Pet ownership in the unsheltered homeless population in Los Angeles

Benjamin Henwood , Eldin Dzubur , Harmony Rhoades , Patricia St. Clair & Robynn Cox

Published online: 31 Jul 2020.

Submit your article to this journal ↗

Article views: 38

View related articles ↗

View Crossmark data ↗

Taylor & Francis
Taylor & Francis Group

Check for updates

Brief Report

Pet ownership in the unsheltered homeless population in Los Angeles

Benjamin Henwood[a], Eldin Dzubur[a], Harmony Rhoades[a], Patricia St. Clair[b] and Robynn Cox[a]

[a]Suzanne Dworak-Peck School of Social Work, University of Southern California. Los Angeles, USA; [b]Schaeffer Center, University of Southern California. Los Angeles, USA

ABSTRACT

Objectives:: To examine pet ownership among unsheltered homeless adults.

Methods:: Surveys collected as part of the Los Angeles County (LAC) annual homeless count across three years were analyzed. In 2017, 2018, and 2019, participants completed 4,808, 4,815, and 4,259 eligible surveys, respectively. Weighted averages were used to be representative of LAC's unsheltered population.

Results:: Estimates of pet ownership among unsheltered homeless adults were 12% in 2017 and 2019, and 9% in 2018. Among pet owners in 2017, 48% ($n = 1,362$) reported being turned away from shelter because of pet policies.

Conclusions:: Pet ownership represents a major obstacle to accessing shelter among unsheltered homeless adults.

Policy Implications: : More pet-friendly policies are needed to effectively serve many unsheltered homeless adults.

Summary Box

1) What is the current understanding of this subject? Little is known about the unsheltered homeless population including rates of pet ownership.
2) What does this report add to the literature? This study is the first to provide estimates of pet ownership in a large sample of unsheltered adults.
3) What are the implications for public health practice? The findings from this study suggest that pet ownership represents a major obstacle to accessing shelter and suggests that more pet-friendly policies are needed to effectively engage the large unsheltered population.

Introduction

Pet ownership estimates in the United States are relatively stable over time, ranging from 42% to 68% of households depending on methodological approach (e.g. surveys by mail, internet, or random digit dialing). (Rowan (2018)) To date, estimates of pet ownership among homeless populations are limited. (Cronley et al. (2009); Irvine et al. (2012); Rhoades et al. (2015); Kerman et al. (2019)) Administrative data from 4,100 sheltered adults in Knoxville, Tennessee, identified 6% of homeless adults as pet owners, (Cronley et al. (2009)) whereas 23% of 398 homeless youth (aged 13–25) at drop-in centers in Los Angeles reported pet ownership. (Rhoades et al. (2015)) Improved estimates are critical considering both the benefits and liabilities of pet ownership. (Kidd and Kidd (1994)) In the general population, pets are associated with higher levels of social capital (Wood et al. (2017)) and physical activity, (Yabroff et al. (2008)) and among homeless persons, pets have been associated with decreased loneliness (Rew (2000)) and improved mental health (Rhoades et al. (2015)) and may serve as a marker of responsibility. (Irvine et al. (2012)) Understanding pet ownership may also be critical for engaging homeless individuals in services, because many would not accept housing if it meant giving up their pet. (Kidd and Kidd (1994)), (Slatter et al. (2012))

This study utilized data collected as part of the Los Angeles County (LAC) annual homeless count to address these gaps in knowledge. LAC accounts for close to 20% of the overall U.S. unsheltered homeless population, with 3 of 4 LAC homeless individuals living unsheltered. (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. (2018)) We had three primary research questions: (1) What is the prevalence of pet ownership among unsheltered homeless adults? (2) To what extent do unsheltered adults report an inability to access shelter because of their pets? (3) What are the demographic characteristics associated with pet ownership among unsheltered adults?

Data and methods

LAC's homeless count is administered each year by the Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority. In addition to a 3-night full visual enumeration of the unsheltered population, face-to-face surveys are administered between December and March by trained interviewers to a stratified random sample of unsheltered homeless adults aged 25 or older. Surveys include demographic characteristics, health conditions, and pet ownership. Methodological details have been published elsewhere. (Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority (2018))

For this study – approved by the authors' institutional review board – we explored the prevalence of pet ownership across three years: 2017, 2018, and 2019. Data from 2017 describe whether unsheltered adults reported an inability to access shelter because of their pets, because that is the only survey that included this question. We assessed demographic characteristics associated with pet ownership utilizing the most recent data from 2019. In 2017, 2018, and 2019, samples of 4,808, 4,815, and 4,259 individuals, respectively, were eligible and interviewed. For this study, we excluded individuals who reported homelessness duration longer than their age and those missing the pet ownership item. The resulting 2019 analytic sample was 3,757-3,907 (88-92% of the total sample). We calculate weighted averages of the demographic characteristics conditional on pet ownership to make our estimates representative of the LAC unsheltered homeless population. Standard errors are estimated using Taylor linearization. To assess for statistically significant differences between unsheltered adults with and without pets, we used Pearson's chi-squared test for categorical variables (e.g. veteran status) and linear regressions for continuous variables (e.g. age). An additional logistic regression was used to examine predictors of pet ownership while controlling for all other covariates.

Results

Approximately 12% of individuals ($n = 2,850$) reported owning pets in 2017, a percentage that decreased to 9.0% ($n = 2,284$) in 2018 and increased again in 2019–11.7% ($n = 3,509$). Among the 12% who owned a pet in 2017, 48.1% ($n = 1,362$) reported being turned away from shelter because of pet policies. Across all three years, those with pets reported having, on average, 1.5 pets. Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics of the sample in the most recent year (2019), including bivariate tests for differences between participants with or without pets. On average, the pet-owning subsample was 56% male, approximately 46 years old, and experienced homelessness for almost 5 years. Approximately 37% met the federal definition of chronic homelessness and approximately half reported a lifetime history of mental illness or ongoing physical health conditions. Just under 4% of pet owners were veterans, with veterans being less likely to have a pet. Race and ethnicity was associated with pet ownership, such that those without pets were more likely to be Black (not of Hispanic origin; 29%), compared to pet owners, who were more likely to be White (not of Hispanic origin), Hispanic, or other non-Hispanic ethnicity. Pet owners

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of a weighted sample of adults experiencing homelessness grouped by pet ownership.
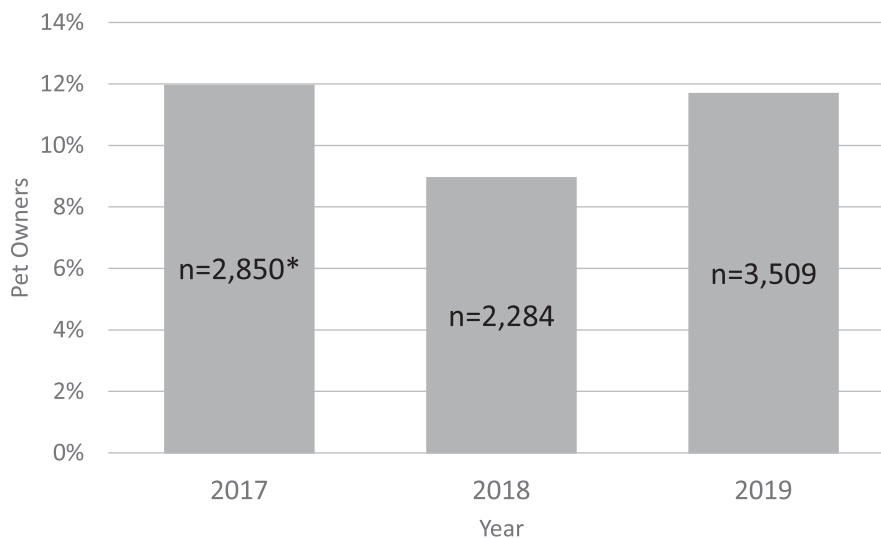
	Population	No pets	Pet owner N/Mean (%/Linearized SE)[a]	Total	p-value
Length of time homeless (years)					0.910
Mean (Linearized SE)	29,466	4.75 (0.19)	4.81 (0.48)	4.76 (0.18)	
Age (years)					0.553
Mean (Linearized SE)	29,466	46.33 (0.39)	45.79 (0.87)	46.27 (0.37)	
Veteran Status					<0.05
Not a veteran	29,093	26,940 (92.6%)	28,075 (96.5%)	27,056 (93.0%)	
Veteran	29,093	2,153 (7.4%)	1,018 (3.5%)	2,037 (7.0%)	
Chronic Homelessness					0.506
Not chronically homeless	29,466	19,624 (66.6%)	18,534 (62.9%)	19,506 (66.2%)	
Chronically homeless		9,842 (33.4%)	10,932 (37.1%)	9,960 (33.8%)	
Race/Ethnicity					<0.001
Black, not Hispanic	29,466	8,575 (29.1%)	3,860 (13.1%)	8,015 (27.2%)	
White, not Hispanic		8,133 (27.6%)	8,899 (30.2%)	8,221 (27.9%)	
Hispanic		10,048 (34.1%)	13,112 (44.5%)	10,431 (35.4%)	
Other, not Hispanic		2,681 (9.1%)	3,595 (12.2%)	2,799 (9.5%)	
Gender					<0.001
Female or Other	29,410	7,764 (26.4%)	13,087 (44.5%)	8,382 (28.5%)	
Male		21,646 (73.6%)	16,323 (55.5%)	21,028 (71.5%)	
Living Situation (Past 6 mo.)					<0.01
Never in a vehicle	29,303	21,186 (72.3%)	17,933 (61.2%)	20,805 (71.0%)	
Lived in a vehicle		8,117 (27.7%)	11,370 (38.8%)	8,498 (29.0%)	
Physical Health Issue					0.703
No	28,567	15,283 (53.5%)	14,912 (52.2%)	15,226 (53.3%)	
Yes		13,284 (46.5%)	13,655 (47.8%)	13,626 (47.7%)	
Mental Health Illness					0.148
No	28,862	15,816 (54.8%)	14,085 (48.8%)	15,585 (54.0%)	
Yes		13,074 (45.3%)	14,777 (51.2%)	13,277 (46.0%)	

Note: [a]Weighted, number of strata = 6; number of sampling units = 314-321, number of obs. = 3,757-3,907.

Table 2. Results from a logistic regression predicting pet ownership in a weighted sample of adults experiencing homelessness

Pet Ownership (ref = No pets) (N = 28,014[a])	Odds Ratio	Linearized SE	t	P>|t|	95% CI	
Length of time homeless (years)	1.00	0.01	0.03	0.98	0.98	1.02
Age (years)	1.00	0.01	0.14	0.89	0.99	1.02
Veteran Status (ref = not a veteran)						
Veteran	0.57	0.21	−1.55	0.12	0.28	1.16
Chronic Homelessness (ref = not chronically homeless)						
Chronically homeless	1.15	0.35	0.45	0.66	0.63	2.09
Race/Ethnicity (ref = Black, not Hispanic)						
White, not Hispanic	2.43	0.67	3.23	0.00	1.41	4.16
Hispanic	2.95	0.67	4.79	0.00	1.89	4.61
Other, not Hispanic	2.83	0.88	3.34	0.00	1.53	5.23
Gender (ref = Female)						
Male	0.48	0.06	−5.60	0.00	0.37	0.62
Living Situation (Past 6 mo.) (ref = Did not live in a vehicle)						
Lived in a vehicle	1.47	0.30	1.92	0.06	0.99	2.19
Physical Health Issue (ref = No)						
Yes	0.94	0.17	−0.32	0.75	0.66	1.34
Mental Health Issue (ref = No)						
Yes	1.19	0.19	1.08	0.28	0.87	1.62

Note: [a]Weighted, number of strata = 6; number of sampling units = 319, number of obs. = 3,731.

*48% (n = 1,362) reported being turned away from shelter because of pet policies.

Figure 1. Estimate of pet ownership among unsheltered homeless population in Los Angeles County.

were less likely to identify as male and to more likely to have lived in a vehicle (e.g. car, van, or RV) in the prior 6 months than those without pets. Table 2 presents the results from a logistic regression predicting likelihood of pet ownership in the sample after adjusting for all aforementioned covariates. Those identifying any race/ethnicity or than Black, but not Hispanic were 2–3 times as likely to own a pet compared to individuals who identified as Black, not Hispanic. Compared to females, males were about half as likely to own a pet, controlling for all other factors. Adults who have lived in a vehicle in the past six months were only marginally more likely to have a pet. Whether or not an individual was a veteran was not related to their likelihood of owning a pet, after adjusting for all other covariates.

Discussion

Pet ownership estimates among LAC's unsheltered homeless adults appear to be relatively stable over time, with approximately 12% reporting pet ownership in 2017 and 2019, with a brief decrease to 9% in 2018. These estimates are higher than the 6% previously reported among sheltered adults, (Cronley et al. (2009)) but lower than the 23% reported among

youth experiencing homelessness. (Rhoades et al. (2015)) This may reflect higher rates of pet ownership among unsheltered adults compared to sheltered adults and lower rate of pet ownership among homeless adults as compared to youth. Safety concerns and a need for protection may motivate pet ownership, given that men are the least likely to have pets and those with pets are more likely to live in vehicles. Living in a vehicle may also reflect increased resources that enable people to care for a pet. Age was not associated with pet ownership, but these data did not include individuals younger than 25, who were surveyed during a separate youth count not asking about pets. To remedy this information gap, LAC's youth homeless count in 2020 will include a question on pet ownership for the first time. Lifetime duration of homelessness, meaning the total number of years that one self-reports as being homeless, was not associated with pet ownership, suggesting that people do not easily give up their pet, even as their time experiencing homelessness – and perhaps the costs for caring for a pet – increases.

Close to half of pet owners reported being turned away from shelter because of their pet. Future research should consider whether pet ownership may also hamper the ability of pet owners to access permanent housing often designed for adults experiencing chronic homelessness. Despite its large sample size, this study has several limitations, including self-reported pet ownership and potential selection bias, especially if it is more difficult for surveyors to approach pet owners. These findings may not be generalizable to unsheltered homeless populations outside of LAC Figure 1.

Public health implications

This study is the first to provide estimates of pet ownership in a large sample of unsheltered adults. The findings suggest that pet ownership represents a major obstacle to accessing shelter and suggests that more pet-friendly policies are needed to effectively engage the large unsheltered population .

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author (s).

Notes on contributors

Benjamin Henwood is an Associate Professor at the University of Southern California Suzanne Dworak-Peck School of Social Work.

Eldin Dzubur is an Assistant Professor of Research at the University of Southern California Suzanne Dworak-Peck School of Social Work.

Harmony Rhoades is an Associate Professor of Research at the University of Southern California Suzanne Dworak-Peck School of Social Work.

Patricia St. Clair is a Senior Data Advisor at the University of Southern California Schaeffer Center.

Robynn Cox is an Assistant Professor at the University of Southern California Suzanne Dworak-Peck School of Social Work.

References

Cronley, C., Strand, E. B., Patterson, D. A., & Gwaltney, S. (2009). Homeless people who are animal caretakers: A comparative study. *Psychological Reports*, 105(2), 481–499.

Irvine, L., Kahl, K. N., & Smith, J. M. (2012). Confrontations and donations: Encounters between homeless pet owners and the public. *The Sociological Quarterly*, 53(1), 25–43. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1533-8525.2011.01224.x

Kerman, N., Gran-Ruaz, S., & Lem, M. (2019). Pet ownership and homelessness: A scoping review. *J Soc Distress Homeless*, 28(2), 106–114. https://doi.org/10.1080/10530789.2019.1650325

Kidd, A. H., & Kidd, R. M. (1994). Benefits and liabilities of pets for the homeless. *Psychological Reports*, 74(3), 715–722. https://doi.org/10.2466/pr0.1994.74.3.715

Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority. (2018). Los Angeles continuum of care homeless count methodology report. https://www.lahsa.org/documents?id=2564-2018-los-angeles-continuum-of-care-homeless-count-methodology-report. 2018. Accessed January 3, 2020.

Rew, L. (2000). Friends and pets as companions: Strategies for coping with loneliness among homeless youth. *Journal of Child and Adolescent Psychiatric Nursing*, 13(3), 125–132. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1744-6171.2000.tb00089.x

Rhoades, H., Winetrobe, H., & Rice, E. (2015). Pet ownership among homeless youth: Associations with mental health, service utilization and housing status. *Child Psychiatry and Human Development*, 46(2), 237–244. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10578-014-0463-5

Rowan, A. (2018). Companion animal statistics in the USA. *Demogr Stat Companion Anim Popul Collect*. August 2018. https://animalstudiesrepository.org/demscapop/7.

Slatter, J., Lloyd, C., & King, R. (2012). Homelessness and companion animals: More than just a pet? *The British Journal of Occupational Therapy*, 75(8), 377–383. https://doi.org/10.4276/030802212X13433105374350

U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. (2018). *The 2018 annual homeless assessment report (AHAR) to Congress, part 1: Point-in-time estimates of homelessness*. U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development.

Wood, L., Martin, K., Christian, H., et al. (2017). Social capital and pet ownership – a tale of four cities. *SSM Popul Health*, 3, 442–447. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssmph.2017.05.002

Yabroff, K. R., Troiano, R. P., & Berrigan, D. (2008). Walking the dog: Is pet ownership associated with physical activity in California? *Journal of Physical Activity & Health*, 5(2), 216–228. https://doi.org/10.1123/jpah.5.2.216