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How often do pets get lost from home and return?

Weiss, E.¹, Slater, M.¹ and Lord, L.², ¹American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, Shelter Research & Development, USA, ²The Ohio State University, Veterinary Preventive Medicine, USA; margaret.slater@aspca.org

Dogs and cats are kept as companions in many countries. Likewise, they can become lost from home or run away. No population-based data on the frequency of this occurrence or the success of finding a lost pet has been previously published. This study determined the frequency of pets getting lost and found as well as the ways they returned home. A cross-sectional random digit dial telephone interview was conducted between September and November 2010 in the USA. There were 2,587 households successfully contacted; 1,015 owned dogs or cats within the past five years. Pets did not have to be currently in the household. Eight hundred and sixteen households owned dogs and 503 owned cats (307 owned both in the past five years). The median number of dogs owned was 1 (range, 1 to 22) and the median number of cats was 2 (range, 2 to 27). In the past 5 years, 14% of dogs and 15% of cats were lost and 93% of dogs and 75% of cat were recovered. No pet or owner demographic variables were associated with pets getting lost. For dogs, searching the neighborhood and returning on their own were the most common methods of finding the dog; 13.9% were found through an identification tag. For cats, 59% returned on their own and 30% were found by the owner searching the neighborhood. Seven percent of dogs and 4% of cats were found through animal control/law enforcement. Dogs were more likely than cats to be lost more than once. Cats were less likely than dogs to have identification. Owners of dogs and cats rarely searched at shelters or contacted animal control/law enforcement. Knowledge of the most successful methods of finding dogs and cats provides invaluable advice for owners of lost pets, veterinarians, animal welfare professionals and law enforcement. More pets could potentially be reunited with their owners if collars and visible identification were used routinely.