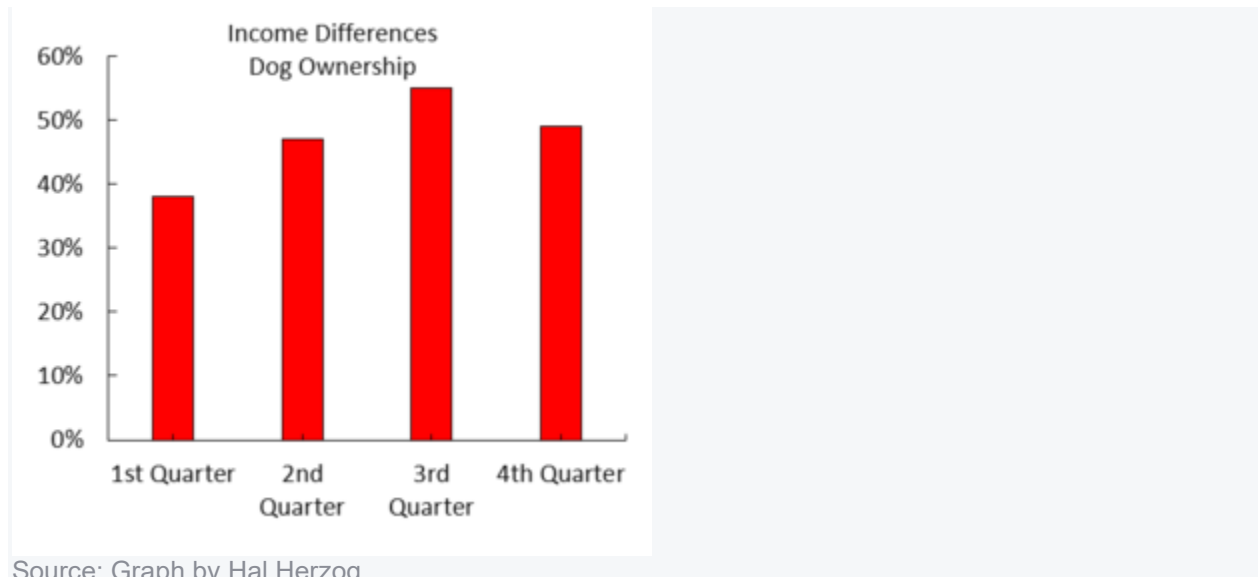
As [PT blogger Jessica Pierce](#) points out in her wonderful book *Run, Spot, Run: The Ethics of Keeping Pets*, parents often get a dog because they believe a pet will be good for their kids' psychological development. (In reality, there is little evidence that having a pet causes better mental health in children. See [here](#).) When the kids grow up, their parents often don't replace the family pet.

In addition, young people and older people who are retired often have more freedom to travel and having a dog or cat may tie them down. (When I ask my friend Susan if she was going to get a new dog when she packed her last child off to college, she said "Nope, I don't want anything that I have to paint or feed.")

How Much Space Do You Have?

People with plenty of space tend to have more pets. For example, the five states with the lowest rates of dog ownership are 15 times more crowded in human population density than the five states with the highest rates of dog ownership. Similarly, the size of your town makes a difference. The GSS researchers found that only 40% of people living in cities had a dog compared to 55% of people living in rural areas. The same trend was seen in cat-ownership (20% of city dwellers versus 37% of country folk.) As you would expect, people living in apartments and condos were less likely to own a pet than were people who lived in houses.

Are You Rich, or Poor, or In the Middle?



In Western cultures, pet ownership has been described by scholars as a pastime of the rich that filters down to the middle class. The relationship between money and pets, however, can be complex. For example, Andrew Rowan and I found that among European nations, people in poorer countries like Greece were less likely to own a dog than people in rich countries like Sweden. The University of Florida research team found a complicated relationship between money and pet-keeping in the United States. For example, rich people and poor people were equally likely to own a cat. But, as shown in this graph, people in the lowest 25th percentile in family income were less likely than other income groups to own a dog.

The Bottom Line

Demography plays out differently with different kinds of pets. For example, all of the factors described above - sex, income, race/ethnicity, etc.—influenced dog ownership. Patterns of cat ownership, however, was primarily affected by race/ethnicity, rural versus urban, and type of housing. And owning “any pet” was not affected by gender, or income, or education.

In a [previous post](#), I argued that whether you have an animal in your life is determined, more than anything else, simply by where you live. Thanks to Jennifer Applebaum and her colleagues, we now know a lot more about the impact of sex, race, ethnicity, and money on human-pet relationships in the United States.

References

Applebaum, J. W., Peek, C. W., & Zsembik, B. A. (2020). Examining US pet ownership using the General Social Survey. *The Social Science Journal*, 1-10.