

# Owners, guardians, and owner-guardians: Differing relationships with pets

Pamela Carlisle-Frank\* and Joshua M. Frank†

\* The Foundation for the Interdisciplinary Research and Education Promoting Animal Welfare (FIREPAW, Inc.), Houston, TX, USA

† SUNY Cortland, Cortland, NY, USA

## Abstract

*A national study was conducted in the US examining pet caregivers who define themselves as either “owners,” “guardians” or “owner-guardians.” The purpose was to determine whether these groups differed in their attitudes, beliefs and behaviors with regard to companion animals. Random samplings of US households and clients of randomly selected veterinarians and animal clinics were surveyed about their attitudes and beliefs about their pets, their treatment of their pets, and about companion animals in general. The results suggest statistically significant differences between these groups with regard to the way they think about, and behave toward, their companion animals. It is unknown whether these differences result from the changes in mental constructs and language resulting from the Guardian Campaign, or whether they represent preexisting differences in attitudes.*

**Keywords:** attitudes, behaviors, beliefs, companion animals, guardians, pet owners

Over the course of the past six years the US has seen a movement to change the way people think about their pets by changing the language they use to describe the care-taking of those animals. The Guardian Campaign, as it has come to be known, is an effort to foster a social and cultural shift in language from use of the term “owner” to that of “guardian” when referring to caretakers of companion animals<sup>1</sup>. One of the primary objectives of this effort is to inspire a shift in public consciousness about companion animals. More specifically, the campaign strives to make the public aware that companion animals are not objects, possessions, or disposable property, but rather, sentient beings with needs and interests of their own. Through changing language, and ultimately perceptions, the campaign aims to encourage compassion, respect, and commitment toward companion animals, thereby helping to end abuse, abandonment, and exploitation of companion animals<sup>2</sup>. Research has confirmed the feasibility of the assumption that our perceptions of animals affect the way they are treated (Kidd and Kidd 1987; Herzog and Burghardt 1988; Bryant 1990; Schenk et al. 1994; Van Houtte and Jarvis 1995). In a typology of companion animal abusers, “objectification” of animals and classifying them as “property” was argued to more readily lead to abuse because with such belief systems animals are treated at their owners' discretion (Vermeulen and Odendaal 1993).

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**Address for correspondence:** Dr Pamela Carlisle-Frank, The Foundation for the Interdisciplinary Research and Education Promoting Animal Welfare (FIREPAW, Inc.), 14781 Memorial Drive, Office #2207, Houston, TX 77079, USA. Ph/fax: 713-493 2585; e-mail: info@firepaw.org

But the movement to change the term from pet “owner” to “guardian” is not without its critics. In a recent position paper on the subject, the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) recommended that use of the term “guardian” not be adopted, even to semantically describe the human–pet relationship (Anon 2005). The AVMA contends that use of the term “guardian” may create consequences that adversely affect both animals and their caretakers. Among the potential problems, the AVMA argues, are numerous potential legal and social issues including: reductions in the rights of owners, with less authority leading to fewer treatment options for their pets, and additional legal obligations, requiring owners to accept financial burdens for costly treatment; increased animal abandonment due to owners’ financial inability to provide more costly treatment options; owners’ inability to select procedures like euthanasia or spay/neuter; compromises to confidentiality of veterinary information and control of animal medical records; problems transferring an animal to another party; reduced coverage of animal-related claims by homeowners’ insurance; the need for guardians to register and file annual reports; a loss of protection under animal abandonment laws for service providers; unclear guidelines for veterinarians’ responsibilities; unclear guidelines for who is responsible for payment of veterinary services; claims against the state for unconstitutional taking of private property without compensation; reduced ability to responsibly use animals for agricultural production (food and clothing), research, exhibition and entertainment (e.g., racing, circuses, rodeo), and companionship; inability of governments to protect public health through quarantine and vaccinations; reduced ability to use service animals for search and rescue; animals left in limbo; reduction in animals receiving needed services; adverse effects on animal health and welfare; and an increase in homeless/unwanted animals due to financial burdens and problems associated with euthanasia and spay/neuter options (Anon 2005).

While a thorough search of the scientific literature brought forth no previous published scientific research studies on the Guardian movement, it is a topic that has seen its fair share of coverage from the mainstream print media in the US.<sup>3</sup> It is also an effort that has seen success in terms of legislation. At the time this report was written, at least a dozen US cities, one county, and an entire state had passed ordinances changing the language and recognizing caretakers as their pets’ guardians rather than owners. That translates to approximately three million Americans currently recognized as guardians of their companion animals.<sup>4</sup>

But how many people actually consider themselves to be “guardians?” And, do the caretakers who consider themselves to be guardians differ in their attitudes, perceptions, and treatment of companion animals? The only source for answers to these questions has been at the anecdotal level. Conducting empirical research seeking answers to these questions holds the potential for determining if such efforts are actually having an effect on caretakers of companion animals and the animals themselves. Additionally, empirical research holds the potential to reveal key factors about the general pet-keeping public’s attitudes, perceptions, and behaviors that could play a vital role in the direction and focus of future efforts to improve the lives of companion animals.

## Overview

It has previously been argued that language affects our perceptions and treatment of animals (Dunayer 2001). Surveying pet caretakers about the language they use to describe their role and relationship with their companion animals was thought to be an important factor in the present study. Of particular interest was whether people perceived themselves as their animals' guardians or their pets' owners and whether they viewed their pets as property or as sentient beings.

Previous studies have found that the majority of people who have pets view them as members of the family rather than as property (Kellert 1980; Katcher and Beck 1983; Carmack 1985; Voith 1985; Albert and Bulcroft 1988; Sanders 1993; Siegel 1993). In the present study respondents were asked whether they considered their pets members of the family and whether they viewed their companion animals as property.

Previous research has found that the majority of Americans surveyed report that their pets are allowed to live indoors with the rest of the family, and that the pets' names appear along with the other family members on greeting cards (Anon 1995). Additionally, some research has suggested that perceptions of pets as sentient beings versus property is correlated with the treatment the family pets receive (Cain 1983; Veevers 1985; Carlisle-Frank, Frank and Nielsen 2004). Asking respondents whether and in what ways they actually treat the pet like other family members may be a good supporting indicator of the relationship people have with their pets, as well as whether people recognize their pets are sentient beings. In the present study, questions were asked about where the family pet was allowed to live, and whether the pets' names appeared with the other family members on greeting cards.

A national study of pet owners found that the majority of US dog and cat owners play with their pets and show affection to them daily (Anon 2000). Showing attention and affection toward pets was thought to be another important question for the present study. Would guardians and owners differ in this regard? Also of interest was whether respondents celebrate their pets' birthdays, as such behavior may be indicative of treating pets as genuine family members. Previous research surveying pet caretakers nationwide indicated that the majority of families with companion animals in the US celebrate their pets' birthday (Anon 1995, 2000).

Additionally, previous research found that 45 percent of people with dogs and 16 percent of those with cats in the US take their companion animals along with them on family vacations (Anon 2000). Uncovering whether pets were taken along on family walks, outings, picnics or vacations seemed another possible indicator of whether the pet was truly considered a member of the family.

Other questions for determining attitudes about whether pets were viewed as sentient beings and truly members of the family or as objects/property concerned whether the pets were included in the family photo album. Previous research studies have indicated that the family photo album provides powerful insights into family relationships—including those relationships with the family pet (Ruby 1982; Entin 1983). In the present study, it was believed that using the family photo album as yet one more marker of the types of attitudes and relationships people have with their animals may help determine if the pet is symbolized or portrayed as a true member of the family.

In order to assess attitudes, perceptions, and behaviors that might indicate a tendency towards either viewing the family pet as a sentient being with feelings and preferences or as an object (property), numerous other questions were asked to determine attitudes about the family pet, as well as respondents' attitudes to companion animals in general. All of these responses were then correlated with respondents' classifications of themselves as "guardians," "owners" or "owner-guardians," to determine if there were statistically significant differences between these groups in terms of the way they thought about and treated their companion animals.

## **Methods**

A national study was conducted in the US to examine animal caregivers who consider themselves "guardians" and those who consider themselves their pets' "owners." A third group, "owner-guardians," emerged during the analysis stage of the study and were evaluated as a separate group.

### **Participants and Procedure**

Data collection for the research study was derived from two separate groups: Using a national residential mailing address database created by the US Postal Service, a computerized random selection of 740 households across the country created the first pool of potential participants. Questionnaires were mailed to these households, along with a cover letter asking people to participate in a study about people and their pets. The cover letter explained that participation must be voluntary and confidential. Self-addressed, stamped envelopes were supplied for the return of completed surveys. Additionally, mailings were sent to veterinarians, and advertisements were placed in veterinarian periodicals calling for participation in the national study. A randomly selected group was then chosen from those veterinarians responding and agreeing to participate. A total of 260 questionnaires and cover letters, along with self-addressed, stamped envelopes for the return of completed surveys, was then mailed to the office managers who placed them inside the veterinary offices, clinics and animal hospitals. Data were collected nationwide for both segments (randomly selected households and self-selected clients of participating animal care facilities) to give a geographic and demographic cross-section of the nation.

Based on grant funding, a predetermined total of 1,000 questionnaires was distributed. The response rate was 42 percent. After eliminating incomplete questionnaires and those returned from people without pets, the total number of questionnaires analyzed in the study was 305. The source for participants in the study group was comprised of 178 participants responding from random mailings and 127 participants who were veterinary clients. The regional breakdown for study group participants included Midwest (18%), Northeast (28.9%), Pacific (9.5%), South (30.5%), and Rocky Mountain (11.5%) regions of the United States. Seventy-six percent of study participants (232 respondents) were female and 24 percent (73) were male. The geographic distribution of responses was reasonably close to the geographic distribution of households, with the Pacific Coast somewhat underrepresented (9.5 percent of responses versus 14.4 percent of households), and the Rocky Mountain states somewhat over-represented (11.5 percent of responses versus 7.4 percent of households). Most of this geographical variation was due to the distribution of responses obtained through veterinarians. The average age of participants was 45 years.

## Questionnaire

Respondents received a questionnaire asking them demographic-related questions, the types and number of pets they had, their attitudes and treatment of their pets, their beliefs about how companion animals in general should be treated, and whether they considered themselves to be pet owners or guardians (See Table 1). Final questions for this study were selected and refined from study and dummy questions of surveys previously distributed during two pilot studies, including a version of the questionnaire made available on the Internet. All questionnaires were embedded with special coding that allowed the origin (random mailing, veterinarian offices/animal hospitals and clinics) to be identified when completed surveys were returned.

## Data Analysis

Due to an imbalance between the number of respondents in the sample groups, a two-tailed Fisher exact test was used to determine whether there were significant differences in responses to questions between groups. Three two-group comparisons were used (i.e., guardians vs. owners, guardians vs. owner-guardians, and owners vs. owner-guardians) rather than a single three-group comparison, so that it could be determined where the significant difference lies between groups. For the source of where animals were obtained, a single Fisher exact test was performed on all possible sources. However, because a single respondent can obtain animals from multiple sources, the categories were made exclusive by creating a hierarchy of sources, with sources higher on the hierarchy preempting other sources for that respondent.<sup>5</sup> Due to the number of choices for this particular question and the complexity/time involved in the computation of the Fisher exact test for large tables, a Monte Carlo estimate of the exact test statistic value was used for the question about sources of animals (number of samples=10,000; SAS Institute 1999).

In a few cases, variable means were compared rather than simply comparing the number of respondents in each category. For example, mean values were calculated for the number of times respondents showed affection towards their pets, and their rating of the level of satisfaction they experienced with their pets. These means were compared between groups using a two-tailed *t*-test.

## Results

### Guardians, Owners and Owner-Guardians

Respondents were asked to self-define the way they perceive their role in terms of their pets. The survey asked: "Do you consider yourself your pet(s)' owner or guardian?" The percent of all respondents ( $n = 305$ ) who considered themselves to be animal guardians was 63.3 percent (193). Of these, 77 percent were female and 23 percent were male. The percent of all respondents from the study group who considered themselves to be owners was 22.3 percent (68); of these, 69 percent were female and 31 percent were male. Owner-guardians—people who consider themselves to be both guardians *and* owners—made up 14.4 percent (44) of all respondents from the study group; in this group, 82 percent were female and 18 percent were male.

**Table 1.** Sample questions: Guardian, owner, guardian-owner study.

<p><b>Number/types/sources of pets/owner-guardian status</b></p> <p>How many and what types of pets/companion animals do you have?</p> <p>How did you obtain your pet(s)?</p> <p>Do you consider yourself your pet's: owner ___ guardian ___</p> <hr/> <p><b>Attitudes to family pet</b></p> <p>How satisfied are you with your pet(s)?</p> <p>Do you consider your pet(s) a member(s) of the family?</p> <p>Do you consider your pet(s) your property?</p> <p>Do you feel attached to your pet(s)?</p> <p>Do you identify with your pet(s)?</p> <hr/> <p><b>Treatment of companion animals</b></p> <p>Where applicable, is/are your pet(s) spayed/ neutered?</p> <p>In the past two years, how many times, if any, have any of your pets gone missing?</p> <p>In cases where registration is required, is/are your pet(s) registered and/or licensed?</p> <p>How many pets/companion animals have you had to give up due to moving, family problems, or other relationship, personal or family problems?</p> <p>Where applicable, do/does your pet(s) have identification such as microchips, tags, or tattoos?</p> <p>Do you permit your pet(s) to live indoors with you /the rest of the family?</p> <p>If you celebrate birthdays, do you celebrate your pets' birthdays?</p> <p>If you have a family photo album, is/are your pets' photos included?</p> <p>Are your pets' name(s) included with other family members on holiday and/or greeting cards?</p> <p>Where applicable, do you take your pet(s) on family walks, outings, drives, picnics, vacations or day-trips?</p> <p>If you typically give gifts, do you buy your pets gifts for holidays, birthdays, or for other occasions?</p> <p>How often do you tell your companion animals that you love them?</p> <hr/> <p><b>General beliefs/perceptions about companion animals (Agree/Disagree)</b></p> <p>Long-term chaining of dogs should not happen</p> <p>Spay/neuter of pets should be done to stop overpopulation and suffering of animals</p> <p>Pets should not live long-term in cages</p> <p>Viewing pets as possessions is wrong</p> <p>De-clawing cats for convenience of people is wrong</p> <p>We should not make a big deal out of protecting pets</p> <p>We should help animals because they are dependent on humans/helpless</p> <p>Animals are sentient beings with needs/interests of their own</p>
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**Table 2.** Source of companion animals: Where owners, guardians and owner-guardians obtained their pets.

Participants	Purchase	Adopt	Offspring of Another Pet	Gift	Friend, Family, Co-worker	Stray	“Free Animal” Ad	Other
Owners (n = 68)	48.5%	27.9%	16.2%	19.1%	20.6%	22.1%	11.8%	8.8%
Guardians (n = 193)	34.7%	56.5%	6.2%	12.4%	25.9%	38.9%	7.3%	3.6%
Owner-Guardians (n = 44)	50.0%	59.1%	6.8%	13.6%	20.5%	43.2%	6.8%	6.8%

### Number, Type and Source of Companion Animals

Participants had a mean of 1.2 dogs, 1.2 cats, 0.30 birds, 0.20 small animals, 0.16 reptiles, and 0.33 other types of companion animals for the random sampling, and 1.7 dogs, 2.1 cats, 0.26 birds, 0.05 small animals, 0.09 reptiles, and 2.2 other types of companion animals for the veterinary clients.

How did respondents obtain their animals? The results indicate that owners obtain their animals from significantly different sources than guardians ( $p = 0.0005$ , Fisher exact test) and owner-guardians ( $p = 0.0265$ , Fisher exact test) (See Table 2). Owners were more likely to purchase animals and to have offspring of their pets than guardians. Guardians and owner-guardians were more likely than owners to adopt their animals or take them in as strays. A total of 27.9 percent (19) of owners reported that they adopted at least one of their animals. The percentage of owners reporting they purchased at least one of their animals was 48.5 percent (33). The percentage of owners taking at least one of their animals in as a stray was 22.1 percent (15), while those owners reporting at least one of their animals was the offspring of another one of their animals was 16.2 percent (11).

The percentage of guardians reporting they adopted at least one of their animals was 56.5 percent (109). Another 34.7 percent (67) of guardians reported purchasing at least one of their animals, and 38.9 percent (75) of guardians from the study group reported they had taken at least one of their animals in as a stray. Only 6.2 percent (12) of guardians said that their animal was an offspring of another one of their animals (See Table 2).

A total of 59.1 percent (26) of owner-guardians reported they had adopted at least one of their animals. Fifty percent of owner-guardians reported they purchased at least one of their animals. The number of owner-guardians reporting they took at least one of their animals in as a stray numbered 43.2 percent (19), and 6.8 percent (3) reportedly obtained at least one of their animals as the offspring of another of their animals.

### Treatment of Companion Animals

Respondents were asked a series of questions about the treatment of their own family pets. Table 3 offers an overview of the results.

**Table 3.** Treatment of companion animals by owners, guardians and owner-guardians.

Treatment of Pets	Owners	Guardians	Owner-Guardians
Spay/neuter pets	69.1% (n = 68)	92.6% (n = 193)	95.5% (n = 44)
Lost a pet within previous two years	30.9% (n = 68)	15.5% (n = 193)	11.4% (n = 44)
Did register pets where applicable	67.3% (n = 55)	91.8% (n = 158)	94.6% (n = 37)
Relinquished a pet due to personal problems	33.8% (n = 68)	18.6% (n = 193)	27.3% (n = 44)
Have ID on pets where applicable	55.9% (n = 68)	69.9% (n = 193)	79.5% (n = 44)
Pets permitted to live indoors with rest of family	76.5% (n = 68)	97.4% (n = 193)	97.7% (n = 44)
If have a family photo album, include pets' photos with other family members' photos	65.6% (n = 64)	93.6% (n = 174)	87.8% (n = 41)
Celebrate pet's birthday	26.5% (n = 68)	61.7% (n = 193)	56.8% (n = 44)
Sign pets' names along with other family members on greeting cards	29.4% (n = 68)	69.4% (n = 193)	65.9% (n = 44)
Take pets along on family trips, walks, outings	52.9% (n = 68)	76.2% (n = 193)	79.6% (n = 44)
Give pets gifts for holidays/birthdays	48.5% (n = 68)	80.8% (n = 193)	77.3% (n = 44)
Express love to pet > 1x/day	38.2% (n = 68)	65.8% (n = 193)	63.6% (n = 44)

*Spay/Neuter:* When asked whether their animals were spayed or neutered, 69.1 percent (47) of owners responded that at least one of their animals was spayed or neutered, and 92.6 percent (179) of guardians and 95.5 percent (42) of owner-guardians said that at least one of their animals was spayed or neutered. The difference between owners and guardians was significant ( $p < 0.0001$ , Fisher exact test), as was the difference between owners and owner-guardians ( $p < 0.0001$ , Fisher exact test).

*Lost Pets:* Respondents were asked whether/how often they had a pet go missing within the previous two years. Although losing a pet can occur to even highly responsible caretakers, it was hypothesized that the probability of losing a pet may be related to the level of care and responsibility provided. Therefore, it was believed that the frequency of losing pets might also be related to ownership/guardianship attitudes (See Table 4). As it turned out, the difference between owners and guardians with regard to whether or not they had ever lost a pet was statistically significant ( $p = 0.0103$ , Fisher exact test). On average, guardians and owner-guardians combined lost their pets an average of 0.30 times, while owners lost their pets an average of 0.65 times.



**Table 4.** The number of pets lost within the previous two years by owners, guardians and owner-guardians.

<b>Times Pet Lost</b>	<b>Owners (n = 68)</b>	<b>Guardians (n = 193)</b>	<b>Owner-Guardians (n = 44)</b>
Never Lost Pet	69.1 %	84.5%	88.6%
Lost pet once	19.1%	9.8%	9.1%
Lost pet twice	5.9%	4.2%	0.0%
Lost three or more times	5.9%	1.5%	2.3%

However, as will be discussed later, guardians and owner-guardians were more likely to allow their animals to live indoors than owners, and this was correlated with a lower chance of losing an animal. Fisher exact tests were performed comparing all groups in terms of whether they had ever lost a pet, for just those animals allowed to live indoors, with no significant differences found between groups. The same was true when examining only animals that were prohibited from living indoors. However, though there were no significant differences, the general trend was for guardians and owner-guardians to lose animals less frequently than owners, after accounting for whether the animals lived indoors.

*Registering:* When applicable to do so (that is, where it is legally required to register the specific type of animal the caretaker has), 32.7 percent (18) of owners reported they did not register their pets, while only 8.2 percent (13) of guardians and 5.4 percent (2) of owner-guardians reported they did not register their animals. The difference between owners and guardians in terms of registering their animals was statistically significant ( $p = 0.0001$ , Fisher exact test), as was the difference between owners and owner-guardians ( $p = 0.0042$ , Fisher exact test). The difference between guardians and owner-guardians was not significant.

*Relinquishment:* When respondents were asked how many times, if any, they had relinquished a pet due to personal or family problems such as moving or divorce, 33.8 percent (22) of owners reported they had relinquished a pet, and 18.6 percent (36) of guardians, and 27.3 percent (12) of owner-guardians reported that they had relinquished a pet. The difference between owners' and guardians' treatment of companion animals in terms of whether or not they had ever relinquished their pets was statistically significant ( $p = 0.0054$ , Fisher exact test). Owners relinquished animals an average of 0.8 times, while guardians and owner-guardians relinquished animals an average of 0.4 times.

*Identification:* When asked whether their pets had some form of identification such as an ID tag, micro-chipping, or tattooing, in cases where applicable (type of animal) 44.1 percent (30) of owners' pets did not have identification, 30.1 percent (58) of guardians' animals had no ID, and 20.5 percent (9) of owner-guardians' animals did not have identification. The difference between owners and guardians with regard to assuring their pets had identification was statistically significant ( $p = 0.038$ , Fisher exact test), as was the difference between owners and owner-guardians ( $p = 0.0144$ , Fisher exact test).

*Living Indoors:* How do owners, guardians, and owner-guardians stack up when it comes to permitting their pets to live indoors with the rest of the family? In order to account for respondents who permit their animals to live both indoors and outdoors, and to distinguish between those who permit animals to live indoors at least some of the time from those who prohibit animals from living indoors, the survey asked respondents: Do you permit your pet to live indoors with you? The results indicate that 76.5 percent (52) of owners allow their pets to live indoors, while 97.4 percent (188) of guardians and 97.7 percent (43) of owner-guardians permit their companion animals to live indoors. The difference between owners and guardians with regard to permitting their pets to live indoors was significant ( $p < 0.0001$ , Fisher exact test), as was the difference between owners and owner-guardians ( $p = 0.0022$ , Fisher exact test).

*Birthday Celebrations, Gift Giving, and Greeting Cards:* Questions were asked to determine whether respondents' treatment of their pets was similar to how many Americans typically treat human family members. For those respondents reporting they celebrate the birthdays of human family members, only 26.5 percent (18) of owners reported they celebrate their pets' birthdays. In contrast, 61.7 percent (119) of guardians and 56.8 percent (25) of owner-guardians reported they celebrate their pets' birthdays. The difference between owners and guardians in terms of who celebrates their pets' birthdays was statistically significant ( $p < 0.0001$ , Fisher exact test), as was the difference between owners and owner-guardians ( $p = 0.0016$ , Fisher exact test).

Of those participants who give gifts to human family members, 48.5 percent (33) of owners also give gifts to their pets. In contrast, 80.8 percent (156) of guardians and 77.3 percent (34) of owner-guardians reported they give their pets gifts. The difference between owners and guardians in terms of gift-giving to companion animals was significant ( $p < 0.0001$ , Fisher exact test), as was the difference between owners and owner-guardians ( $p = 0.0022$ , Fisher exact test).

Of those participants who reportedly give greeting cards with all family members' names on them, 29.4 percent (20) of owners include the pets' names along with other family members' names on the cards. By comparison, 69.4 percent (134) of guardians and 65.9 percent (29) of owner-guardians reported they sign their pets' names along with other family members on greeting cards. The difference between owners and guardians in terms of including pets with other family members on greeting cards was statistically significant ( $p < 0.0001$ , Fisher exact test), as was the difference between owners and owner-guardians ( $p = 0.0002$ , Fisher exact test).

*Family Photos and Family Outings:* Are the family pets included along with other family members in the family photo album? For those respondents who had a photo album, 65.6 percent (42) of owners have their pets included, while 93.6 percent (162) of guardians and 87.8 percent (36) of owner-guardians include their pets' photos along with other family members in the family photo album. The differences between owners and guardians with regard to including the pets along with other family members in the family photo album were statistically significant ( $p < 0.0001$ , Fisher exact test), as was the difference between owners and owner-guardians ( $p = 0.0327$ , Fisher exact test).

Who takes their pets along on family walks, picnics, outings or vacations? Where applicable, 52.9 percent (36) of owners take their pets along on family outings. In contrast, 76.2 percent (147) of guardians and 79.6 percent (35) of owner-guardians reported they take their companion animals along on family outings and vacations. Again, the difference between owners and guardians with regard to including their pets in family activities was statistically significant ( $p = 0.0006$ , Fisher exact test), as was the difference between owners and owner-guardians ( $p = 0.0050$ , Fisher exact test).

*Expressing Affection:* The final question concerning the treatment of companion animals asked respondents how often they show affection toward their pets each week. Showing affection was defined as telling their pets they loved them. For owners, 45.6 percent (31) reported they show affection toward their pets between once a day to once a week (1–7 times a week) and 38.2 percent (26) of owners reported they show affection toward their pets more than once a day (8 times or more a week). Sixteen percent (11) of owners reported they never show affection toward their companion animals. For guardians, 25.4 percent (49) reported they show affection toward their pets between once a day to once a week (1–7 times a week) and 65.8 percent (127) of guardians reported they show affection toward their pets more than once a day (eight times or more a week). Nine percent (17) of guardians reported they never show affection toward their pets. For owner-guardians, 29.6 percent (13) reported they show affection toward their pets between once a day to once a week (one–seven times a week) and 63.6 percent (28) of owner-guardians reported they show affection toward their pets more than once a day (eight times or more a week). Seven percent (3) of owner-guardians reported they never show affection toward their pets. The differences between owners and guardians with regard to the frequency with which they show affection toward their companion animals was statistically significant ( $p = 0.0003$ , Fisher exact test), as was the difference between owners and owner-guardians ( $p = 0.0302$ , Fisher exact test).

A secondary measure was performed to determine the differences between the groups with regard to how often they showed affection toward their companion animals. Guardians and owner-guardians (for whom there were no significant differences in the affection they showed their pets) were merged together and compared with owners to determine if they differed in the amount of times they told their pets they loved them. The two groups were compared using an unpaired, two-tailed  $t$ -test assuming unequal variances (tests for equality of variances between  $t$ -test groups yielded significant differences). The results indicate that guardians and owner-guardians express affection toward their companion animals significantly more often than do owners. The results were significant ( $t = -5.75$ ,  $df = 176$ ,  $p < 0.0001$ ), with guardians and owner-guardians combined having a mean score of 37.19 times a week expressing affection toward their pets, and owners having a mean score of 13.77 times per week expressing affection toward their pets. Ten percent of respondents overall ( $n = 305$ ) reported they never show affection toward their pets.

**Table 5.** Attitudes to the family pet held by owners, guardians and owner-guardians.

Participants	Satisfaction with Pets	Members of Family	Pets as Property	Attachment to Pets	Identify with Pets
Owners (n = 68)	82.4%	86.8%	80.9%	76.5%	70.6%
Guardians (n = 193)	95.3%	99.0%	10.4%	99.0%	96.9%
Owner-Guardians (n = 44)	90.9%	100%	52.3%	100%	95.4%

### Attitudes to the Family Pet

The survey asked respondents several questions concerning their attitudes to their own companion animals. Respondents were asked how satisfied they were with their pets, if they view their pets as members of the family, whether they consider their pets as property, and whether they are attached to, and can identify with, their pets (See Table 5).

*Satisfaction with Pets:* How do the groups compare with regard to being satisfied with their animals? The results indicated that 82.4 percent (56) of owners reported being satisfied with their pets, while 95.3 percent (184) of guardians and 90.9 percent (40) of owner-guardians reported being satisfied with their companion animals. The difference between owners and guardians in terms of their satisfaction with their pets was statistically significant ( $p = 0.0016$ , Fisher exact test). An additional test was performed to determine the level of differences between the groups with regard to how satisfied they are with their companion animals. Guardians and owner-guardians were merged together and compared with owners to determine if they differed in the level of satisfaction they had with their pets. The two groups were compared using an unpaired, two-tailed  $t$ -test assuming unequal variances (tests for equality of variances between  $t$ -test groups yielded significant differences). The results indicate that guardians and owner-guardians are more satisfied with their companion animals than are owners. The results were significant ( $t = 3.01$ ,  $df = 92.5$ ,  $p = 0.003$ ), with guardians and owner-guardians combined having a mean score of 6.5 on a 7-point scale of satisfaction with their pets, and owners having a mean score of 5.9 on a 7-point scale of satisfaction with their pets.

*Pets as Members of the Family:* The study group differed in how they responded to whether they considered their pets members of the family. For owners, 86.8 percent (59) reported they viewed their companion animals as members of the family. In contrast, 99.0 percent (191) of guardians and 100 percent (44) of owner-guardians reported they viewed their pets as members of the family. The difference between owners and guardians with regard to beliefs that their pets are full-fledged family members was statistically significant ( $p = 0.0001$ , Fisher exact test), as was the difference between owners and owner-guardians ( $p = 0.0113$ , Fisher exact test).

*Pets as Property:* We know where respondents from the study group stand on perceiving their pets as members of the family, but do they still believe their pets

are property? Even though 86.8 percent (59) of owners stated they believed their pets are full-fledged family members, 80.9 percent (55) said they believed their pets are property. In contrast, only 10.4 percent (20) of guardians said they believed their companion animals are property. The percentage of owner-guardians who said they believed their pets are property was 52.2 percent (23). All three groups were significantly different with regard to responding they believed their pets are property ( $p < 0.0001$  for owners vs. guardians;  $p < 0.0001$  for guardians vs. owner-guardians;  $p < 0.0017$ , for owners vs. owner-guardians; Fisher exact test).

*Attachment to Pets:* What sort of relationship do people have with their pets? For owners participating in the study ( $n = 68$ ), 76.5 percent said they were attached to their pets. In contrast, 99.0 percent (191) of guardians and 100 percent (44) of owner-guardians said they were attached to their pets. The difference between owners and guardians in terms of their attachment to their pets was statistically significant ( $p < 0.0001$ , Fisher exact test) as was the difference between owners and owner-guardians ( $p = 0.0017$ , Fisher exact test).

*Identify with Pets:* Can people relate to their companion animals? Again there was a distinct difference within the study group. For owners, 70.6 percent (48) reported they can relate to their pets. By contrast, 96.9 percent (187) of guardians and 95.4 percent (42) of owner-guardians reported they identify with their companion animals. The difference between owners and guardians in terms of their ability to identify with their pets was statistically significant ( $p < 0.0001$ , Fisher exact test), as was the difference between owners and owner-guardians ( $p = 0.0069$ , Fisher exact test).

### **General Beliefs About, and Perceptions of, Companion Animals**

What do pet caretakers think about companion animals in general? The survey asked respondents whether they agreed or disagreed with several general statements about companion animals. Participants were asked whether or not they believed in issues such as long-term chaining of dogs, spaying/neutering companion animals, keeping pets living long-term in cages, viewing pets as property, declawing cats, spending energy to protect animals, and helping animals because they are dependent on us. Table 6 offers a summary of these results.

Guardians were significantly more likely than owners to believe that long-term chaining and caging of animals was wrong ( $p < 0.0001$ ); spay/neutering was important for curtailing overpopulation ( $p < 0.0001$ ); and that viewing pets as possessions and declawing cats for human convenience is wrong ( $p < 0.0001$ ). Guardians were also significantly more likely than owners to believe we should help animals because they are dependent on humans ( $p < 0.0001$ ) and that animals are sentient beings with needs and interests of their own ( $p < 0.0001$ ). Owner-guardians were also significantly different from owners in all these beliefs (See Table 6). Conversely, owners were significantly more likely than guardians or owner-guardians to believe people should not make such a big deal out of protecting animals ( $p < 0.0001$ ).

**Table 6.** Owners' guardians' and owner-guardians' general beliefs about, and perceptions of, companion animals.

	<b>% Owners Agree (n = 68)</b>	<b>% Guardians Agree (n = 193)</b>	<b>% Owner-Guardians Agree (n = 44)</b>	<b>Owner vs. Guardians, Fisher Exact Test</b>	<b>Owner vs. Owner-Guardians, Fisher Exact Test</b>
<b>General Beliefs/ Perceptions</b>					
Long-term chaining of dogs should not happen	63%	93%	84%	$p < 0.0001$	$p = 0.0193$
Spay/neuter of pets should be done to stop over-population and suffering of animals	60%	96%	95%	$p < 0.0001$	$p = 0.0002$
Pets should not live long-term in cages	66%	97%	95%	$p < 0.0001$	$p = 0.0002$
Viewing pets as possessions is wrong	46%	97%	93%	$p < 0.0001$	$p < 0.0001$
De-clawing cats for convenience of people is wrong	47%	80%	70%	$p < 0.0001$	$p = 0.0193$
We should not make a big deal out of protecting pets	32%	1%	0%	$p < 0.0001$	$p < 0.0001$
We should help animals because they are dependent on humans/helpless	68%	97%	98%	$p < 0.0001$	$p < 0.0001$
Animals are sentient beings with needs/ interests of their own	65%	97%	91%	$p < 0.0001$	$p = 0.0017$

## Discussion

The present study formally examined issues that previously have been limited to only anecdotal observation. Perhaps the most interesting finding was that there appears to be clear differences with regard to attitudes toward pets, beliefs about companion animals in general, and treatment of companion animals, between those who consider themselves to be owners of their pets, and those who consider themselves to be animal guardians. Also of interest, was the emergence of a third group—those people who consider themselves to be both owners and guardians (or owner-guardians, as they were referred to in the present study). Owner-guardians were, by and large, far more similar to guardians than they were to owners in their attitudes toward, beliefs about, and treatment of, companion animals.

In terms of identification, registration, spay-neuter, relinquishment, and lost pets, guardians reportedly exhibit more responsible behaviors than owners toward their companion animals. Guardians also appeared to treat animals more as family members than property, and appeared to have closer relationships with their ani-

mals. Guardians also differed in their beliefs regarding how animals should be treated in general, reporting attitudes that were generally more sensitive to animal welfare issues than their owner counterparts.

The results of the present study suggest that the initial phases of the Guardian Campaign efforts to raise public consciousness and change attitudes about the treatment of companion animals may have been successful in persuading many pet caretakers in the US to change their language from pet owner to guardian. Furthermore, the results suggest that the differences between guardians and owners in their attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors appear to be quite dramatic. It is possible that these differences are, at least in part, a result of changes in thinking about companion animals that resulted from the shifting of language and mental constructs from an “owner” frame of mind to that of a “guardian.” However, it is also possible that the differences in attitude came first, and the differences in choice of language merely reflect preexisting differences in attitude. It is equally possible that both are true, with language and attitudes creating a feedback loop, where both work to reinforce one another.

While not considered in this study, it is possible that participants residing in localities that already legislated use of the term “guardian” might differ in their responses from those participants whose communities have not legislated a change in terminology. This might be especially true if participants lived in municipalities in which there was a high level of media coverage and considerable public debate about the pros and cons of such legislation.

Professional background, education level, and socio-economic status might also affect how people respond to this controversial socio-political issue—especially given the potential for significant impacts on veterinary medicine, the breeding industry, retail and wholesale pet industries, social and legislative issues, as well as legal ramifications. Regional differences also exist, and to the extent that the survey varies from the geographical distribution of the population, the results may vary from actual attitudes.

Another important issue for future studies to examine is whether participants have been exposed to information or positions on the owner-guardian issue from the mainstream media, animal welfare/animal rights organizations, animal breeders, organizations promoting the sale of pets or other animal-related industries, legal advisors, or their veterinarians. The owner-guardian issue has become a hotly debated, divisive issue in recent times. Proponents argue that use of the term “owner” overemphasizes use of the property status of animals, thereby decreasing the recognition that animals are sentient beings, and increasing the likelihood for abuse, neglect and abandonment of companion animals<sup>6</sup>. Opponents argue that changing to use of the term “guardian” may diminish the relationship between animals and their caregivers, undermine protective care of animals, lead to potential legal problems for veterinarians and caregivers, cause restrictive legislation to breeders and others who buy and sell pets, remove the option of caregivers to euthanize, spay-neuter, or vaccinate their pets, restrict homeowner insurance coverage for pet-related claims, and increase the number of homeless/unwanted pets (Anon 2001, 2002, 2003abc, 2004, 2005). With such strong emotions and persuasive arguments coming from both proponents and opponents of the Guardian Movement, exposure to information from either side could have a profound impact on participants’ responses.

While it may be too early to determine whether the change in terminology has actually benefited or harmed animals in any tangible way, future studies could provide critical insights by tracking both the positive and negative outcomes to animal shelters, veterinarian care, legal decisions, and the incidence and legislative findings of animal cruelty cases such as hoarding and abuse, in those communities that have legislated change to use of the term “guardian.” The results from long-term studies of these issues could shed light on whether the current concerns of opponents, and/or the arguments of proponents, have any actual validity. Only then can we determine whether such social and legislative changes actually reduce the suffering of animals, or is merely a case of the cure being worse than the disease.

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## Notes

1. Interview with Elliot Katz, DVM, Founder of In Defense of Animals and the Guardian Campaign.
2. Ibid.
3. Among them are: San Francisco Chronicle; Los Angeles Times; Connecticut Daily News; PR Newswire; The Christian Science Monitor; The Daily News; Dallas Morning News; The News Tribune; Democrat and Chronicle; The Denver Post; The Observer; CBS News.
4. In Defense of Animals' Guardian Campaign tracking statistics: [www.guardiancampaign.com](http://www.guardiancampaign.com).
5. The hierarchy was created based on the order of choices in the survey question, using the following order: adoption, purchase, gift, received from friend/family/neighbor/coworker/took in stray/offspring of another pet/free pet ad/other. Thus, somebody who adopted an animal and took in another as a stray would show up in the test under the category “adoption” only.
6. Interview with Elliot Katz, DVM, Founder of In Defense of Animals and the Guardian Campaign

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