The benefits and costs of pet ownership for individuals experiencing homelessness

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STREETVET
ACCESSIBLE, FREE VET CARE FOR THE HOMELESS
StreetVet.co.uk
Seminar objectives

• Recognise the costs and benefits of pet ownership for individuals experiencing homelessness

• Understand the requirement for positive pet policies to achieve engagement

• Be aware of the potential contributions of veterinary professionals to the inclusion medicine allied health team
Caring for a pet on the streets is costly

- Reduced mobility
- Provision of daily essentials
- Stigma ("This is for him, not for you")
- Zoonotic disease exposure
- Bereavement triggers coping mechanisms
- Exclusion from hospitals and housing

Howe & Easterbrook, J Pov, 2018: Rhoades et al, Child Pysch Hum Dev, 2015:
Homeless pet owners face exacerbated housing challenges

- Most social housing is not pet friendly so owners get “stuck” if accepted in hostels
- Hostel staff not trained to accommodate dogs – staff and residents often prejudiced
- Typically asked to abandon dogs to take a hostel room
- Insisting on keeping the dog seen as a “choice” and makes the owner “voluntarily homeless”
Homeless pet owners often struggle to access healthcare for themselves

- Often will not seek medical care until pathology is more advanced
- Likely to arrive at A&E with their best friend
- Will self-discharge if cannot entrust anyone with their dog
- More likely to be discharged back onto the streets (lack of pet-friendly accommodation)
- Medical staff often unaware of zoonoses

Taylor et al, Anthrozoös, 2004
So why do people do it?

- Companionship
- Interaction
- Security
- Purpose/“Redemption”
- Often a link to happier times…

Rew, J Child Adolesc Psychiatr Nurs, 2000
Irvine L, J Contemp Ethnog, 2012; Brooks et al, BMC Psych, 2018
**Table 1** Dimensions of pet ownership among homeless youth utilizing drop-in centers in Los Angeles (N = 332)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimension</th>
<th>% Agreeing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>My pet keeps me company</td>
<td>84.48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My pet makes me feel loved</td>
<td>79.31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My pet helps me feel safe</td>
<td>72.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My pet gives me someone to love</td>
<td>70.69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My pet protects me</td>
<td>64.29</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 2** Demographic and behavioral characteristics of homeless youth utilizing drop-in centers in Los Angeles, by pet ownership (N = 332)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Where currently staying</th>
<th>% (N)/Mean (SD)</th>
<th>χ²/t (p)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Overall</td>
<td>48.78 (160)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pet Owners</td>
<td>36.49 (27)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Pet Owners</td>
<td>52.36 (133)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Street</td>
<td>49.10 (163)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>50.00 (38)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>48.83 (125)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shelter/housing program</td>
<td>13.86 (46)</td>
<td>5.78 (0.02)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3.95 (3)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>16.80 (42)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other housing location</td>
<td>37.05 (123)</td>
<td>8.7 (0.01)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>46.1 (35)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>34.8 (89)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It is hard to get pet food</td>
<td>10.52</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Rhoades et al, Child Psychiatry Hum Dev, 2015
Where do the dogs come from?

- Used to be owner’s deceased son’s dog.
- Bought when owner felt things were going well.
- All that is left of owner’s dairy farm.
- Fished out of the canal in a plastic bag.
- Squat dog.
- Paid £12 for him.
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“‘You’re homeless. You don’t deserve a dog.’” [We laugh]

So how do you respond?

“With a big ‘FU’! I’ve had people say, ‘I’m calling Animal Control and having your dog taken away from you’ and I’m like ‘Yeah, yeah. Whatever.’ Because Animal Control’s going to come and see a healthy, happy dog and be like, ‘You have a nice day.’

Homeless pet owners are often particularly bonded to their dogs

Taylor et al, Anthrozoös, 2004
Also see Singer et al, Phys Rep, 1996
The Lexington Attachment to Pets Scale

- “My pet means more to me than any of my friends”
- “I believe that pets should have the same rights and privileges as family members”
- “Quite often, my feelings towards people are affected by the way they react to my pet”
- “I believe that loving my pet helps me stay healthy”

Johnson et al., Anthrozoös, 2015

Would you accept housing if it did not allow pets?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>MEN</th>
<th>WOMEN</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NO</td>
<td>93.3</td>
<td>96.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>YES</td>
<td>6.7</td>
<td>3.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Singer et al., Psychological Reports, 1995
Pets provide motivation and engagement

- Lack of trust fundamentally impairs access to services
- Outreach and social work professionals commonly do not value pet ownership
- Pets provide a conversation starter!
- Bonded owners are motivated by ensuring their pet’s welfare

Panning et al, Can J Public Health 2016
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Overall</td>
<td>Pet Owners</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mental health</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PTSD symptoms</td>
<td>23.75 (76)</td>
<td>24.32 (18)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Depression scale (0–30)</td>
<td>9.61 (0.44)</td>
<td>7.78 (0.85)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loneliness scale (0–6)</td>
<td>2.19 (1.89)</td>
<td>1.77 (1.81)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trauma &amp; violence</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hit at home</td>
<td>45.85 (149)</td>
<td>49.33 (37)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hit at home and currently staying at home</td>
<td>42.42 (14)</td>
<td>58.33 (7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saw family member hit at home</td>
<td>41.23 (134)</td>
<td>46.67 (35)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saw family member hit at home and currently staying at home</td>
<td>33.33 (11)</td>
<td>50.00 (6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carried a weapon (past 30 days)</td>
<td>37.76 (125)</td>
<td>47.37 (36)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hurt seriously in a fight (past year)</td>
<td>54.98 (182)</td>
<td>55.26 (42)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hurt badly or threatened while homeless</td>
<td>33.12 (106)</td>
<td>31.08 (23)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Homeless pet owner usually manage to provide for their pets’ needs admirably

• Comparable health status to dogs owned by people in houses
• Less likely to be obese
• Less likely to suffer from separation anxiety (not left alone...)
• Non-evidence based statements to the contrary unnecessarily perpetuate stigma

Need preventative veterinary healthcare and a safety net in an emergency

Williams & Hogg, Pet Beh Sci, 2016
StreetVet-facilitated solutions

- Pet references for housing applications certifying date of last parasiticide and vaccination administered
- Advocacy and empowerment
- Provision of emergency kennels: must have a contract in place, rarely able to foster
- Pet-friendly policy guidance
- Monitoring of potential zoonoses
- Support in bereavement
StreetVetting poses unique challenges

- Incredibly bonded owners
- Must safeguard potentially vulnerable owners
- Difficult “practice” environment
- Different medical and social priorities
- Atypical medical cases and risk factors
Unique medical cases and risk factors

- Very varied diet
- Typically older dogs
- “Diseases of the Staffie”
- Often fragmented histories
- “Ingenious” home remedies
- Always aware of NAI, don’t think we have ever seen it

Chi^2 p < 0.05

Proportion of recorded ages

- < 1 year
- 1 – 8 years
- > 8 years

*StreetVet SAVSNET*

*Sánchez-Vizcaíno et al, BMC Vet Res, 2017*
Treatment priorities and limitations

• A bit of diarrhoea is a big problem in a small hostel room
• Cannot prescribe “chicken and rice”
• Cannot “crate rest”
• No fridge...
• Some get weekly checks, others will never be seen again
• Avoid using topical treatments
Case example

• 13 year old terrier presented with dorsal alopecia and pigmentation

• Asymmetrical testicles identified. Pre-GA investigations started:
  • In field HCT and glucose measurement
  • Urinalysis (SG and dipstick)
  • Blood-sampled for in-house analysis

• Castrated and submitted for histopath – diagnosed Leydig cell tumour.

• Alopecia resolved within 3 months.
Case example

• Long-term patient treated for minor dermatological complaints.
• Run-over by a train. Rescued from the tracks by the RSPCA and transferred back to our care.
• Amputation, enucleation and prolonged hospitalisation in a practice.
• Magical recovery, reunited with her owner.
• Mast cell tumour diagnosed, staged and removed.
“Common” zoonoses

- Fleas
- Sarcoptes
- Dermatophytoses
- Giardia/Salmonella
- (Toxocara)
- (Monitoring exotic diseases)
- (Dog bites)
Advice for allied health professionals working around dogs

• Never sandwich the dog between you and the owner/anything else
• Do not initiate interactions with the dog yourself
• Be aware of canine body language
• Dogs nearly always bite out of fear (inc. guarding), sometimes as a learnt behaviours
Muzzle training

• Forcing a muzzle on is likely to create aversion and cause problems when none exit
• Must be able to pant and drink in muzzle
• Two straps for security – one around neck, second over head
• Appropriate to face shape – flat-faced breeds will get out of a long muzzle
Lots of videos on YouTube

Key principles =
- Positive reinforcement
- Won’t learn if stressed
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Owner’s response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How long have you had your pet for?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Has your pet ever bitten you or another person?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Has your pet ever bitten another dog?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is your pet protective of food, toys, you, your possessions, or anything else (please specify)?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is your pet receiving any medical treatment, or are you aware of any conditions which may require veterinary treatment?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you think your dog needs to be muzzled around people it does not know and other dogs?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Has your control of your dog ever been a factor in any Anti-Social Behaviour Order or has it even been confiscated by the police?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does your dog get distressed if left for short periods of time?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is your dog known to be destructive?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When was the last time your dog was treated for fleas and what was the product used?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

New pet = unknown

Yes = risk minimisation and isolation

Pain = fear. Treatments may make the dog more likely to soil inside, for example.

May indicate inconsistent control – NOT ALWAYS!

Potential nuisance behaviours

NOT a pet-shop product – MUST be veterinary!
Thank you!

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Co-founders:
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