



Homeless Women's Voices on Incorporating Companion Animals into Shelter Services

What is this research about?

This research examines the nature of animal caretaking among female, homeless shelter residents in Canada. It evaluates the literature on homeless women, investigates the benefits and drawbacks of companion animals, and studies the relationship between homeless populations and companion animals.

What you need to know

Homeless women share experiences similar to homeless men, such as addictions, mental illness, and poverty. However, women also experience additional challenges that are unique to gender. These include being disproportionately responsible for child rearing and experiencing domestic abuse, sexual abuse and assault. Research suggests that homeless women have a high rate of pet ownership, and derive a sense of companionship, responsibility, therapy, and safety from their pets. However, very few shelters in Canada accommodate pets and this forces many homeless women to either surrender their pet to gain entry into a shelter, or live on the street to remain with their pet.



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KEYWORDS

*relationships, homeless women,
animals, Canadian shelters*

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ARTICLE SOURCE

*Homeless Women's Voices on Incorporating Companion
Animals into Shelter Services* was published in *Anthrozoos: A Multidisciplinary Journal of The Interactions of People & Animals*; 24(1): 79-95(17) in 2011.

What did the researchers find?

The researchers found that 8 themes arose from the interviews. A sense of *companionship* derived from the strong human-animal attachment was noted by almost half of the participants. 39% of the participants identified the unconditional *acceptance* due to the non-judgemental nature of pets as a reason for owning a pet. The source of *comfort* that a pet provides was acknowledged by 51% of the interviewees. 28 % of the participants mentioned that pets instilled in them a sense of *responsibility* and accountability. The *therapeutic* health benefits of having a pet were acknowledged by almost half of the participants. 24% of the women also felt that their pets gave them a sense of *safety* and protection, and 82% reported a feeling of *loss* after having to surrender their pet in exchange for accommodation in shelters. Finally, concerns for the shelter users who may be opposed to accommodating pets were identified by 31% of the participants under the theme of *worry for others*. Both a physical and emotional sense of home facilitated by the presence of a pet was an overarching theme in the findings. Overall, the majority of participants favoured the idea of providing space for animals in homeless shelters. However, most of these supporters thought that the animals should be kept separate from the residents out of respect for those who suffer from allergies, and those that may not share the same affinity for animals.



What did the researchers do?

The researchers interviewed 87 homeless women living in homeless shelters in 6 Canadian cities. Fifty-one of the participants were asked questions related to animal companionship. The semi-structured interviews questioned the women about whether they have a companion animal, their experiences with companion animals,

the physical features of the shelter in which they stay, public/community perceptions of companion animals in shelters, and suggestions for homeless shelters regarding the accommodations of pets. Interviews were also conducted with 2 shelter staff to explore policy and experiences related to accommodating companion animals.

HOW CAN YOU USE THIS RESEARCH?

This research highlights the need for more research into homeless women's experiences with pets. It can also be used by policy-makers to examine the possibility of accommodating companion animals such that homeless women will not have to make decisions over surrendering their pets or living on the street.

ABOUT THE RESEARCHERS

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Bachelor and Master's degrees in Social Work from the University of Calgary

During her Bachelor's program, she was a part of the North American Mobility Exchange Program, and interned at the University of Tennessee Veterinary Social Work program where her interest in the Human Animal Bond grew. Jennifer is currently working towards certification as an EAGALA (Equine Assisted Growth and Learning Association) Mental Health Professional.

CHRISTINE A. WALSH

Associate Professor in the Faculty of Social Work, University of Calgary

Christine's program of community-based participatory research investigates the social determinants of the health for marginalized, socially excluded and disadvantaged populations, with a specific emphasis on women affected by homelessness and poverty. In her research she aims to influence health, justice and social policy and programming initiatives to improve health and well-being for disadvantaged populations.