

Role of Animal Companionship in People Experiencing Structural Vulnerabilities Globally

Anya Bhopa,¹ Varleen Kaur,² Shania Bhopa³

¹Department of Animal Biosciences, University of Guelph, Guelph, Ontario, Canada

²Department of Biochemistry, Memorial University of Newfoundland, St. John's, Newfoundland & Labrador, Canada

³Faculty of Health Sciences, McMaster University, Hamilton, Ontario, Canada.

Mental health has become ever more critical than it has been before in history. One in two Canadians will have mental health concerns by the time they reach the age of 40 years [1]. In addition, mental health issues are becoming a leading disability worldwide [2]. With respect to the epidemiological burden of mental disorders, a global burden of disease study [3] attributes nearly 15% of years of life lost to mental disorders, making mental illnesses one of the most significant causes of disability worldwide. Research has shown that pets' potential benefit to good mental health comes from evidence of pet ownership in relation to stress reduction, improved quality of life, and pets as promoters of social and community interaction [4]. This article focuses on the impact of having a pet on mental health and further how it impacts the daily life experiences of individuals facing homelessness.

Pets are linked to emotional upliftment because they offer a reliable and nearby source of solace and company [5]. The idea that animals could sense when assistance is required and respond appropriately fosters a depth of connection that was thought to be especially helpful in times of distress [6]. Companion animals help with practical work by helping divert attention from unpleasant symptoms and experiences, providing a schedule, and helping to activate conduct [7]. Because of the reciprocity in human-pet

relationships, the idea that pets accept their owners without passing judgment, the sense of pride that comes from effectively caring for an animal, and other factors, pets are crucial to maintaining a good identity and sense of self [8]. A lack of a sense of self identity is especially present in the homeless youth population.

A study conducted in Malaysia analyzed the self-efficacy of 448 individuals, which included 122 individuals with dogs and 80 individuals with cats [9]. It was found that self-efficacy was much higher in the participants that had animal companions, which results in these individuals having the ability to have confidence in their ability to have persistence despite barriers that may arise [9]. It should be noted that this study was conducted amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, where social isolation was a common factor among all participants [9].

"The Pet Effect"

The "pet effect" refers to the hypothesis that having a pet can increase longevity, psychological well-being, and physical health in people [10]. However, many studies have reported that these are personal evictions rather than scientific research [11]. Approximately 25% of homeless individuals have pets [12], but there is a lack of quantitative research on pet ownership among homeless youth [13]. A study aimed to address this gap by examining pet ownership among 398 homeless youth utilizing two drop-in

centres in Los Angeles [14]. The majority of pet owners reported that their pets provided companionship and made them feel loved. Additionally, nearly half of the pet owners stated that having a pet made it more challenging to stay in a shelter [14]. Compared to non-pet-owning peers, pet owners reported fewer symptoms of depression and loneliness [14]. Furthermore, pet ownership was associated with reduced utilization of housing and job-finding services and a decreased likelihood of staying in a shelter [14]. These findings highlight the positive benefits of pet ownership for youth facing homelessness while emphasizing the potential negative impact on housing options. Therefore, it is crucial for housing and other services to consider and accommodate the needs of youth facing homelessness with pets.

This integrative review confirms existing research demonstrating the positive impact of companion animals on the well-being of homeless individuals [15]. However, it is essential to conduct further investigation to establish a direct causal relationship between pet ownership and well-being among people experiencing homelessness. Companion animals serve as a crucial source of emotional support for homeless individuals. However, owning a pet may also make them more vulnerable by limiting their access to services such as shelter, healthcare, and mobility assistance. Since many homeless shelters do not permit pets, finding housing remains a significant challenge for homeless individuals.

Systematic Barriers

Despite the mental health benefits that pets have for their owners, systematic barriers cause companion animals to burden individuals facing structural vulnerabilities [16]. For example, in Los Angeles, California, half of the precariously housed individuals with

animal companions report that due to no-pet policies, they could not receive emergency shelter and had to spend nights on the street [16]. In addition to being forced to choose between housing and staying with their pet, homeless individuals face barriers when accessing mental health services [16]. Since the services available to shelter residents frequently do not suit the needs of a companion animal (e.g., boarding, transportation, daycare), individuals often do not receive the healthcare assistance they require in order to stay with their animal [16].

These systematic barriers result in the demographic of individuals facing structural vulnerabilities needing additional support. As a case study analysis example, a Canadian-based non-profit organization, 'The Canadian Courage Project', supports transitional housing residents. Since youth lack access to mental health services because of their animal companions, The Canadian Courage Project provides mental health workshops to potentially fill this gap in the current system [17]. Additionally, to further support this demographic, The Canadian Courage Project provides essential items needed to care for an animal companion [17]. These items are included in an 'Animal Service Booth', which operates on a 'take what you need' basis to remove the stigma associated with wellness care kits [17]. The Canadian Courage Project is an example of an organization working to enhance pet and human companionship for those facing additional structural vulnerabilities in the community.

Also, previous research has shown that mental health burden is linked to a stronger emotional bond with one's dog [18]. This link is completely mediated by attachment to humans [18]. A higher mental health burden was linked

to poorer comfort with depending on or trusting in others [18]. From a developmental standpoint, the relationship between a weaker emotional attachment to humans and a stronger one to pets may result from people being unable to form secure attachments to others when they are young [18]. These folks may develop closer bonds with their animals that could be viewed as more trustworthy and non-threatening [18].

Call to Action

Studying our interactions with animals is fascinating, important, and challenging. It is unclear whether and under what circumstances pets make people happier and healthier. Animals, overall, play an important role in nearly every aspect of human psychology and culture. In addition, our attitudes, behaviours toward, and relationships with other species provide insight into many aspects of human nature.

However, the research needs to be more conclusive due to the limited studies published in this area. More research is needed to examine whether developing a stronger emotional relationship with pets results from unpleasant previous bonding experiences and whether this coping mechanism enhances or degrades psychological health [4]. From the research found, we can suggest that access to animal support programs must be more readily available to the youth facing homelessness [19]. Additionally, more specialized programming is needed for specific demographics, such as youth identifying as a part of the LGBTQ+ community [19].

Overall, pets can provide emotional support and a sense of purpose for individuals experiencing feelings of loneliness, isolation, and hopelessness [4]. Many individuals' pets are their family and close companions,

providing a sense of love and connection that may be lacking in other areas of their lives [5].

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