

The Dollars and Sense of Spay/Neuter for Cats

Study shows higher-income households more likely to fix their felines

BY ARNA COHEN

A study published in the *Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association (JAVMA)* supports statistically what animal shelters know from experience—that households with higher incomes are more likely to spay or neuter their cats.

The authors undertook the study in 2007 to gather data on the demographics of cat-owning households, information that could help government officials design legislation to boost the spay/neuter rate. During a three-week period, researchers conducted 1,205 interviews with a random sample of people from a wide range of geographic regions and socioeconomic levels. Of those interviewed, 383 households (31 percent) had a total of 850 cats, which works out to 82.4 million cats living in 36.8 million American homes. (That's a lot of kitty litter.)

The respondents were queried about their gender, education, age, annual income, number of cats, and where they'd gotten them. They were also asked about the sex of the cats, whether they were neutered, and what reasons the owners had for neutering or not neutering.



MARK COFFEY PHOTO/ISTOCKPHOTO.COM

The encouraging news is that 680 of the 850 cats (80 percent) were spayed or neutered, indicating that most Americans are willing to do the right thing. The strongest demographic influencing the neuter rate was annual family income: 51.4 percent of cats in households earning less than \$35,000 were neutered, while more than 90 percent of cats owned by those with incomes exceeding \$35,000 were neutered. Age also seemed

to play a slight role, with people 40 or older more likely to neuter their cats than those in the 18-to-39 bracket. The owners' gender was not a factor in the decision to neuter.

When owners with unneutered cats were asked why they hadn't sterilized their animals, the most common response was "a female cat is better off having one litter before being spayed," followed closely by "the procedure costs too much" and "planning to breed the cat."

The research could be interpreted as a validation of the type of outreach that shelters have used to encourage spaying and neutering: programs to educate the public about the costs of pet overpopulation and the benefits of neutering, and financial assistance for low-income owners who want to neuter their pets. It also makes for a strong argument that any local and state legislation that requires neutering or calls for higher license fees for unneutered pets should include publicly funded, low-cost neutering options.

The study did not include feral or stray cats. To read the entire report, "Population characteristics and neuter status of cats living in households in the United States," see *JAVMA*, Vol. 234, No. 8. **AS**