

27 April 2023

2026 Census Topic Review – companion animals

The Cat Protection Society of NSW strongly supports the inclusion of companion animals in the 2026 Australian Census.

Information about pet ownership is of critical importance to local, state and federal government planning and resource allocation; health and disease surveillance; and emergency and disaster response planning.

There is a wealth of data on the importance of pets to people; the social, mental health and physical health benefits, as well as the risks people will take to protect their pets. The New South Wales State Emergency Services program “Get Ready Animals” <https://www.ses.nsw.gov.au/get-ready-animals/get-ready-animals> was designed because it was recognised that many people would not leave their pets behind in an emergencies such as bushfires or floods, thus putting themselves and emergency personnel at risk.

In cases of domestic violence, despite significant concern for harm and threats to their pets, victims with pets are more likely to delay leaving, and show greater reluctance to seek help and report to the authorities (Cleary, M., Thapa, D.K., West, S., Westman, M., Kornhaber, R., 2021. ‘Animal abuse in the context of intimate partner violence: A systematic review’. *Aggression and Violent Behaviour*, 61, 1-17.)

And yet, for all their importance to people, we have little reliable data on pets. For those of us working with companion animals, such as our charity, data is scarce and tends to be extrapolated or patchy. In NSW for example, although a legal requirement, not all cats and dogs are registered and so don’t appear on the Companion Animals Register, and registered deceased animals aren’t always removed from Register. Council pound data is limited to animals entering and leaving the pound.

For animal welfare organisations such as ours, trying to target welfare programs or measure results is extremely difficult without reliable data on pet ownership. We use the available census data on social demographics and find this helpful, however, it would be even more helpful with the inclusion of pet ownership.

Cat Protection has invested our own funds to commission surveys from Ipsos about cat ownership, but we are a single state-based feline-only charity and the cost of this research is significant.

The benefits of reliable companion animal data linked to human demographic data would extend to local, state, and federal governments; public health; animal health and welfare; biosecurity; animal welfare; veterinary services and community services.

Because people love their pets, we think people would be more than happy to answer questions about pet ownership, if they are reassured their information is confidential (because sometimes people don't have permission to keep a pet).

Cat Protection would use census data to better understand the demographics of cat ownership in LGAs throughout NSW, helping us to design relevant feline welfare programs, for example, to support services and information in languages other than English, to know where to target subsidised veterinary services such as cat desexing and vaccination, and to deliver education and information services in areas of need. The information would assist our partnerships with local councils to promote responsible cat ownership, and would assist programs such as registration drives to target areas of need.

We consent to this submission being publicly released and we are happy to be contacted for further information.

Yours sincerely

Kristina Vesk OAM
Chief Executive Officer