

Connections and Companionship:

The Health of BC Youth with Pets



McCreary
Centre Society



YOUTH HEALTH - YOUTH RESEARCH - YOUTH ENGAGEMENT

Founded in 1977, McCreary Centre Society is a non-governmental not-for-profit organization committed to improving the health of BC youth through research, evaluation, and youth engagement projects.

Copyright: McCreary Centre Society, 2016

ISBN: 978-1-926675-50-3

McCreary Centre Society
3552 East Hastings Street
Vancouver, BC, V5K 2A7

Copies of this report are available at: www.mcs.bc.ca

For enquiries about this report, presentation requests, or information about accessing data from the BC Adolescent Health Survey or Homeless and Street-Involved Youth Survey, please email: mccreary@mcs.bc.ca.



Follow us on Twitter: [@mccrearycentre](https://twitter.com/mccrearycentre)



Facebook: McCreary Centre Society

Project Team

Annie Smith, Executive Director

Maya Peled, Director of Evaluation

Colleen Poon, Research Associate

Duncan Stewart, Research Associate/BC AHS Coordinator

Jessica Tourand, Research Assistant

Danielle Connor, Graphic design and report layout, Paws for Hope Animal Foundation

Special thanks are extended to the youth who completed a survey. Quotes from some of these youth are included throughout the report.

Funding for this report was provided by Paws for Hope Animal Foundation.

Funding for the 2013 BC Adolescent Health Survey was provided by the BC Ministry of Children and Family Development, BC Ministry of Health, and BC Office of the Representative for Children and Youth.

Funding for the 2014 Homeless and Street-Involved Youth Survey was provided by Vancouver Foundation and BC Ministry of Health.

Citation: Smith, A., Stewart, D., Poon, C., Tourand, J., Peled, M., & McCreary Centre Society (2016). Connections and companionship: The health of BC youth with pets. Vancouver, BC: McCreary Centre Society.

Table of Contents

Foreword	3
Key findings	4
Introduction	5
Youth with a pet	7
Housing and having a pet	12
Physical health	13
Engagement in physical activity	14
Mental health	15
Substance use	18
Accessing services	18
School	19
Safety	20
Pets and social connections	21
Homeless youth and access to veterinarian services	22
Final word	23
References	24

Foreword

Without a doubt, our relationship with animals has changed significantly over the past couple of decades. Thanks to scientific advancements, we have a greater understanding of the emotional intelligence of animals and their capacity to feel pain, fear, loneliness, joy and excitement. The changing demographics of families have also likely contributed to the value placed on animals as members of the family. As our understanding of animals evolves, so does our knowledge of the impact that our relationship with our pets has on our mental, physical and emotional well-being.

In response to this greater understanding, a number of social service agencies seek to address issues of how to accommodate their clients who have pets, with varying degrees of success. However, many are not, and this is often to the detriment of both their clients and their pets.

As an animal welfare organization committed to creating sustainable animal welfare in BC, we aim to advocate for policy and create programs that improve the lives of animals. While it was a focus on the health and well-being of animals that was the impetus for our programs that support vulnerable populations in helping them care for and keep their pets, we very quickly realized the positive impact our support services were having on the individual pet guardian. We have been able to witness anecdotally how the relationship a homeless/marginalized person has with their pet is often their only consistent and constant source of companionship. It was through these encounters that we first realized the value and necessity of developing partnerships with social service agencies to identify ways we can work together to serve vulnerable populations and their pets. By doing so, we can foster the human-animal bond that is key to many of those in the community.

To do this, we need more information. *Connections and Companionship: The health of BC youth with pets* provides an important first step in understanding both the impact pets have on youth, along with the barriers and challenges pet guardianship can create. Through this report, we can begin to obtain the knowledge necessary to develop informed policy and programs that provide holistic and practical solutions, and that can serve both the best interest of the individual and their pet. Only then, will we have a truly healthy community.

Kathy Powelson

Executive Director, Paws for Hope Animal Foundation

Key Findings

More than half of youth aged 12–19 who completed the 2013 BC Adolescent Health Survey (BC AHS) and 2014 Homeless and Street-Involved Youth Survey (HSIYS) had a pet.

Among youth who completed the HSIYS, the younger youth were when they first became homeless or street-involved, the more likely they were to have a pet. For example, among youth aged 16–19, 57% of those who became street-involved at 12 years old or younger had a pet, compared to 44% who became street-involved after their 15th birthday.

Among students who completed the BC AHS, youth with a debilitating health condition or disability, those living in poverty, sexual minority youth, and those who had been bullied or abused were all more likely to have a pet.

Socially isolated youth were less likely to have a pet, most notably those without close friends or a supportive adult to turn to.

Having a pet appeared to be linked to increased social connections, including homeless youth being more likely to have non-homeless friends.

The lack of affordable pet-friendly accommodations in BC may explain why homeless youth who lived alone and those who moved from house to house in the past year were less likely to have a pet. Also, homeless youth who had a dog were less likely than those without a dog to think they would have a home of their own in five years.

Having a pet appeared to reduce the chances that homeless youth would be able to access emergency housing or services. For example, those with a pet were almost half as likely to be in a safe house or shelter as those without a pet (8% vs. 15%), and youth with a pet were less likely to access safe or affordable housing services or soup kitchens than their peers without a pet.

However, pet ownership among those who were more stably housed was linked to positive future aspirations. Youth with a pet who completed the BC AHS were more likely to see themselves in a job or career in five years' time (66% vs. 62% without a pet), with a home of their

own (29% vs. 22%), and having a family (particularly females: 16% vs. 12% of females without a pet).

Taking care of pets and other animals was associated with engagement in physical activities among youth who completed the BC AHS, even those who were typically at risk of not exercising, such as those with a limiting health condition. For example, youth with a pet were more likely to engage in an hour of moderate or vigorous exercise on at least five days in the past week (45% vs. 38% without a pet).

However, in addition to the health benefits of pet ownership, having a pet may be a barrier to accessing care for those who need it. Youth who completed the BC AHS who took care of a pet were more likely to have foregone needed medical care (10% vs. 7%) as well as needed mental health services (13% vs. 10%) in the past year compared to those without this caretaking responsibility.

Having a pet was particularly valuable to homeless youth who were dealing with additional challenges in their lives. For example, among youth with a sensory disability, those who had a dog were more likely to often or always feel safe at night and were half as likely to have considered suicide in the past year (33% considered suicide vs. 71% without a dog).

Homeless youth currently staying in the most precarious housing situations, such as on the street, in a car or in a squat were more likely to feel safe where they slept if they had a pet (75% vs. 54%).

Homeless youth with a pet were more likely to be attending school and attending regularly than their homeless peers without a pet.

Having a pet was associated with positive mental health for some youth. For example, homeless youth who identified as lesbian, gay, or bisexual who had a dog were more likely to report excellent mental health than their peers without a dog.

Homeless youth with a pet who lived in the Fraser region were around twice as likely to have accessed a vet as those who lived in other parts of BC. Across the province, 15% of homeless youth with a pet felt that more veterinarian services were needed in their community.

Introduction

Although the number of Canadians who have a pet has not been determined, a 2014 survey found that seven million people across the country shared their home with a cat and 6.4 million with a dog (1).

Having a pet has been shown to have positive health and social benefits for a variety of populations, yet there is little research on the relation between pets and adolescent health (2).

This report is the first to look at the role that pets play in the lives of British Columbia's young people. It uses data from the 2013 BC Adolescent Health Survey (BC AHS) and the 2014 Homeless and Street-Involved Youth Survey (HSIYS).

Data from the HSIYS was included along with that of a representative school sample (BC AHS) because other studies have described homeless youth as having a particularly strong bond with their pet and of putting their pets' needs before their own, even if that means missing out on shelter, stable housing, or employment (3). For example, results from a recent U.S. survey found that nearly half of homeless youth who owned pets reported that pet ownership was a barrier to accessing a shelter (4).

Background

The BC AHS is a voluntary and anonymous survey administered to students in Grades 7–12 (ages 12–19) in mainstream public schools across the province. The survey captures youth's perceptions of their health, and risk and protective factors for healthy development. The HSIYS is also voluntary and anonymous and is completed by homeless and street-involved youth aged

12–19. It contains many of the same questions as the BC AHS, and has additional questions asking youth about their experiences of homelessness and services.

A total of 29,832 students completed the 2013 BC AHS and almost 700 completed the 2014 HSIYS. To learn more about both surveys and to view the overall results, visit www.mcs.bc.ca.

About the Report

When percentages are compared in the text, they are always statistically significant. However, graphs and charts show frequencies that are not necessarily statistically significant at every point. Where this is not obvious, it is indicated in the text below the graph.

Where an asterisk (*) appears beside a percentage, the percentage should be interpreted with caution as it has a high standard error but is still within a releasable range.

The wording in the BC AHS and HSIYS were different as the BC AHS asked about 'caring for a pet or animal' and the HSIYS asked youth if they 'had a pet.' It is assumed that, due to their status as homeless, youth who stated on the HSIYS that they had a pet were also caring for that pet, and that youth who completed the BC AHS who were responsible for the care of a pet, had a pet.

Terms Used in This Report

Extreme stress or **extreme despair** is used to describe when youth felt such high levels of stress or despair in the past month that they were unable to function properly.

Had a pet is used to describe youth who identified as having a pet on the HSIYS and youth who had caretaking responsibilities for a pet or animal on the BC AHS.

Homeless youth is the term used to describe youth who identified as homeless or street-involved on the HSIYS.

LGBTQ2S is used to describe youth who identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning, or Two Spirit.

Pet (also known as a companion animal) is a domestic or tamed animal or bird kept for companionship or pleasure and treated with care and affection. The most common pets identified in the survey were cats and dogs, but some youth reported having certain types of

rodents (e.g., gerbils and hamsters), birds (e.g., budgies and parrots), reptiles (e.g., snakes and lizards), and fish.

Most precarious housing describes staying in a hotel/motel/SRO/hostel, safe house/shelter, extreme weather shelter, transition house, squat/abandoned building, on the street, couch surfing, or in a tent or car.

Protective factors are experiences or other aspects in a young person's life that can reduce the chances they will have problems associated with their health.

Risk factors are experiences or other aspects in a young person's life that can increase the chances they will have problems associated with their health.

Vulnerable youth are youth who completed the BC AHS who may experience challenges in their lives due to their home or life circumstances or previous victimization history, such as those who did not have a support network or those who had been bullied or abused.

About the Analyses

Most comparisons and associations using the 2013 BC AHS data are statistically significant at $p < .01$. This means there is up to a 1% likelihood that the results presented occurred by chance. Due to the smaller sample sizes of some of the sub-populations (e.g., youth with a disability), $p < .05$ was used if the sample was less than 5,000.

Comparisons and associations using the HSIYS are statistically significant at $p < .05$, meaning there is up to a 5% likelihood that these results occurred by chance.

Reported correlations cannot be assumed to prove causation or show the direction of a relation. There may be other factors involved. For example, the report shows a link between having a pet and being physically active. However, we do not know if youth who are already more physically active are more likely to have a pet, if having a pet encourages youth to become more physically active, or if there are other variables involved.

Limitations

This report includes a review of current literature about the relation between pets and human health. However, many studies have produced inconsistent or contradictory results (e.g., 5–7), and some have been criticized for a lack of rigour or a dependence on qualitative data (8). Also, as many studies have been with specific populations, this may prevent the results from being generalizable (9).

Neither the BC AHS nor the HSIYS were designed to focus on the relationship between youth and their pets,

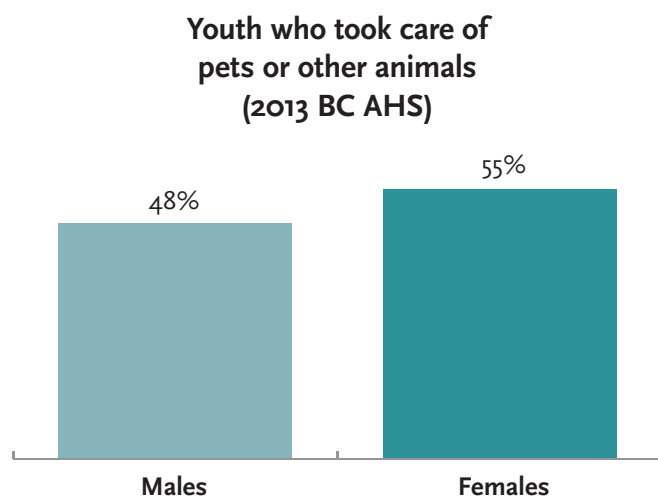
so may have missed valuable information. For example, the surveys did not ask about the importance or quality of the relationship that youth had with their pet(s). Yet we know from other studies that youth with pets reported a more positive health picture if they rated their relationship with their pet highly (10).

In the BC AHS it was not possible to determine what sort of animal youth were thinking of when they answered the question about caring for a pet, and it is unknown how this may have affected the overall results.

Youth With a Pet

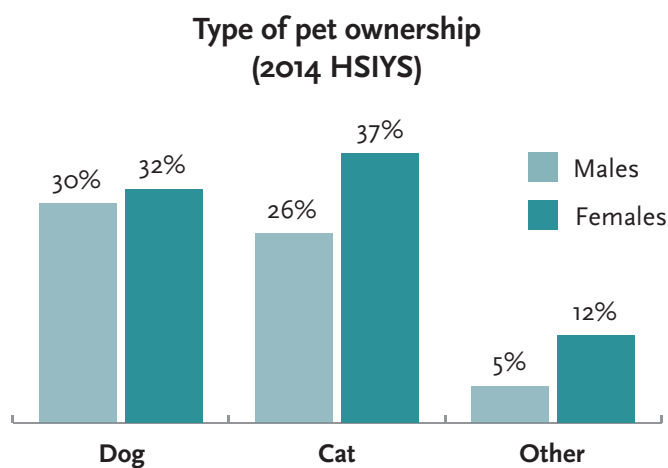
“What makes me happy is my cat.”

Results from the 2013 BC Adolescent Health Survey (BC AHS) showed that over half (52%) of the province’s students took care of a pet or other animals on an average school day, with females more likely to do so than males.



Similarly, 55% of males and females who completed the 2014 Homeless and Street-Involved Youth Survey (HSIYS) had at least one pet. Thirty percent had at least one dog; 31% had a cat; and 10% had another type of

pet, such as a bird, fish, rabbit, snake, or rodent. Also, 9% of males and 17% of females had more than one type of pet (such as a cat and a dog). These rates were all similar to results seen in 2006 when the survey was last completed.

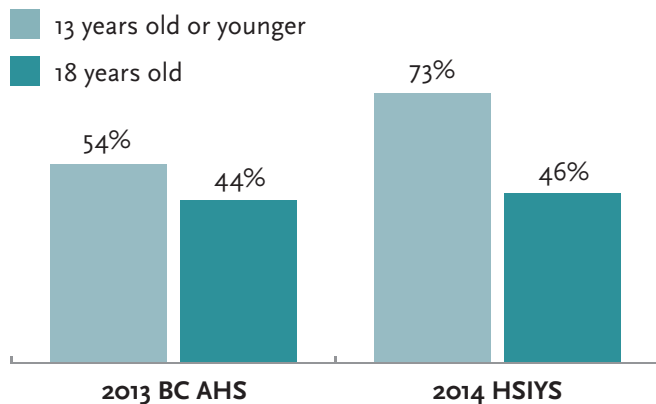


Note: The difference between males and females owning a dog was not statistically significant.

Youth aged 12–17 were more likely than older youth to have a pet. For example, 22% of homeless youth aged 18 and older had a dog and the same percentage had a cat, whereas 36% of those who were 12–17 years old had a dog and 38% had a cat.

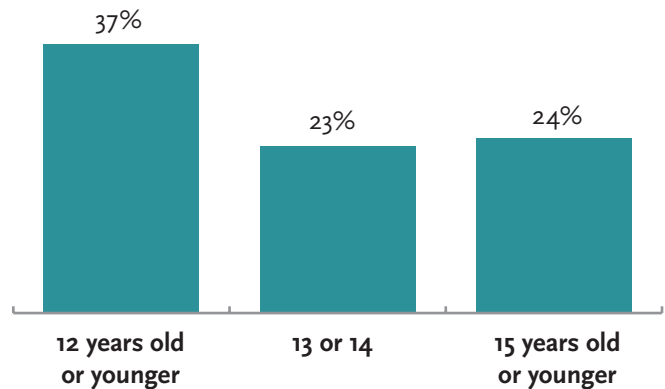
of those who became street-involved at 12 years old or younger had a pet, compared to 44% who became street-involved after their 15th birthday.

Pet ownership by age



Among youth who completed the HSIYS, the younger youth were when they first became homeless or street-involved, the more likely they were to currently have a pet. For example, among youth aged 16–19 years, 57%

Dog ownership by age youth first became street-involved or homeless (among youth aged 16-19; 2014 HSIYS)



Note: The difference between youth who were first homeless at 13 or 14 and those who were 15 years or older was not statistically significant.



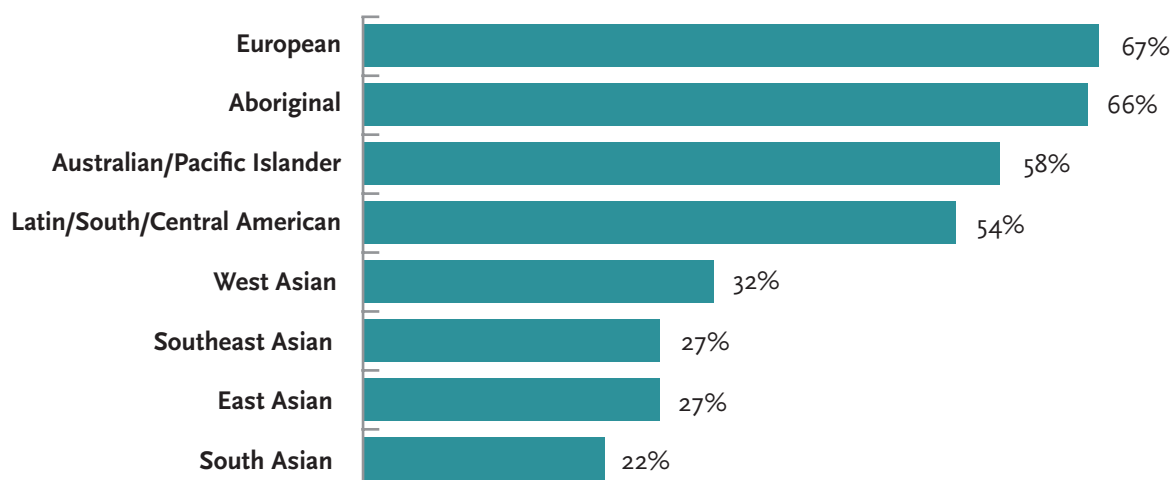


Canadian-born youth who completed the BC AHS were more than twice as likely as their peers born abroad to take care of a pet (58% vs. 26%). The longer youth had lived in Canada, the more likely they were to have a pet (32% of immigrant youth who lived in Canada six or more years had a pet vs. 19% who lived in the country less than two years). This pattern was not seen among

homeless youth, with those born abroad as likely as their Canadian-born peers to have a pet.

Among youth who completed the BC AHS, youth who identified as being of European heritage and/or Aboriginal heritage were the most likely to care for a pet, whereas Asian youth were the least likely.

**Pet ownership by family background
(2013 BC AHS)**



Note: Youth could choose more than one family background.

Similarly, homeless youth of European descent were the most likely to have a pet (61% vs. 51% of non-European youth), and specifically to own a dog (36% vs. 27%).

Geographical Profile

A U.S. study found that pet ownership had a buffering effect on loneliness among rural adolescents (11).

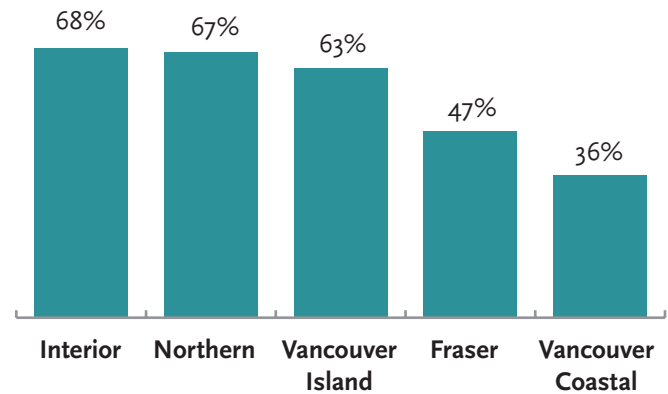
Among youth who completed the BC AHS, those who went to school in rural parts of the province were more likely to have a pet than those in urban areas (68% vs. 50%). There were also clear regional differences in pet ownership among the province's 16 Health

Service Delivery Areas, with around 30% of youth in Vancouver and Richmond having a pet, compared to over 70% in the Northern Interior and Thompson Cariboo Shuswap regions.

At the regional level, dog ownership was most common in the Interior, while youth in the Fraser had the highest rates of cat ownership, and youth in Vancouver Coastal were more likely than their peers in other regions to own a different type of pet.

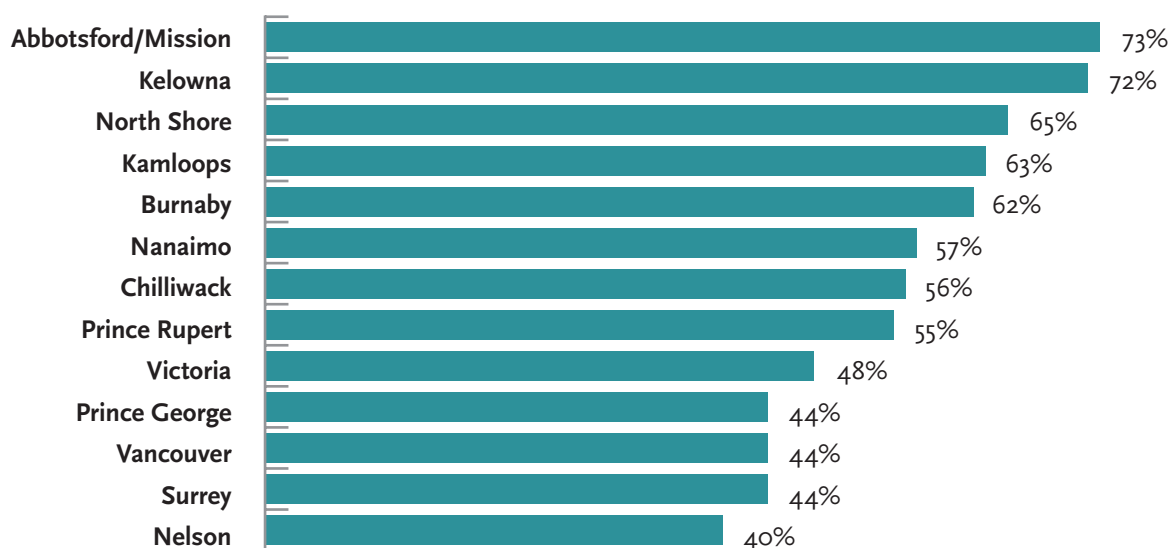
Pet ownership among homeless youth in the 13 communities surveyed ranged from 40% in Nelson to over 70% in Kelowna and Abbotsford/Mission.

Pet ownership by Health Authority (2013 BC AHS)



Note: The difference between the Northern and Interior regions was not statistically significant.

Pet ownership by community (2014 HSIYS)



Note: Not all differences between communities were statistically significant.

Youth with Additional Challenges

Some youth who have experienced particular challenges may have pets as a source of companionship or comfort. For example, among students who completed the BC AHS, those who went to bed hungry because there was not enough money for food at home, sexual minority youth, those who had been bullied or abused, and those with a limiting health condition or disability were all more likely to have a pet. Similarly, among youth who completed the HSIYS, those with a health condition were more likely to have a cat (35% vs. 24%).

Findings from the BC AHS showed that females who were struggling with body weight and body image issues were more likely to care for a pet. For example, 60% of females who were overweight or obese (based on their Body Mass Index) had a pet (vs. 54% of healthy weight females), and females who purged after eating were more likely to take care of a pet. These results were not seen for males, and in fact males who purged were less likely to have a pet.

Youth who were socially isolated were less likely to have a pet. For example, youth without any close friends or without an adult inside or outside their family they could turn to for help were less likely to have a pet than their peers who had these supports.

**Percentage of youth who took care of pets
(2013 BC AHS)**

	Had vulnerability	Did not have vulnerability
Had health condition or disability that limited their activities	63%	50%
LGBTQ2S	57%	52%
Went to bed hungry because there was not enough money for food at home	57%	51%
Ever physically and/or sexually abused	56%	51%
Experienced in-person bullying in past year	56%	48%
Had no adult to turn to for support	50%	52%
Had no close friends	45%	52%



Housing and Having a Pet

There is a shortage of pet-friendly housing in BC, and this can be particularly challenging for youth who are homeless or are living out of the family home. Also, if youth are able to find a place to live, BC tenancy laws allow landlords to take a pet deposit of up to 50% of the first month's rent regardless of the type, size or number of pets (12), and tenants with pets tend to pay around

\$100 per month more in rent than those without pets (13).

BC SPCA statistics show that around 1,500 pets per year are surrendered due to a lack of affordable pet-friendly housing (14). This is likely a significant underestimation as these figures would not include animals that were abandoned or privately re-homed.

Among youth who completed the BC AHS, those who moved in the past year were less likely to have a pet (47% had a pet vs. 53% who had not moved).

Living situation was also related to pet ownership among homeless youth.

For example, those who lived alone were less likely to have any pets (37% vs. 57% of youth who did not live alone) and were specifically less likely to be dog owners (14% vs. 33%).

Having a pet appeared to reduce the chances that homeless youth would be able to access emergency housing or services. For example, those with a pet were almost half as likely to be in a safe house or shelter as those without a pet (8% vs. 15%).

Homeless youth who were in more stable living situations were the most likely to have a pet. For example, 38% who had been living in the same place for less than a month had a pet, compared to 70% who had been staying at their current place for over a year. Overall, 41% of youth currently living in the most precarious housing (such as a squat or on the street) had a pet, compared to 60% of those who were in more stable situations.

McCreary and other research has shown that some youth who are homeless move in and out of their family home several times before finally leaving or being kicked out for good. Youth who were staying with their parents were more likely to have a pet than those who were not with their parents (70% vs. 46%).

Having a dog or multiple pets appeared to reduce the chances that homeless youth would be able to stay in a house or apartment, as 17% of those with multiple pets and 25% with a dog were staying in a house or apartment compared to at least a third without these commitments. Additionally, only 27% of dog owners currently staying in the most precarious housing situations expected to have a home within the next five years, compared to 51% without a dog.

Youth with a pet were less likely to access safe or affordable housing services or soup kitchens than their peers without a pet.

When asked an open-ended question about what they would like to change in their community to better support homeless and street-involved youth, over a third (37%) of those with pets wanted greater availability of housing and shelter options, and 1 in 4 wanted more resources to be accessible to them such as counsellors and youth centres.

Physical Health

A Swedish study found that adults with pets perceived their physical health more positively than non-pet owners (15). However, male and female youth with a pet who completed the BC AHS and HSIYS rated their overall physical health similarly to youth who did not have a pet.

Among youth with pets who completed the BC AHS, males were more likely than females to rate their overall

health as good or excellent (90% vs. 84%), which was consistent with the gender difference seen among all youth who completed the survey. However, among youth with pets who completed the HSIYS, males and females were equally likely to rate their health as good or excellent (54%).

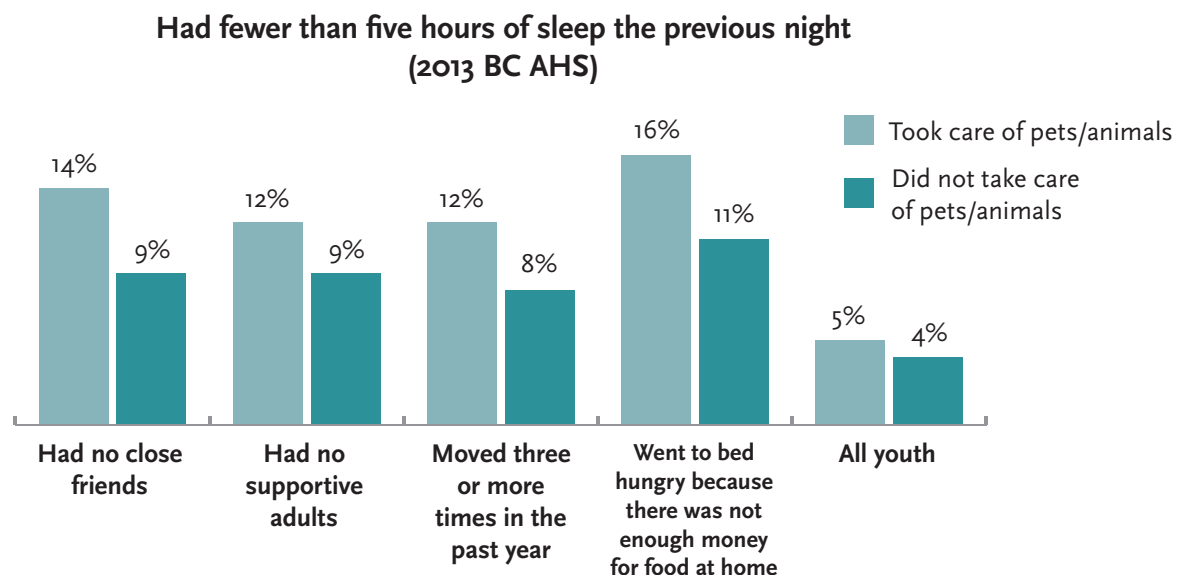
Sleep

Two recent American studies found that pet owners who shared their bedroom with their pet were vulnerable to sleep disturbance and insomnia (16, 17).

Youth who completed the BC AHS or HSIYS, especially those who were dealing with additional challenges, were less likely to get a good night's sleep if they had a pet. For example, 38% of homeless youth staying in the most precarious housing with a dog slept less than

five hours on the night before completing the survey, compared to 28% in precarious housing without a dog.

However, for homeless youth with a mental health condition, those with a cat were more likely to get at least five hours sleep (75% vs. 63% of those without a cat), and those with a pet other than a cat or dog were more likely than those without such a pet to have slept for eight or more hours.



Note: The difference for 'all youth' was not statistically significant.

Engagement in Physical Activity

“What makes me happy is my dog, running, 6am sun rising.”

Although some studies have not found a positive relation between owning a pet and exercise rates among youth (10, 18), others have found a positive link to physical activity (19–21) and specifically to physical activity among adolescents (22). For example, an Australian study of youth aged 8–16 found that those who walked a dog or played with pets in the past week were more likely to meet physical activity guidelines than those who did not engage in these activities (22).

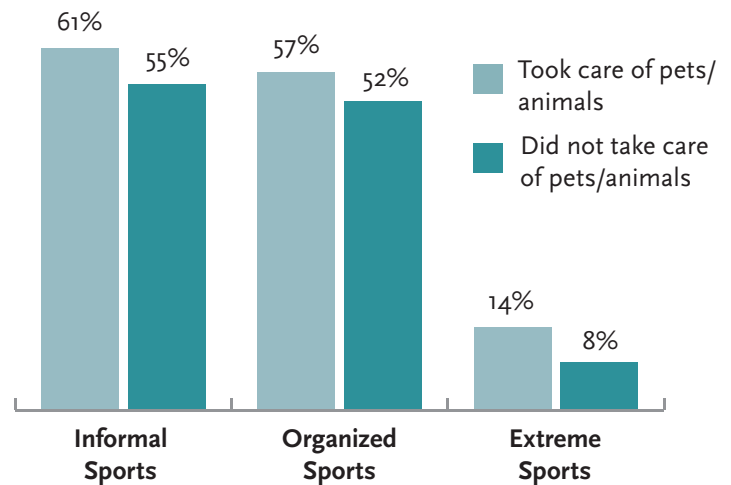
Similarly, dog ownership was associated with walking and other types of physical activity among Australian children aged 10–12 years (23). In addition, Sirard and colleagues (2) used accelerometers to measure physical activity in American adolescents and found dog ownership to be positively linked to higher total daily physical activity across age, gender, race, and socio-economic status.

Consistent with other studies, taking care of pets was associated with engagement in physical activities among youth who completed the BC AHS. For example, youth with a pet were more likely than those without one to engage in an hour of moderate or vigorous exercise on at least five days in the past week (45% vs. 38%).

Youth who took care of pets were more likely to be involved in physically active types of extracurricular activities on a weekly basis, such as informal sports (e.g., hiking, biking, or skateboarding), organized sports (i.e., sports with a coach, such as school teams or swimming lessons), and extreme sports (e.g., back country skiing, BMX). In addition, female youth with pets were more likely to take part in weekly dance, yoga, or exercise classes (30% vs. 25% of females without pets).

Having a pet increased the chances youth would be physically active even when they were typically at risk for not exercising. For example, youth who have been found to exercise less than their peers in other studies of the BC AHS, such as youth with a limiting health condition or disability and sexual minority youth, were more likely to exercise in the week prior to completing the survey if they had a pet. In addition, among youth who lived alone, those who took care of pets were more likely to

Weekly extracurricular activity participation in the past year (2013 BC AHS)



participate weekly in organized sports activities (50%* vs. 31% of those who did not take care of pets) and extreme sports (29%* vs. 14%).

Among homeless youth, 58% of all pet owners participated in informal sports and 17% played organized sports after they became homeless, which were similar to the rates among homeless youth without a pet.

While having a pet was positively linked to engaging in exercise, youth with pets may have had challenges participating in some other types of extracurricular activities. For example, among youth who completed the BC AHS, those with pets were less likely to take part in weekly clubs or groups (12% vs. 14% of those without pets).

Missing out on extracurricular activities was particularly noticeable among some groups of vulnerable youth who had a pet. For example, youth in the BC AHS who had no supportive adults in their lives were less likely to participate in clubs or groups on a weekly basis when they had pets to take care of (10% vs. 13% without a pet). Similarly, youth who had been abused or bullied who had pets were less likely to volunteer on a weekly basis.

Mental Health

“I get support from the Elder and my dog.”

Having a pet has been linked to a variety of mental health benefits (24). These include decreased stress and anxiety (25), even in children as young as four years old (26), as well as reduced symptoms of depression (27,28).

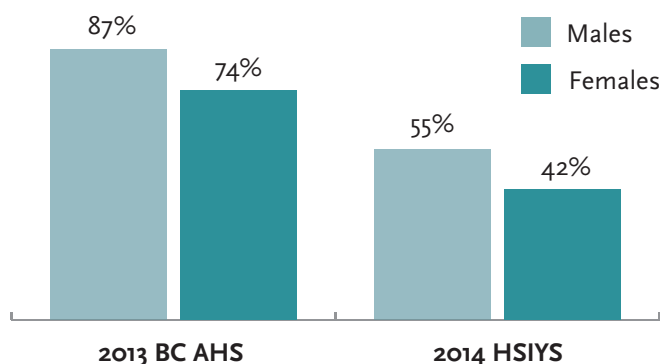
Other research has found little or no positive relation between pet ownership and mental health (29,30), although two U.S. qualitative studies with homeless youth found that caring for pets was a source of positive self-esteem, sense of wellbeing, and self-motivation to meet basic needs (31). Pets can provide youth with unconditional love and can reduce feelings of loneliness (32). Pets can also be an impetus for some individuals to make more responsible choices, such as reducing their alcohol consumption (32) or avoiding criminal involvement (33).

Studies have found that adolescents with pets are more likely to report feeling depressed than their peers without pets, and it is theorized that people with poorer mental health often acquire a pet in the hope of alleviating symptoms (10).

Most youth with a pet who completed the BC AHS reported positive mental health. However, females with a pet were less likely than females without a pet to rate their mental health as good or excellent (74% vs. 78%) and more likely to report extreme despair in the past month (11% vs. 9%). In addition, both male and female youth with a pet were more likely to report extreme stress.

These higher rates of extreme stress among youth who took care of pets were seen particularly among vulnerable groups who completed the BC AHS. For example, among youth who went to bed hungry because there was not enough money for food, those who took care of a pet were more likely to experience extreme stress than their peers without this caretaking responsibility.

Good/excellent mental health among pet owners



Extreme stress in the past month (2013 BC AHS)

Youth who...	Took care of pets/ animals	Did not take care of pets/ animals
Went to bed hungry because there was not enough money for food at home	29%	22%
Had been physically and/or sexually abused	28%	21%
Identified as LGBTQ2S	28%	21%
Had no close friends	24%	16%
Had no supportive adults	24%	16%
Moved three or more times in the past year	21%	13%
Had been bullied in person in the past year	17%	12%
All youth	11%	8%

As noted earlier in this report, having a pet can be a barrier to finding affordable housing, and as such can add to the stress that homeless young people face. Among homeless youth with a history of living in the most precarious housing, those with a pet were less likely to rate their mental health as good or excellent (39% vs. 50% of those without a pet).

However, for homeless youth dealing with other challenges such as discrimination, having a pet was associated with more positive mental health. For example, homeless LGBTQ2S youth with a dog were more likely to report excellent mental health than their peers without a dog, and homeless youth who had a sensory disability were half as likely to have considered suicide in the past year if they owned a dog (33% vs. 71%).

Youth were asked an open-ended question about what makes them happy. Seven percent of all homeless youth wrote that animals made them happy. This rose to 12% among youth with a pet.

What makes me happy:

“Animals, food, money, shopping, friends, relaxing.”

“Dogs, original characters, Lord of the Rings, my partner, feeling in control.”

“Food, wifi, puppies, music, cats, shopping, and dancing.”

“Friends, pets (dogs), when people show physical affection towards me.”

“Friends, working, hobbies, my animals.”

“Horseback riding, quading, dirt biking, etc.”

“My dog, my friends, my dad, my kitties.”

“My daughter, my boyfriend, my dog, family.”

“My friends, animals, school, Summer, outdoors.”

“Spending time with loved ones (family, friends, pets), shopping, cleaning.”

Source: 2014 HSIYS



Feeling Skilled

Youth who completed the BC AHS were asked if they could identify something they were good at. Youth with pets were more likely than their peers without pets to feel they were good at something (78% vs. 74%).

Among youth who identified something they were good at, females were more likely than males to write about having skills with animals (3% vs. <1%), as were youth with a mental health condition (such as depression or anxiety) compared to those without such a condition. Youth with a mental health condition who felt they were good with pets were less likely to report extreme despair than those who indicated they were good at something else.

I am good at:

“Training dogs, and training horses.”
“Taking care of my pet.”
“Photography, soccer, playing with my dog.”
“Riding horses, dancing, singing.”
“Caring for my animals, friends, family, and playing soccer.”
“I’m really good with animals. I volunteer at the SPCA.”
“Playing with my cat.”
“Remembering song lyrics, identifying birds.”
“Running and I’m good with animals.”
“Music, cat care.”
“Saxophone and dog training.”

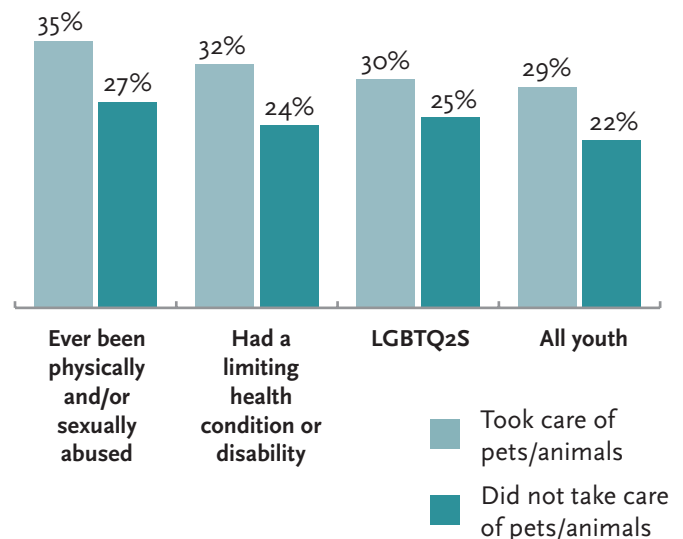
Source: 2013 BC AHS

Hope for the Future

“The thing I like best about my life is my dog.”

Among youth who completed the BC AHS, those who had a pet were more likely than those without a pet to see themselves in a job or career in five years (66% vs. 62%), having a home of their own, and having a family (particularly females: 16% vs. 12%). However, youth with a pet were less likely to see themselves in school in five years’ time (51% vs. 53%) or to expect to continue their education beyond high school (85% vs. 88%).

See themselves as having a home of their own in five years’ time (2013 BC AHS)



Substance Use

Studies in the U.S. and Canada have shown a link between pet ownership and reduced substance use among people who were homeless (e.g., 34). A qualitative study of homeless Canadian youth found that owning a dog reduced youth's level of substance use and the type of drugs they used (3). Youth in the study explained that a motivation for them to avoid substance use was the risk that if they became involved with the criminal justice system their pet would be removed or euthanized (3).

Results from the HSIYS provided some support for these findings. For example, youth with a cat were less likely to have used marijuana every day in the past month (26% vs. 37%; among those who had tried marijuana) and those who owned any pet were less likely to have tried amphetamines (27% vs. 39%). Also,

homeless youth living in the most precarious housing were less likely to have used substances as a way to manage their stress if they had a pet (33% vs. 51% of those without a pet).

However, there was a different picture among youth who completed the BC AHS. Students who had a pet were more likely to have tried marijuana (30% vs. 21% without a pet), alcohol (50% vs. 39%), and other drugs (18% vs. 16%), and females were more likely to have engaged in heavy sessional drinking in the past month (40% vs. 35% of females without a pet; among those who had tried alcohol). However, this pattern was only seen among urban based youth, as those in rural communities with and without pets were equally likely to have tried alcohol or marijuana and to have engaged in heavy sessional drinking in the past month.

Accessing Services

Health Care

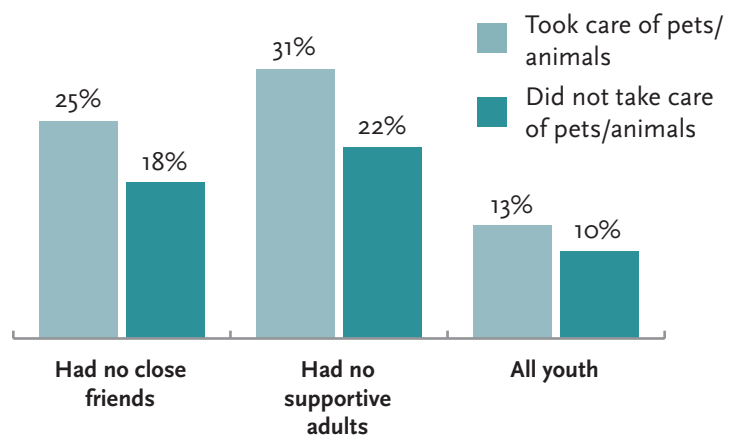
Several studies have found that caring for a pet is associated with better health and thus lower rates of accessing needed health care (33,35,36).

Pet ownership has been estimated to lead to savings on national health expenditures (37), and specifically dog ownership could save the U.S. \$419 million per year in obesity treatment (38).

However, having a pet may be a barrier to accessing care for those who need it. Lem and colleagues (39) found that pet ownership among street-involved youth impaired youths' ability to access shelter, services, and housing and employment opportunities.

Youth who completed the BC AHS who took care of a pet were more likely than those without pets to have foregone needed medical care (10% vs. 7%) as well as needed mental health services in the past year. This pattern was also seen among vulnerable groups of youth. For example, among youth who had no supportive adults or close friends, those who took care of pets were more likely to miss out on needed mental health services than those who did not have this caretaking responsibility.

Did not access needed mental health services in the past year (2013 BC AHS)



This pattern was not seen among homeless youth, as those with a pet were no more likely to miss out on needed medical, dental, or mental health care than those without a pet.

School

“I depend on my teacher, my counsellor, myself and my dog.”

Small scale studies have suggested that the presence of animals, and specifically dogs, in classroom settings may decrease problem behaviour and increase engagement in children with disabilities, including improving behaviour, sense of responsibility, empathy, and respect (40), and increasing students’ verbal and non-verbal interactions with their teachers (41). Additional studies have linked reading aloud to dogs with improved academic engagement (42), increased reading skills (43), and lower blood pressure in children, suggesting that an animal’s presence makes the environment friendlier and reduces anxiety which can facilitate learning (44).

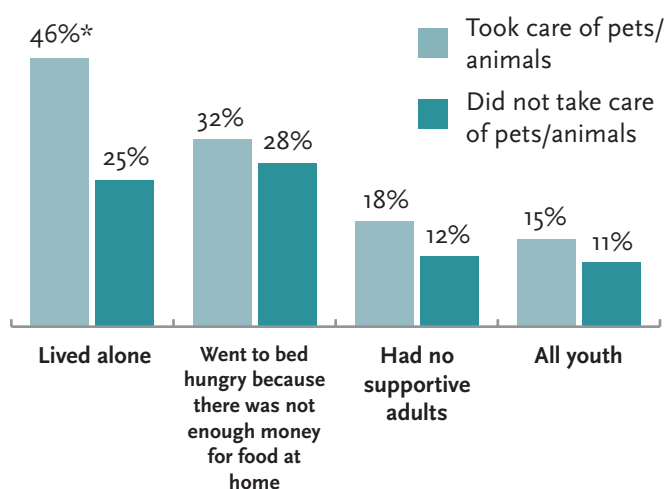
Although neither the BC AHS nor the HSIYS asked about the presence of animals in the classroom, HSIYS results did show positive associations between pet ownership and school. For example, as was seen when the HSIYS was conducted in 2006, homeless youth with a pet were more likely to be attending school and attending regularly, particularly alternative education. This pattern was also found among homeless youth who identified as LGBTQ2S, those who had moved recently, and those with no adult support. Similarly, among homeless youth who had moved in the past six months, those with a pet were more likely to be attending school than those without a pet (68% vs. 48%).

Although homeless youth with a pet were more likely to be attending school, having a pet was associated with poorer school connectedness (e.g., feeling safe and happy at school, and experiencing positive relationships

with teachers and other school staff), particularly for youth with additional challenges. For example, youth with a history of the most precarious housing who had a dog were less likely to feel happy at school and to feel school staff treated them fairly.

Results from the BC AHS showed a different pattern in that youth who took care of pets were more likely to have skipped school in the past month (especially females: 26% vs. 23% of females without a pet) and to specifically miss class due to family responsibilities (15% vs. 11%). Missing school due to family responsibilities may suggest that youth need help caring for their pets, as for example nearly half of youth who lived alone and took care of pets had missed school due to family responsibilities.

Missed school in the past month because of family responsibilities (2013 BC AHS)



**The percentage should be interpreted with caution as the standard error was relatively high but still within a releasable range.*

Safety

“I trust my big brother and my dog.”

Australian research has shown that dog owners feel safer at home and in the community than those without a pet, and a community is perceived to be safer when people are seen in public spaces walking a dog (45). Pet ownership has also been shown to facilitate social interactions and may contribute to a sense of community and perceptions of safety (7). In Canada, homeless women described their companion animals as providing a sense of safety (46), which was consistent with findings among homeless youth (4,32,47).

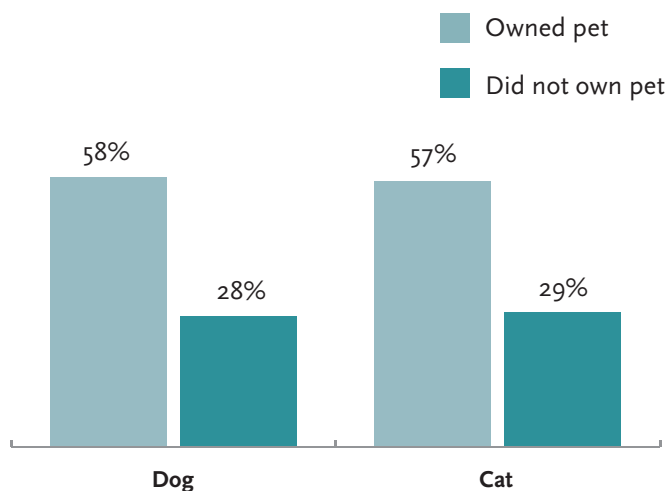
Among youth who completed the BC AHS, those who took care of pets were more likely to report often or always feeling safe in their neighbourhood in the daytime (92% vs. 90% who did not take care of pets) and in their neighbourhood at night (66% vs. 63%). This was found for even the most vulnerable youth. For example, 59% of bullied youth who had a pet often or always felt safe in their neighbourhood at night (vs. 55% who did not take care of pets). However, having a pet did not improve feelings of safety for youth inside their home.

Homeless youth did not generally feel safer in their neighbourhood if they had a pet. However, homeless youth with a sensory condition who had a dog were more likely to often or always feel safe at night. Fifty-seven percent of those with a dog felt safe at night in the neighbourhood, compared to 19% of those with a

sensory disability without a dog. Also, among youth with any health condition, those who had a cat were more likely to feel safe where they were sleeping at night (76% vs. 65%).

Among those currently staying in the most precarious housing situations, homeless youth who had a pet were more likely to feel safe where they slept (75% vs. 54% without a pet), even if they had no supportive adults to turn to.

Always or often felt safe at night by pet ownership (among youth who had a history of precarious housing and who did not have a supportive adult in their lives; 2014 HSIYS)



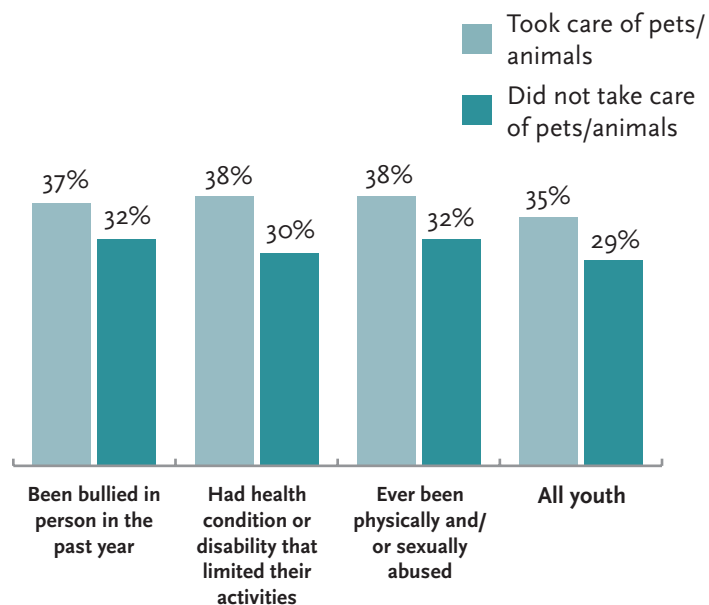
Pets and Social Connections

Studies have suggested that pets can facilitate social interaction and build social connections within communities (7, 45, 48, 49). For example, people walking with dogs were found to have more social contact and conversations than those walking alone (48). The presence in the community of other types of pets, including rabbits and turtles, have also been shown to have the potential to facilitate the development of social connections (50).

Findings from the HSIYS appear to support the connection between pet ownership and community engagement. For example, youth with a health condition who had a pet other than a cat or a dog were more likely to feel connected to their community (41% vs. 24%).

Among youth who completed the BC AHS, having a pet was linked to having a supportive adult outside the family. Thirty-five percent of youth with a pet reported having an adult outside their family they could turn to for support, compared to 29% of those who did not have a pet. This was also the case among youth with additional challenges, such as those who had been victimized or who had a limiting health condition.

**Had supportive adult outside the family
(2013 BC AHS)**



Relationships With Peers

"I can depend on my dog"

Companion animals have been linked to reduced loneliness (37,51), although some research suggests that those who already have healthy social support systems may reap the most benefits from owning a pet (30,52).

Pets were generally associated with having more friends. For example, results from the BC AHS showed that 52%

of male youth who took care of pets had six or more close friends compared to 49% of their peers who did not take care of pets, and homeless youth with a pet were more likely to report that they had three or more non-homeless friends in their school or neighbourhood (84% vs. 76%).

Homeless Youth and Access to Veterinarian Services

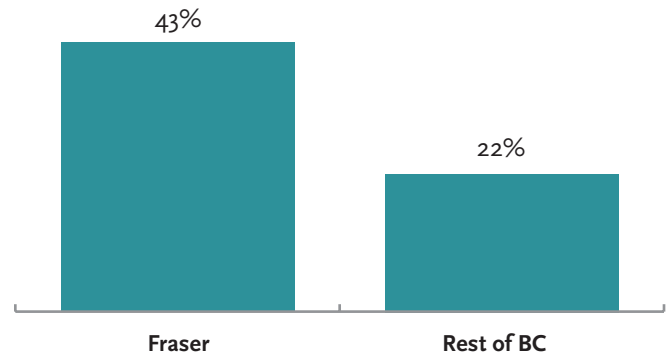
A 2013 Canadian study (53) found that homeless youth worrying about their pet becoming ill or getting injured, and being unable to afford the associated veterinary bills, was a major source of stress for them and was associated with a fear of having their animal removed from their care. The study concluded that homeless youth should be provided with accessible veterinary care.

Youth who completed the BC AHS were not asked about their interactions with vets. However, 29% of homeless pet owners had accessed a vet, and 55% of those who did so found them to be helpful.

Homeless pet owners who lived in the Fraser region were almost twice as likely to have accessed a vet as those who lived in other parts of the province.

Four percent of homeless pet owners said that vet services were not available in their community, with over half of these youth living in the Fraser region. Also, 15% felt that more vet services were needed in their community. This rate was consistent across the different regions of the province.

Pet owners who accessed a veterinarian (2014 HSIYS)



Youth with a pet who had lived in their current place for less than a year were less likely to have accessed a vet (23% vs. 38% of those who had lived in their current home for a year or more).



Final Word

Previous research has shown benefits associated with pet ownership. This was supported by findings from both the BC AHS and the HSIYS where caring for a pet was linked to positive health, such as greater involvement in physical activity (BC AHS), greater connection to community (HSIYS), increased feelings

of safety (BC AHS and HSIYS), and lower rates of substance use (HSIYS).

However, it also appears that the benefits associated with having a pet can be negated by the barriers that come with pet ownership, as youth were more likely to miss school (BC AHS), forego needed health care (BC AHS), and miss out on affordable housing and access to services such as food kitchens and shelters (HSIYS).

Despite the changing housing market and other challenges youth with a pet may face, the rate of pet ownership among homeless youth remained stable, with over half of these youth having a companion animal.

Data from both the BC AHS and HSIYS appear to show that some of the province's most vulnerable young people are turning to animals for companionship and comfort, yet in reality having a pet may create additional barriers and exacerbate some of the challenges those young people are facing.

Many have argued that services should be more pet-friendly and better serve pet-owning homeless populations (e.g., 47,54), which appears to be strongly supported by the evidence presented in this report for homeless youth and other youth with pets. This study also found that despite the changing housing market and other challenges youth with a pet may face, the rate of pet ownership among homeless youth remained stable, with over half of these youth having a companion animal. This offers further support for the need for more pet-friendly spaces.

Many of the health benefits of pet ownership documented in other studies, such as faster recovery from psychological and physical stress (39), could not be considered here. However by offering the first profile of BC youth with pets we hope this report will contribute to a greater awareness of the needs of young people and their pets.



References

- (1) Canadian Animal Health Institute. (2015). Latest Canadian pet population figures released. www.canadianveterinarians.net/documents/canadian-pet-population-figures-cahi-2014
- (2) Sirard J., Patnode C., Hearst M., & Laska M. Dog ownership and adolescent physical activity. *Am J Prev Med.* 2011 Mar;40(3), 334–7.
- (3) Stone E., Lem M., Coe J., Haley D., O'Grady W. Effects of companion animal ownership among Canadian street-involved youth: a qualitative analysis. *J Sociol Soc Welfare.* 2013 Dec;40(4), 285–304.
- (4) Rhoades H., Winetrobe H., & Rice E. Pet ownership among homeless youth: associations with mental health, service utilization and housing status. *Child Psychiatry Hum Dev.* 2015 Apr;46(2), 237–44.
- (5) Herzog H. The impact of pets on human health and psychological well-being: fact, fiction, or hypothesis? *Curr Dir Psychol Sci.* 2011 Aug;20(4), 236–9.
- (6) McNicholas J., Gilbey A., Rennie A., Ahmedzai S., Dono J., & Ormerod E. Pet ownership and human health: a brief review of evidence and issues. *BMJ.* 2005 Nov;331(7527), 1252–4.
- (7) Wood L., Giles-Corti B., & Bulsara M. The pet connection: pets as a conduit for social capital? *So Sci Med.* 2005 Sep;61(6), 1159–73.
- (8) Chur-Hansen A., Stern C., & Winefield H. Gaps in the evidence about companion animals and human health: some suggestions for progress. *Int J Evid Based Healthc.* 2010 Sep;8, 140–6.
- (9) Peacock J., Chur-Hansen A., & Winefield H. Mental health implications of human attachment to companion animals. *J Clin Psychol.* 2012 Mar;68(3), 292–303.
- (10) Müllersdorf M., Granström F., & Tillgren P. A survey of pet-and non-pet-owning Swedish adolescents: demographic differences and health issues. *Anthrozoos.* 2012 Mar;25(1), 49–60.
- (11) Black K. The relationship between companion animals and loneliness among rural adolescents. *J Pediatr Nurs.* 2012 Apr;27(2), 103–12.
- (12) Province of British Columbia. Residential Tenancies [Internet]. Victoria: The Province [date unknown] [cited 2016 Aug 31]. Available from: <http://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/housing-tenancy/residential-tenancies>.
- (13) Carlisle-Frank P., Frank J., & Nielsen L. Companion animal renters and pet-friendly housing in the US. *Anthrozoos.* 2005;18(1)59–77.
- (14) British Columbia Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. Property owner and manager guide [Internet]. Vancouver: The Society [cited 2016 Aug 31]. 12 p. Available from: <http://www.sPCA.bc.ca/assets/documents/welfare/pet-friendly-housing/property-owner-and-manager.pdf>
- (15) Müllersdorf M., Granström R., Sahlqvist L., & Tillgren P. Aspects of health, physical/leisure activities, work and socio-demographics associated with pet ownership in Sweden. *Scand J Public Health.* 2010 Feb;38, 53–63.
- (16) Duthuluru S., Stevens D., & Stevens S. Sleep quality due to sleeping with pets. (Poster presentation 0540). *Journal of Sleep and Sleep Disorders Research.* 2014;37, A189.
- (17) Krahn L, Tovar M., & Miller B. Where do companion animals sleep? (Poster presentation 0844). *Journal of Sleep and Sleep Disorders Research.* 2014;37, A295.
- (18) Mathers M., Canterford L, Olds T., Waters E., & Wake M. Pet ownership and adolescent health: cross-sectional population study. *J Paediatr and Child Health.* 2010 Dec;46(12), 729–35.
- (19) Brown S., & Rhodes R. Relationships among dog owners and leisure time walking in Western Canadian adults. *Am J Prev Med.* 2006 Feb;30(2), 131–6.
- (20) Owen CG, Nightingale C., Rudnicka A., Ekelund U., McMinn A., van Sluijs E., et al. Family dog ownership and levels of physical activity in childhood: findings from the Child Heart and Health Study in England. *Am J Public Health.* 2010 Sep;100(9), 1669–71.
- (21) Salmon J., Timperio A., Chu B., & Veitch J. Dog ownership, dog walking, and children's and parent's physical activity. *Res Q Exerc Sport.* 2010 Sep; 81(3), 264–71.
- (22) Martin, K., Wood L., Christian H., & Trapp G. Not just “a walking the dog”: dog walking and pet play and their association with recommended physical activity among adolescents. *Am J Health Promo.* 2015 Jul-Aug;29(6), 353–6.
- (23) Christian H., Trapp G., Lauritsen C., Wright K., & Giles-Corti B. Understanding the relationship between dog ownership and children's physical activity and sedentary behaviour. *Pediatr Obes.* 2013;8(5), 392–403.
- (24) McConnell A., Brown C., Shoda T., Stayton L., & Martin C. Friends with benefits: On the positive consequences of pet ownership. *Pers Soc Psychol.* 2011 Dec;101(6), 1239–52.
- (25) Kidd AH, & Kidd R. Benefits, problems, and characteristics of home aquarium owners. *Psychol Rep.* 1999 Jun;84, 998–1004.
- (26) Gadomski A., Scribani M., Krupa N., Jenkins P., Nagykalai Z., & Olson AL. Pet dogs and children's health: opportunities for chronic disease prevention? *Prev Chronic Dis.* 2015 Nov;12, 1–10.
- (27) Garrity T., Stallones L., Marx M., & Johnson T. Pet ownership and attachment as supportive factors in the health of the elderly. *Anthrozoos.* 1988;3(1), 35–43.
- (28) Siegel J., Angulo F., Detels R., Wesch J., & Mullen A. AIDS diagnosis and depression in the multicenter AIDS cohort study: the ameliorating impact of pet ownership. *AIDS Care.* 1999 Apr;11, 157–70.

- (29) Parslow R., Jorm A., Christensen H., Rodgers B., & Jacomb P. Pet ownership and health in older adults: findings from a survey of 2,551 community-based Australians aged 60-64. *Gerontology*. 2005 Jan-Feb;51, 40-7.
- (30) Wells Y., & Rodi H. Effects of pet ownership on the health and wellbeing of older people. *Australas J Ageing*. 2000 Aug;19(3), 143-8.
- (31) Bender K., Thompson S., McManus H., & Lantry J. Capacity for survival: exploring strengths of homeless street youth. *Child Youth Care Forum*. 2007 Feb;36(1), 25-42.
- (32) Rew L. Friends and pets as companions: strategies for coping with loneliness among homeless youth. *J Child Adolesc Psychiatr Nurs*. 2000 Jul-Sep;13(3), 125-40.
- (33) Taylor H., Williams P., & Gray D. Homelessness and dog ownership: an investigation into animal empathy, attachment, crime, drug use, health and public opinion. *Anthrozoos*. 2004 Jan;17(4), 353-68.
- (34) Irvine L. Animals as lifechangers and lifesavers: pets in the redemption narratives of homeless people. *J Contemp Ethnogr*. 2013 Feb;42(1), 3-30.
- (35) Headey B, Grabka MM. Pets and human health in Germany and Australia: national longitudinal results. *Soc Indic Res*. 2007 Jan;80(2), 297-311.
- (36) Parslow R., & Jorm A. The impact of pet ownership on health and health service use: results from a community sample of Australians aged 40 to 44 years. *Anthrozoos*. 2003 Jan;16(1), 43-56.
- (37) Headey B. Health benefits and health cost savings due to pets: preliminary estimates from an Australian national survey. *Soc Indic Res*. 1999 Jun;47(2), 233-43.
- (38) Clower T., & Neaves T. The health care cost savings of pet ownership [Internet]. Human Animal Bond Research Initiative [cited 2016 Aug 31]. Available from: http://habri.org/docs/HABRI_Report_-_Healthcare_Cost_Savings_from_Pet_Ownership_.pdf.
- (39) Lem M., Coe J, Haley D., Stone E., & O'Grady W. The protective association between pet ownership and depression among street-involved youth: a cross-sectional study. *Anthrozoos*. 2016;29(1), 123-36.
- (40) Anderson K., & Olson M. The value of a dog in a classroom of children with severe emotional disorders. *Anthrozoos*. 2006 Jan;19(1), 35-49.
- (41) Walters Esteves S., & Stokes T. Social effects of a dog's presence on children with disabilities. *Anthrozoos*. 2008 Mar;21(1), 5-15.
- (42) Bassette L., & Taber-Doughty T. The effects of a dog reading visitation program on academic engagement behaviour in three elementary students with emotional and behavioural disabilities: a single case design. *Child Youth Care Forum*. 2013 Jun;42, 239-56.
- (43) Le Roux, M., Swartz L., & Swart E. The effect of an animal-assisted reading program on the reading rate, accuracy and comprehension of grade 3 students: a randomized control study. *Child and Youth Care Forum*. 2014 Dec;43, 655-73.
- (44) Friedmann E., Katcher A., Thomas S., Lynch J., & Messent P. Social interaction and blood pressure: influence of animal companions. *J Ner Men Dis*. 1983 Aug;171(8), 461-5.
- (45) Wood L., Giles-Corti B., Bulsara M., & Bosch D. More than a furry companion: the ripple effect of companion animals on neighbourhood interactions and sense of community. *Society and Animals*. 2007 Jan;15(1), 43-56.
- (46) Labrecque J., Walsh C.. Homeless women's voices on incorporating companion animals into shelter services. *Anthrozoos*. 2011 Mar;24(1), 79-95.
- (47) Thompson S., McManus H., Lantry J., Windsor L., & Flynn P. Insights from the street: perceptions of services and providers by homeless young adults. *Eval Program Plann*. 2006 Feb;29, 34-43.
- (48) McNicholas J., & Collis G. Dogs as catalysts for social interactions: robustness of the effect. *Br J Psychol*. 2000 Feb;91(1), 61-70.
- (49) Wells D. The facilitation of social interactions by domestic dogs. *Anthrozoos*. 2004 Jan;17(4), 340-52.
- (50) Hunt S., Hart L., & Gomulkewicz R. Role of small animals in social interactions between strangers. *J Soc Psychol*. 1992 Apr;132, 245-56.
- (51) Stanley I., Conwell Y., Bowen C., & Van Orden K. Pet ownership may attenuate loneliness among older adult primary care patients who live alone. *Aging Ment Health*. 2014;18(3), 394-9.
- (52) Duvall Antonacopoulos N., & Pychyl T. An examination of the potential role of pet ownership, human social support and pet attachment in the psychological health of individuals living alone. *Anthrozoos*. 2010 Mar;23(1), 37-54.
- (53) Lem M., Coe J., Haley D., Stone E., & O'Grady W. Effects of companion animal ownership among Canadian street-involved youth: a qualitative analysis. *J Sociol Soc Welfare*. 2013;40(4): 285-304.
- (54) Williams D., & Hogg S. The health and welfare of dogs belonging to homeless people. *Pet Behaviour Science*. 2016;1, 23-30.

CONNECTIONS AND COMPANIONSHIP: THE HEALTH OF BC YOUTH WITH PETS

Founded in 1977, McCreary Centre Society is a non-governmental not-for-profit organization committed to improving the health of BC youth through research, evaluation, and youth engagement projects.

Copies of this report are available at: www.mcs.bc.ca

For enquiries about this report, presentation requests, or information about accessing data from the BC Adolescent Health Survey or Homeless and Street-Involved Youth Survey, please email: mccreary@mcs.bc.ca



Follow us on Twitter: @mccrearycentre



Facebook: McCreary Centre Society

Paws for Hope Animal Foundation is committed to creating more sustainable animal welfare and purposeful companion animal protection in British Columbia. We are the only BC charity to directly help animals and to also assist animal rescue charities with their different areas of need. This includes grant funding, advocacy and professional development workshops. By filling the gaps with our own direct animal assistance and educational programs while simultaneously strengthening and empowering the existing animal support network, we're one step closer to realizing our vision of a Province providing the utmost care and protection for its companion animals today and over the long term.

For more information, please email info@pawsforhope.org, or visit Paws for Hope's website at: www.pawsforhope.org



McCreary
Centre Society