Pet Population and Ownership Trends in the U.S.

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Aging Boomers More Likely Than Previous Generation to Own Pets

Historically the rate of pet ownership has fallen substantially when adults reach the age of 70. For example, just 41% of adults 70 years old or over now own pets, compared to 59% of 50- to 69-year-olds. Between 2020 and 2035, when the youngest Boomer will have turned 70, the percent of adults 70 years old and over will rise from 13% to 19%. Thus, pet ownership in the United States would seem to be threatened by the rapid increase in the population of adults in the 70+ age group caused by the aging of the Boomer generation. [Figures 2-24 and 2-25]

However, aging Boomers appear to be re-writing the book on pet ownership among older Americans in a way that likely will hearten marketers and retailers in the pet industry. A decade ago, just 34% of adults in the 70+ age group owned pets. In 2015 and 2016, when the oldest cohort of Boomers began to turn 70, this percentage jumped to around 40%. If this incipient trend continues, the overall rate of pet ownership likely will increase in coming years. [Figure 2-26]

One reason for this trend is the developing appreciation of the health benefits of pet ownership for an aging population. According to a September 2016 survey by the Human Animal Bond Research Institute (HABRI) and Cohen Research Group, there is widespread awareness of the health benefits of pet ownership in general. For example, more than 80% of pet owners are aware that pets reduce stress, depression and anxiety.

More specifically, 68% of all pet owners are aware that pets support healthy aging and 56% are aware that pets help with conditions like Alzheimer’s disease. Older Americans are even more aware of the health benefits of pet ownership. More than four in five (83%) Boomers and 82% of those in the 70+ age group report more personal experience with mental health improvements from pets than Millennials (62%) and Generation X (72%).
Figure 2-24
Percent Owning Pets by Age Group, 2016

Source: Compiled by Packaged Facts based on data from Simmons Market Research, 2016 Simmons NCS Adult Studies 12-Month. Base: Population. Copyright: 2017. All rights reserved.

Figure 2-25
Adults 70 Years Old as Percent of Adult Population, 2006-2016

Source: Compiled by Packaged Facts based on data from U.S. Census Bureau.
Figure 2-26
Percent of Adults 70 Years Old or Over Owning Pets, 2006-2016

Source: Compiled by Packaged Facts based on data from Simmons Market Research, Fall 2006 through Summer 2016 Simmons NCS Adult Studies 12-Month. Base: Population. Copyright: 2017. All rights reserved.

Millennials Buying In to Pet Ownership

Along with 35- to 49-year-olds, Millennials (those in the 18- to 34-year-old age group) have the highest likelihood of owning a pet. Moreover, as seen in Figure 2-23, 43% of 18-to 34-year-olds who do not have a pet now say they want one in the future. One reason why Millennials have a strong attachment to the idea of pet ownership is that 69% agree that “having a pet is a good way to get ready to have a family.” [Figure 2-27]