

CONNECTIONS & COMPANIONSHIP II



McCreary
Centre Society



CONNECTIONS AND COMPANIONSHIP II

**MCCREARY CENTRE SOCIETY
IN PARTNERSHIP WITH PAWS FOR HOPE ANIMAL FOUNDATION**

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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, please email: mccreary@mcs.bc.ca
For enquires about Paws for Hope Animal Foundation, please email: info@pawsforhope.org

PROJECT TEAM

Annie Smith, Executive Director
Maya Peled, Director of Evaluation
Colleen Poon, Senior Research Associate
Danielle Mahdal, Research Assistant
Stephanie Martin, Community Development Manager
Maren Tergesen, Research Assistant
Garrett Jones, Research and Evaluation Analyst
Katie Meredith, Research Assistant
Samantha Martin-Ferris, Indigenous Researcher
Katie Horton, Community Research Coordinator
Karen Forsyth, BC Adolescent Health Survey Coordinator/Research Associate

YOUTH RESEARCH ACADEMY

Cheylene Moon
Merlin Wiens
Raylee Lane
Breeya Troy
Karina Lewis

CITATION

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THANK YOU

Thank you to all the youth who took the time to complete a survey and tell us about their relationships with their pets.

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FOREWORD

We are very pleased to be working with McCreary Centre Society again in order to advance our understanding of the impact pet guardianship has on young people. This report provides greater insight into the inextricable link between people and their pets. It highlights areas on which pets have a positive impact on young people's mental and physical health. Alternatively, it demonstrates how barriers, such as access to veterinary care, cause distress to both pets and their people.

It is our hope that this report will encourage social service agencies supporting young people to include pets as part of the social safety net, and work to create policies that reduce barriers to service. In addition, we hope that the findings will encourage animal welfare and rescue organizations to recognize the importance of supporting pets in the community, and when at all possible to ensure that pets can remain with their people.

Thank you to all the youth who took the time to complete the surveys and for all those with pets, thank you for including them as part of your family.

Kathy Powelson, Executive Director

Paws for Hope Animal Foundation.

KEY FINDINGS

This report contains information provided by over 60,000 BC youth aged 12-19 who completed the 2013 and 2018 BC Adolescent Health Survey (BC AHS), and 515 youth aged 12-24 who completed a survey specific to their experience with pets (Youth Survey About Pets, 2020).

Reflecting the picture five years earlier, around half of BC youth who completed the 2018 BC AHS had a pet or other animal they took care of on an average school day. Males were the least likely to be caring for a pet, and older youth were less likely than younger ones to be caring for a pet.

Youth who lived in the Northern or Interior regions of the province were the most likely to have a pet, as were youth who identified as Indigenous or European.

Youth experiencing various challenges in their life were more likely to have a pet. For example, they were more likely to have a pet if they experienced poverty; had been kicked out or run away from home in the past year; did not feel connected to their family and school; experienced violence and discrimination; had a physical health condition or disability; or had mental health or substance use challenges.

Among youth who completed the survey specifically about pets, youth who currently had a cat were more likely than those with a dog or another type of pet to indicate that their pet had been spayed or neutered (e.g., 86% with a cat vs. 71% with a dog), while youth with a dog were more likely than those with other types of pets to report their pet was up-to-date on vaccinations (e.g., 84% with a dog vs. 66% with a cat).

Seven percent of youth who completed the pet survey indicated that their pet needed veterinary care but did not get it in the past year. Their most commonly reported reason for not accessing needed veterinary care was that they could not afford it (78%).

Youth who reported they were not well-off financially were more likely to have missed out on accessing needed veterinary care than youth with more money (38% vs. 5%). Feeling worried about the financial cost of caring for their pet was associated with extreme stress, poorer mental health, and lower life satisfaction.

Among youth who completed the pet survey, challenges associated with having their current pet included finding and maintaining housing, missing out on leisure activities, and not accessing needed services for themselves. Among students who completed the 2018 BC AHS, those with a pet were more likely than those without a pet to have missed out on accessing needed medical care (9% vs. 7%) and mental health services (21% vs. 15%) in the past year.

Most youth with a pet who completed the pet survey identified benefits to having their pet, including improvements to their overall well-being (84%), mental health (78%), sense of responsibility (77%), and sense of purpose (71%). Also, if youth were the ones who usually or always took care of their pet, they were more likely to experience benefits than if they took care of their pet less often.

Among youth who completed the 2018 BC AHS, having a pet was associated with being more physically active, including being more likely to engage in 60 minutes of moderate to vigorous exercise on at least

three days in the past week (75% vs. 68% without a pet), and feeling connected to nature (48% with a pet felt connected to nature vs. 40% who did not have a pet).

Over half of youth who completed the pet survey (57%) reported that having their pet reduced the amount of time they spent on their phone or other electronic devices. These youth were more likely than those who reported no such change to exercise on three or more days in the past week (55% vs. 42%) and to feel connected to nature (65% vs. 44%).

Having a pet was associated with feeling skilled. Among youth who completed the 2018 BC AHS, those with a pet were more likely than those without a pet to feel there was something they were really good at (80% vs. 77%).

Youth who completed the pet survey offered suggestions for how young people with pets can be better supported. Their suggestions primarily focused on financial support (reduced costs of vet care, etc.) and housing, but also spoke of the need to educate young people on how to care for their pet.

INTRODUCTION

In 2016, Connections and Companionship was released using data from the 2013 BC Adolescent Health Survey (BC AHS) and the 2014 Homeless and Street Involved Youth Survey. The report aimed to address concerns that there were few studies about pets and their connection to human health, and those which did exist were of poor quality and had inconsistent findings (Chur-Hansen, Stern & Winefield, 2010).

The report was presented to a wide range of audiences and led to changes in the way some youth services were offered. It also sparked an important dialogue about how police and housing providers could better respond to youth with pets.

Connections and Companionship II includes data from the 2018 BC AHS, which was completed by over 38,000 youth (aged 12-19) across 58 of BC's 60 school districts. The BC AHS is a general youth health survey and as such only includes one item which asks youth whether they care for a pet or other animal on a regular school day. To supplement the data from the BC AHS, members of McCreary's Youth Research Academy and McCreary researchers created a Youth Survey About Pets ('pet survey') which asked more detailed questions about young people's experiences with pets.

The pet survey was available online to young people from March to June 2020. BC youth without pets were also invited to complete the survey to contribute to our understanding of the barriers that young people might experience to having a pet. The survey was completed by 515 youth between the ages of 12 and 24, with 55% of respondents aged between 12-18.

The time frame of when the pet survey was distributed means that some youth completed the survey during the COVID-19 pandemic. It is unknown how this experience may have affected their responses, unless they specifically mentioned the pandemic in their answers to open-ended questions.

ABOUT THIS REPORT

Quantitative data from both surveys were analyzed using SPSS statistical software. All reported comparisons are statistically significant at least at $p < .05$.

Quotes from youth who completed the BC AHS and Youth Survey About Pets are included throughout the report.

The BC AHS is considered representative of over 95% of youth aged 12-19 in mainstream schools across BC. The pet survey was completed by youth in all five regions of BC. However, it is not necessarily representative of youth across the province, especially as 81% of survey respondents were female. Rather, survey findings reflect a snapshot of young people's experiences with pets.

For more information about the BC AHS methodology, the McCreary Centre Society, and the Youth Research Academy, please visit www.mcs.bc.ca or email mccreary@mcs.bc.ca. For more information about Paws for Hope Animal Foundation, please email info@pawsforhope.org.

TERMS USED IN THIS REPORT

Experienced government care refers to young people who have stayed in the care of the provincial government such as in a foster home or group home. **An alternative to care** includes a Youth Agreement and Agreement with Young Adults for youth who are age eligible.

Had a pet is used to describe youth who identified as having a pet on the Youth Survey About Pets and who had caretaking responsibilities for a pet or other animal on a typical school day on the BC AHS.

Non-binary youth include those who identified as neither male nor female as well as those who were not yet sure of their gender identity.

BC YOUTH WITH PETS

Findings in this section are from the BC Adolescent Health Survey (BC AHS) unless otherwise noted.

In 2018, it was estimated that 41% of households in Canada had at least one dog and 38% had at least one cat (Canadian Animal Health Institute, 2019).

A number of studies have shown that girls are more likely than boys to rely on pets for companionship and comfort (Cassels, White, Gee, & Hughes, 2017; Muldoon, Williams, & Currie, 2019). This may partially explain why females were the most likely to complete the pets survey.

“On an average school day, I take care of a dog and fish.”
(BC AHS participant, North)

“I do all the care for my cat at home.”
(BC AHS participant, Vancouver Island)

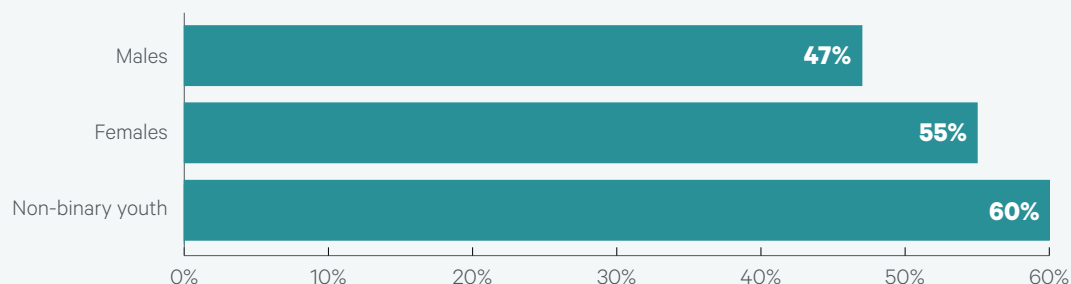
“I take care of all the animals on our farm including our dog and 3 cats.”
(BC AHS participant, Vancouver Island)

“Sadly, I don’t take care of pets, I really want a dog.”
(BC AHS participant, Vancouver Coastal)

As in 2013, around half of BC youth who completed the 2018 BC AHS (51%) had a pet. Also reflecting the pattern from five years earlier, younger youth were more likely than older ones to have a pet. For example, 53% of youth aged 14 and younger had a pet, compared to 50% of youth aged 15 and older.

Males were less likely to have a pet than females and non-binary youth. Also, sexual minority youth were more likely to have a pet than youth who identified as straight. For example, 63% of youth who identified as gay, lesbian, or bisexual had a pet, compared to 50% of those who identified as straight.

YOUTH WHO HAD A PET BY GENDER



Source: 2018 BC AHS.

Among young people who completed the pet survey, 84% currently had a pet (e.g., 86% of females vs. 74% of males). There were no differences in having a pet based on youth’s age, except that youth aged 12–18 were more likely to have four or more pets than youth aged 19–24 (35% vs. 14%; among those with pets).

In addition to being asked about their pets, youth who completed the pet survey were also asked if they had a service animal or official emotional support animal, such as a guide dog or a seizure response dog. Four percent of youth indicated they had such an animal. Another 18% reported they did not have but felt they needed one, which included 42% of youth with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and a third of youth (33%) who had a long-term or chronic medical condition, such as epilepsy.

“[My dog] makes me happy and opens up my world. His tasks are invaluable to me since I’m in a wheelchair and he picks things up for me. He’s made my life so much better and bigger and brighter.”

(Youth Survey About Pets participant)

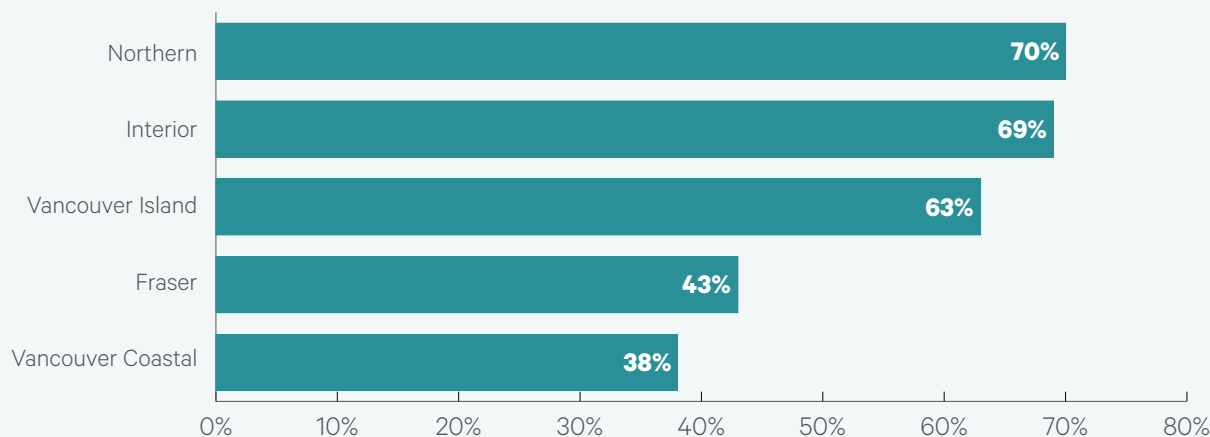
REGIONAL DIFFERENCES

Pets have been found to have a buffering effect on loneliness for youth living in rural areas (Black, 2012).

Among youth who completed the 2018 BC AHS, those who lived in rural areas were more likely to have a pet than those who lived in urban areas (67% vs. 49%).

Youth who lived in the Northern or Interior regions of the province were the most likely to have a pet, and youth who lived in the Vancouver Coastal region were the least likely (this was also the case among youth who completed the pet survey). Rates of having a pet were consistent with five years earlier in every region except Fraser where youth were less likely to be caring for a pet (43% vs. 47% in 2013).

YOUTH WHO HAD A PET BY REGION



Source: 2018 BC AHS.

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

There were few changes from 2013 in having a pet at the smaller Health Service Delivery Area level. Youth in Vancouver and Richmond continued to be the least likely to have a pet, and Northern Interior and Thompson Cariboo Shuswap were among the most likely. However, there was an increase in youth with a pet in Kootenay Boundary (72% vs. 65% in 2013) and a decrease in Fraser South (39% vs. 44%).

YOUTH WHO HAD A PET BY HEALTH SERVICE DELIVERY AREA

Northern Interior	72%
Kootenay Boundary	72%
Thompson Cariboo Shuswap	71%
Northeast	70%
East Kootenay	69%
Central Vancouver Island	68%
Okanagan	67%
North Vancouver Island	66%
Northwest	65%
South Vancouver Island	59%
Fraser East	59%
North Shore/Coast Garibaldi	55%
Fraser North	43%
Fraser South	39%
Vancouver	30%
Richmond	29%

Source: 2018 BC AHS.

Note: Not all differences were statistically significant.

FAMILY BACKGROUND

Youth who identified as European or Indigenous continued to be the most likely to have a pet, and youth who identified as South Asian were the least likely.

YOUTH WHO HAD A PET BY FAMILY BACKGROUND

European.....	69%
Indigenous.....	67%
Australian/Pacific Islander.....	59%
Latin/South/Central American.....	55%
African.....	40%
West Asian.....	33%
East Asian.....	29%
Southeast Asian.....	27%
South Asian	23%

Source: 2018 BC AHS.

Note: Youth could mark all backgrounds that applied. Not all differences were statistically significant.

Youth who were born in Canada were more likely to have a pet than those born abroad (58% vs. 27%). Among youth who were not born in Canada, the longer they lived in the country the more likely they were to have a pet. For example, 34% of youth who had lived in Canada for at least six years had a pet, compared to 21% of those who had lived in the country for five years or less.

HOME LIFE

Household composition appeared to be related to whether youth had a pet. For example, youth who lived alone were less likely to have a pet than youth who lived with other people (38% vs. 51%). This was also the case among youth who completed the pet survey, as 61% of youth who lived alone had a pet, compared to 84% of those who lived with others.

Most youth (78%) who took care of a pet did not have other caretaking responsibilities on a typical school day. However, 21% also took care of either a relative (e.g., a relative with a disability or younger sibling) or their own child/children; and 1% looked after a pet, a relative, and their own child/children.

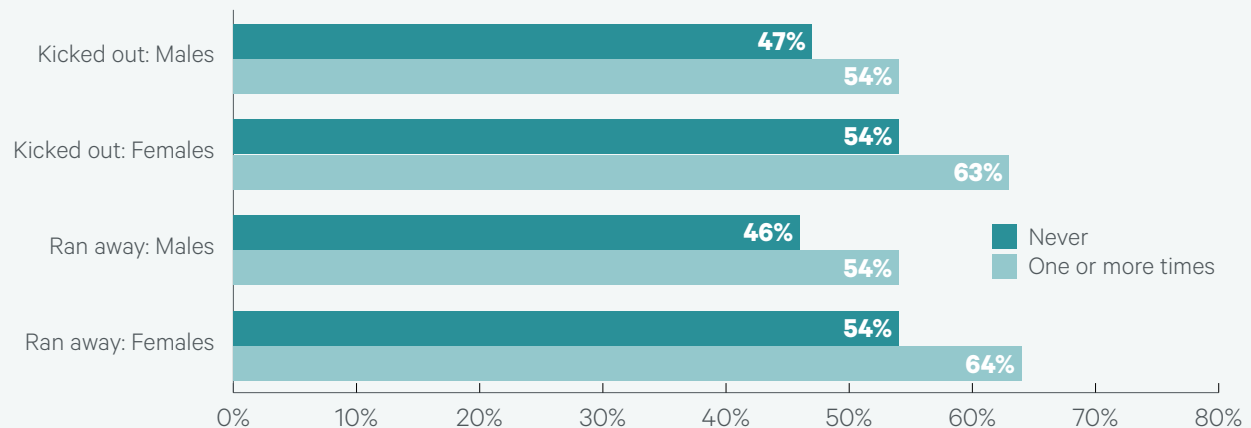
YOUTH WHO ARE MORE LIKELY TO HAVE A PET

Pets can offer emotional support to young people experiencing hardship in their life, by providing stability and comfort (Thompson et al., 2016).

Pets can also facilitate bonding between youth and foster parents and be a source of security and comfort for youth in government care (Carr & Rockett, 2017).

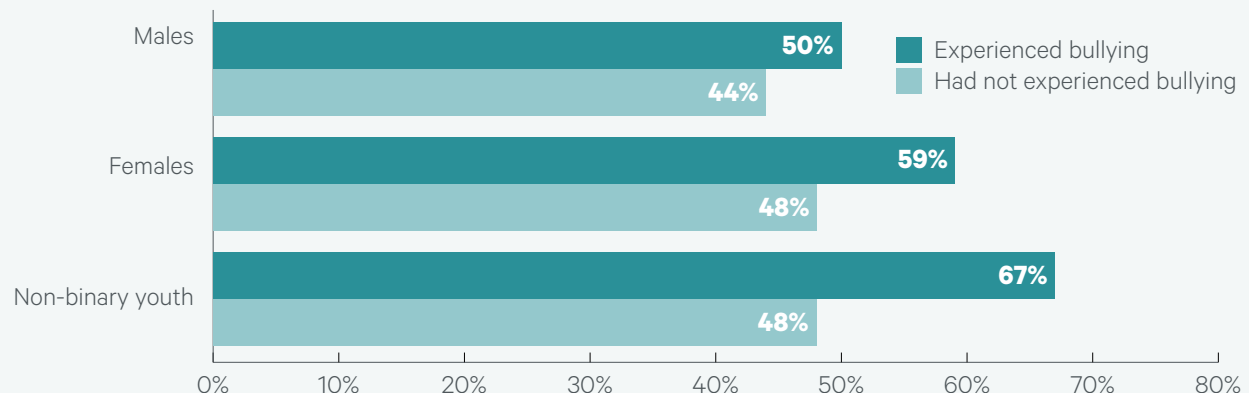
Youth who experienced various challenges in their life were more likely to have a pet. For example, youth were more likely to have a pet if they:

- Experienced poverty and deprivation (57% of those who went to bed hungry because there was not enough money for food at home had a pet vs. 50% of those without this experience). Also, 60% of those who did not have lunch for school or money to buy lunch had a pet (vs. 51% of those who had this).
- Experienced housing challenges, such as being kicked out of home (58% had a pet vs. 50%) or running away from home (60% vs. 50%) in the past year.

YOUTH WITH PETS WHO HAD BEEN KICKED OUT OR HAD RUN AWAY IN THE PAST YEAR

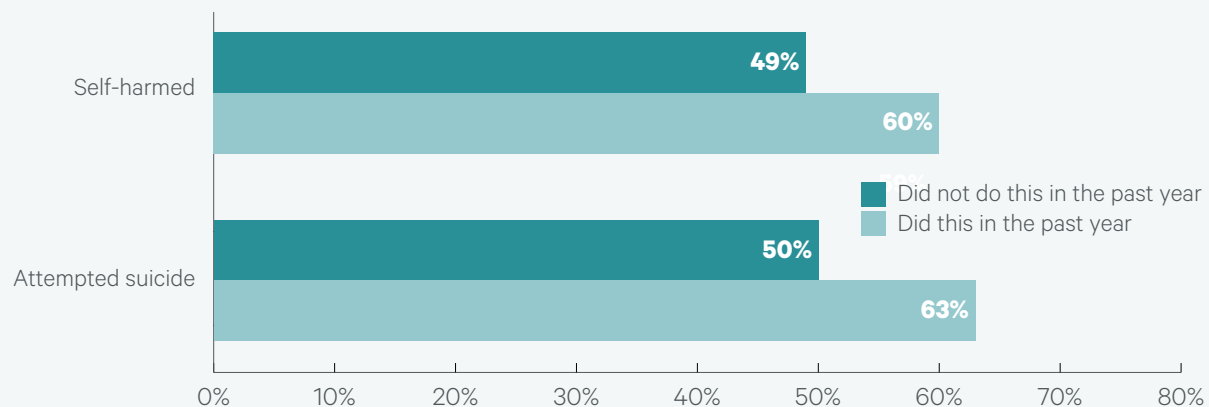
Source: 2018 BC AHS.

- Had been in government care or an alternative to care (58% vs. 52% who had never been in care or an alternative to care).
- Did not feel connected to their family (e.g., 55% of those who did not feel understood by their family had a pet vs. 49% of those who felt understood).
- Did not feel connected to school (e.g., 57% of those who did not feel like a part of their school had a pet vs. 49% who felt like a part of their school).
- Experienced violence and discrimination including:
 - » Verbal sexual harassment in the past year (58% vs. 46% of those who had not had this experience).
 - » Physical sexual harassment in the past year (60% vs. 48%).
 - » Physical abuse (55% vs. 50%).
 - » Sexual abuse (61% vs. 50%).
 - » Discrimination in the past year (55% vs. 49%).
 - » Being bullied at school or on the way to or from school in the past year (55% vs. 46%).
 - » Being cyberbullied in the past year (61% vs. 50%).
 - » Meeting someone online who made them feel unsafe (60% vs. 49%).

YOUTH WITH PETS WHO HAD BEEN BULLIED IN THE PAST YEAR

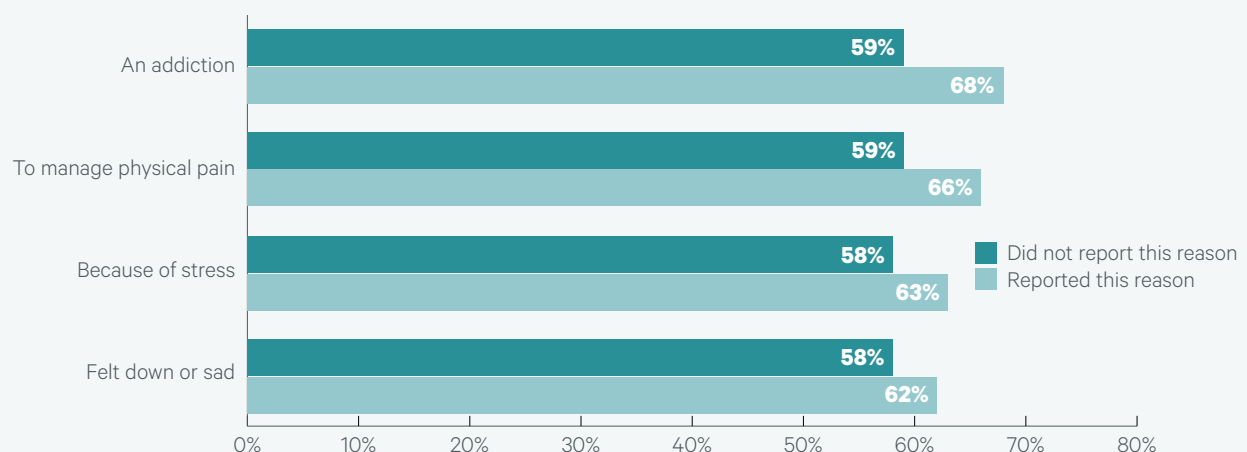
Source: 2018 BC AHS.

- Had experienced loss or bereavement (55% of those who had lost someone close to them had a pet vs. 43% of those without this experience).
- Had a health condition or disability (64% of those with a physical disability had a pet vs. 51% of youth without such a disability; and 61% of those with a long-term/chronic medical condition had a pet vs. 50% without such a health condition).
- Experienced mental health challenges including:
 - » Rated their mental health as poor or fair (58% had a pet vs. 48% of those who rated it as good or excellent).
 - » Had a mental health condition (65% vs. 49% of those without such a condition), including Anxiety Disorder (67% vs. 48%), Depression (63% vs. 49%), ADHD (65% vs. 50%), and PTSD (67% vs. 51%).
 - » Felt their life was not going well (55% vs. 51% of those who did not feel this way).
 - » Did not feel good about themselves (58% vs. 49%).
 - » Had self-harmed or attempted suicide in the past year.

YOUTH WITH PETS WHO HAD SELF-HARMED OR ATTEMPTED SUICIDE IN THE PAST YEAR

Source: 2018 BC AHS.

- Experienced substance use challenges including:
 - » Needed help for their substance use in the past year (60% had a pet vs. 51% of those who did not need help).
 - » Had a substance use addiction (66% vs. 51% without an addiction).
 - » Experienced negative consequences of their substance use in the past year (62% vs. 59% of those who did not experience such consequences; among those who had used substances in the past year).
 - » Last used substances because they were stressed, felt sad, to manage physical pain, or because they had an addiction.

REASONS FOR USING SUBSTANCES IN THE PAST YEAR IN RELATION TO HAVING A PET (AMONG YOUTH WHO USED SUBSTANCES IN THE PAST YEAR)

Source: 2018 BC AHS.

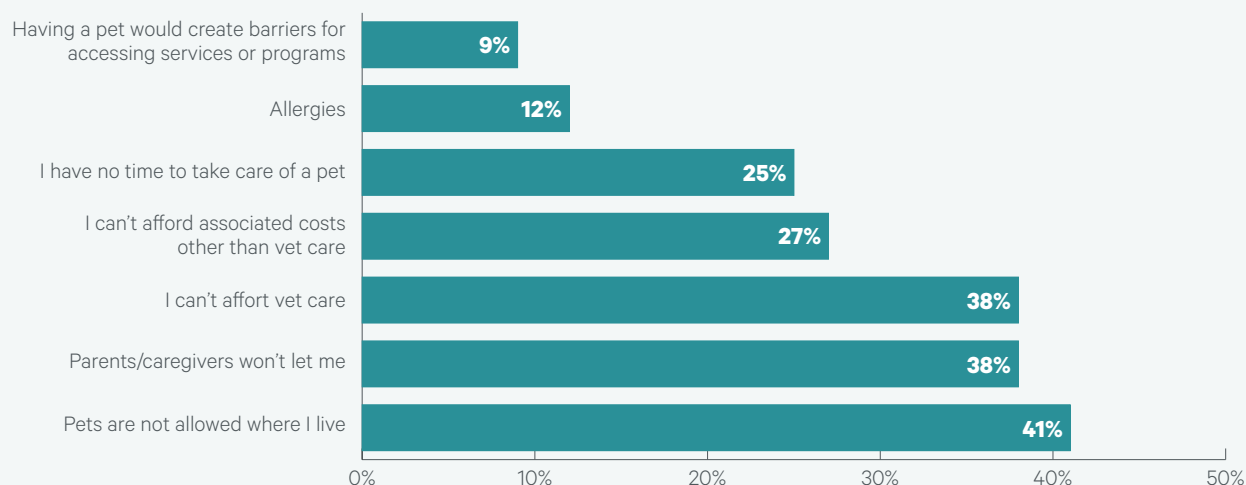
REASONS YOUTH DID NOT CURRENTLY HAVE A PET

All findings in this section are from the Youth Survey About Pets.

Among the 16% of youth who completed the pet survey and did not currently have a pet, their most common reasons for not having one included pets not being permitted where they live; their parent or guardians not allowing it; and/or being unable to afford veterinary care.

Youth aged 19–24 were more likely than those aged 12–18 to indicate not currently having a pet because pets were not allowed where they live (50% vs. 31%).

MOST COMMON REASONS FOR NOT CURRENTLY HAVING A PET (AMONG YOUTH WITHOUT A PET)



Source: Youth Survey About Pets (2020).

Note: Youth could mark all that applied.

“I am very sensitive to smells and would not like a pet when I grow up.”

“I love animals. I’ve always wanted a cat but my dad and sister are allergic.”

“I don’t live in a place that allows pets.”

YOUTH SURVEY ABOUT PETS PARTICIPANTS

LOSS OF A PET

All findings in this section are from the Youth Survey About Pets, unless noted.

A number of studies have shown that depending on the degree of attachment, the loss of a companion animal can cause youth severe grief (Brown, Richards, & Wilson, 1996; Eckerd, Barnett, & Jett-Dias, 2016). Because girls are more likely than boys to form strong bonds with their pets, they are also more likely to experience severe grief after the death of a pet (Brown et al., 1996).

“My cat died so I’m pretty low on energy and alone. I’m not depressed and my parents check in with me regularly but for the time being I’m pretty upset. However, I know that time heals all wounds so I can feel better with some time and effort.”

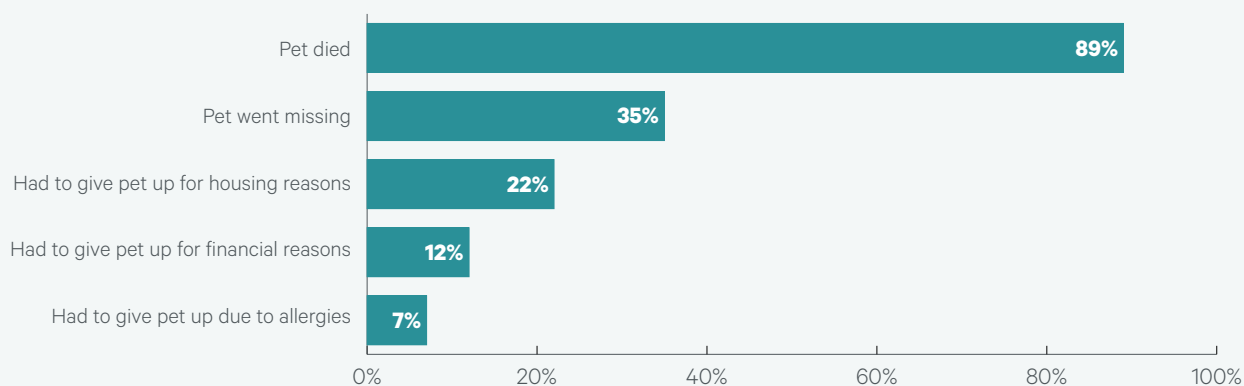
(BC AHS participant, Interior)

“Someone close to me who died due to illness was my dog, which totally counts [as losing someone close to you].”

(BC AHS participant, Vancouver Coastal)

Most youth (95%) who completed the pet survey reported having had a pet at some point, and 87% had also experienced the loss of a pet. While the majority of youth had lost a pet because it had died, around 1 in 5 had to give a pet up because of their housing situation, and around 1 in 10 had to give a pet up due to financial reasons.

HOW YOUTH HAD LOST A PET (AMONG THOSE WHO HAD LOST PETS)



Source: Youth Survey About Pets (2020).

Note: Youth could mark all that applied.

“My pets make me happy. But it makes me sad when they die.”

“[My pet] taught me love, patience, loss.”

“Taught me the hardest thing in life. Letting go of the ones we love.”

“My cat that passed gave me some of the best childhood memories, she was my best friend.”

YOUTH SURVEY ABOUT PETS PARTICIPANTS

YOUTH'S EXPERIENCES WITH THEIR CURRENT PET

All findings are among youth with a pet, and are from the Youth Survey About Pets.

Youth who currently had a pet were asked about their relationship and experience with their pet. Those who currently had more than one pet were asked to answer based on their experience with only one of their pets, such as the one they felt closest to or had the most responsibility for.

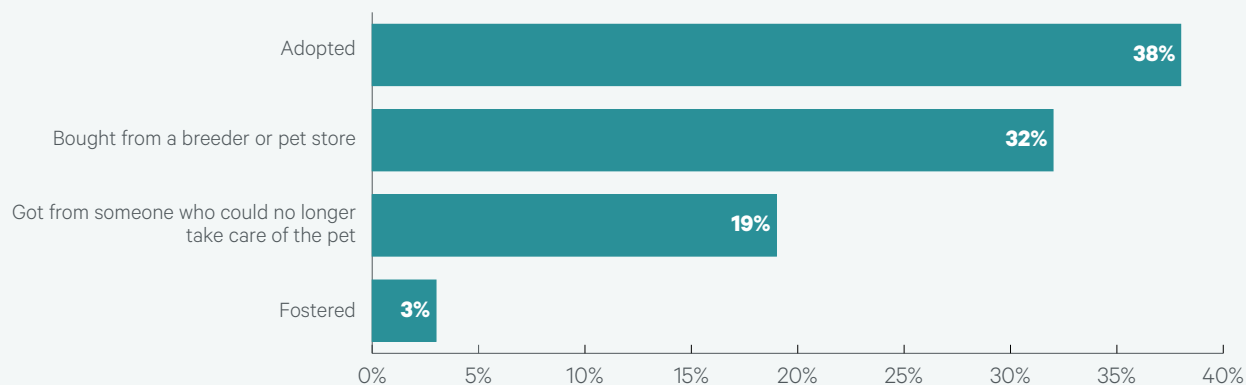
Among those with a pet, 46% answered the questions in reference to a dog, 38% in reference to a cat, and 16% specified other types of pets, such as a rodent (e.g., rat, hamster, guinea pig); reptile (e.g., snake, gecko, bearded dragon); rabbit; bird; or fish.

Most youth (60%) who completed the pet survey had their current pet for at least three years, while 18% had their pet for less than one year. Around half of youth (49%) saw their pet as predominantly their own, while 46% shared their pet about equally with one or more other people, and the remaining minority indicated their pet was mainly someone else's.

HOW YOUTH GOT THEIR PET

Youth most commonly indicated they had adopted their pet or had bought their pet from a breeder or pet store. Around 9% specified they got their pet through a means not among the list of options, such as when another one of their pets gave birth to a litter.

HOW YOUTH GOT THEIR PET (AMONG THOSE WHO CURRENTLY HAD A PET)



Source: Youth Survey About Pets (2020).

“I love that we got such an awesome cat as a rescue/adoption, not knowing much about her at all. She has an amazing personality.”

“If I hadn’t adopted her, she probably would have been put down (senior cat, not very cute, overweight) and I can’t imagine that she wouldn’t be out there sharing her purrs and sass with someone!... Given that I live alone far away from family, it makes the city I currently live in feel like home! I love her so much!”

YOUTH SURVEY ABOUT PETS PARTICIPANTS

ANIMAL WELLNESS AND SAFETY

Most youth indicated their pet was spayed/neutered and up-to-date on vaccinations, while a little over half indicated their pet was microchipped or tattooed.

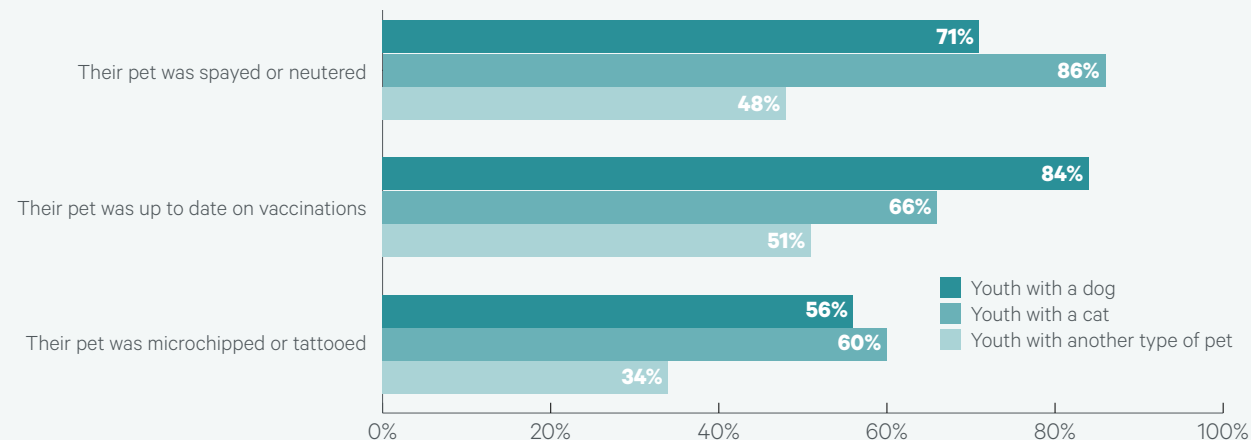
YOUTH WHOSE PET WAS... (AMONG THOSE WHO HAD A PET)			
	NO	YES	DONT KNOW
Spayed or neutered	22%	73%	5%
Up-to-date on vaccinations	12%	72%	17%
Microchipped or tattooed	35%	54%	11%

Source: Youth Survey About Pets (2020).

Note: Not all rows equal 100% due to rounding.

Those with a cat were more likely than those with a dog or another type of pet to indicate that their pet had been spayed or neutered, while youth with a dog were more likely than those with other types of pets to report their pet was up-to-date on vaccinations. Youth with a cat or dog were equally likely to indicate their pet was microchipped or tattooed (and more likely than those with another type of pet).

ANIMAL WELLNESS & SAFETY IN RELATION TO TYPE OF PET (AMONG YOUTH WITH A PET)



Source: Youth Survey About Pets (2020).

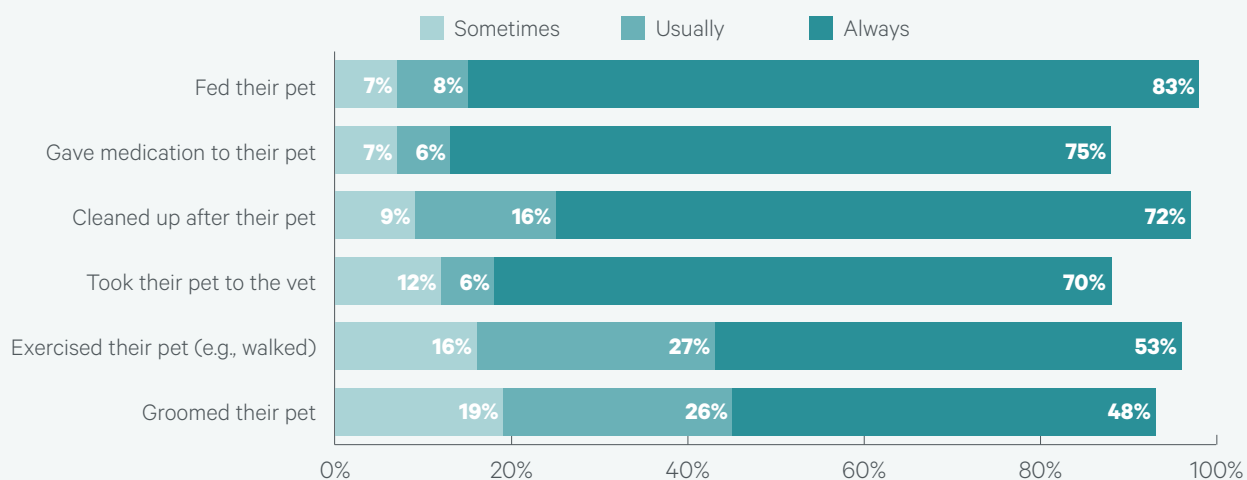
Note: For microchipped or tattooed, the difference between youth with a dog and cat was not statistically significant.

CARING FOR PETS

Most youth reported they were usually or always the one who took care of their pet's needs. Females were more likely than males to report they were usually or always the ones who administered medication to their pet when needed (84% vs. 64%). Females were also more likely than males to report feeding (93% vs. 80%), grooming (77% vs. 51%), exercising their pet (82% vs. 67%), and taking their pet to the vet (80% vs. 56%) when needed.

Youth aged 19–24 were more likely than those aged 12–18 to usually or always administer medication to their pet when needed (86% vs. 77%) but there were no other age differences.

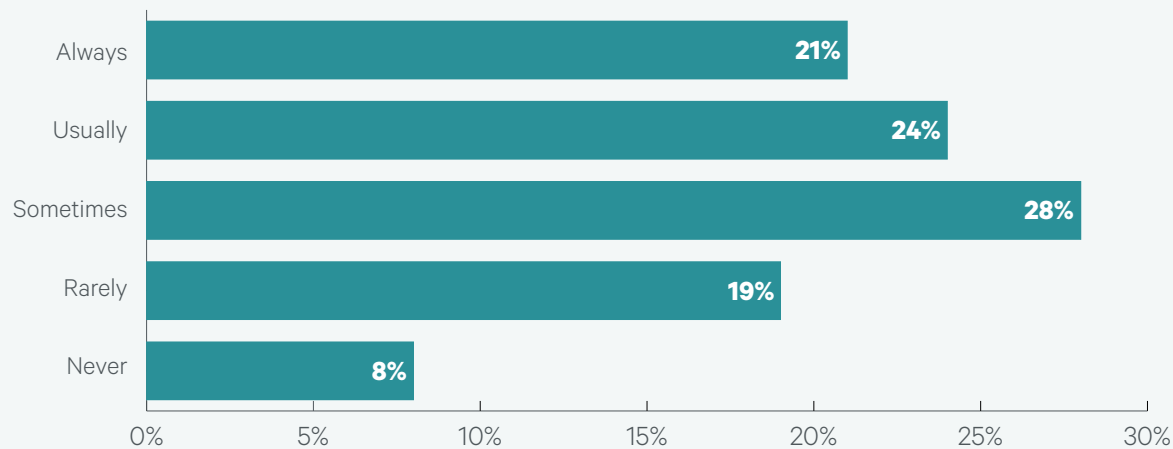
HOW OFTEN YOUTH WITH A PET TOOK CARE OF THEIR PET'S NEEDS (AMONG THOSE WHO INDICATED EACH ITEM APPLIED)



Source: Youth Survey About Pets (2020).

Note: Percentages do not add up to 100% because the response options 'Never' and 'Rarely' are not included in the graph.

When asked how often they were the only one who cared for their pet, 45% indicated they were the sole care provider usually or always. Older youth were more likely than younger ones to report being the sole care provider this often (56% of those aged 19–24 vs. 37% of those aged 12–18), as were females compared to males (48% vs. 25%).

HOW OFTEN YOUTH WERE THE ONLY ONE TO TAKE CARE OF THEIR PET (AMONG THOSE WITH A PET)

Source: Youth Survey About Pets (2020).

In response to an open-ended question about what they have learned from having their pet, several youth stated that they came to realize that having a pet is a big responsibility, particularly if they are the sole caregiver.

“I’ve learned the huge amount of responsibility that it is and how much care needs to go into an animal that is solely your responsibility.”

“Having a pet is a lot more difficult than it seems but it is worth every bit of effort you put in.”

“They are a big commitment and responsibility so getting another pet requires a lot of careful thought and planning.”

“Pets are a big responsibility and live a long time.”

“Owning a pet is a BIG responsibility. It’s very expensive.”

“It’s a huge responsibility and a very long commitment that I often question if I’m equipped for.”

YOUTH SURVEY ABOUT PETS PARTICIPANTS

MISSING OUT ON NEEDED VETERINARY CARE

“The cost of veterinary care is high where I live, making it hard for young people to give their pet adequate care.”

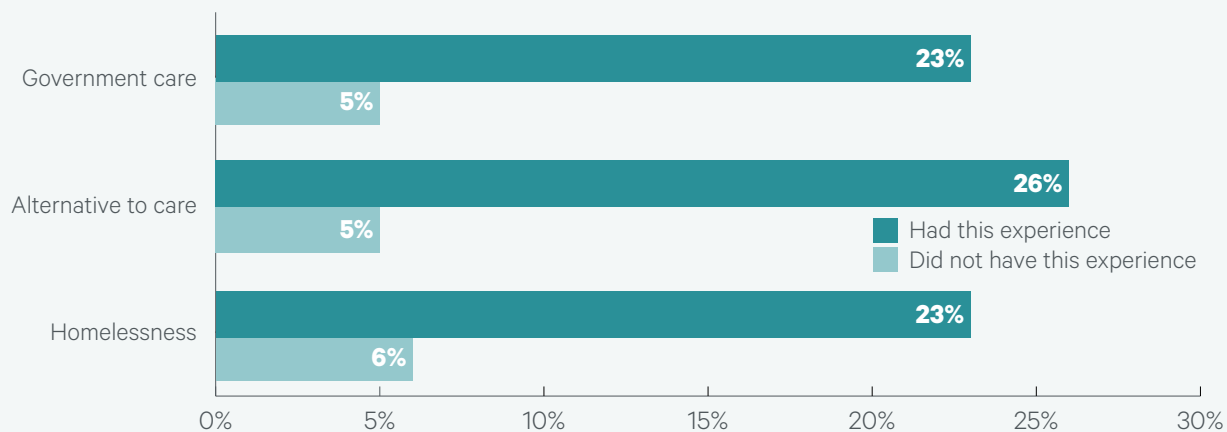
(Youth Survey About Pets participant)

In the past year, 44% of youth reported that their pet did not need veterinary care, while 49% reported their pet received the care they needed, and 7% indicated their pet needed veterinary care but did not get it. There were no differences in needing vet care based on the type of pet youth had.

Among those who did not access needed veterinary care, the most commonly reported reason was that they could not afford it (78%). Other common reasons included having no transportation (33%), their parent or guardian not taking the pet, and/or not knowing where to go (youth could mark all that applied). A few youth indicated a reason not among the list of options, and a couple of these youth specified that the vet was closed due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Youth who reported they were struggling financially were more likely to have missed out on accessing needed veterinary care in the past year (38% vs. 5% who were better off financially). This may explain why youth who lived alone, had experience of government care, an alternative to care, and/or had homelessness experience were all more likely to have missed out on accessing needed veterinary care for their pet than youth without these experiences.

YOUTH'S LIVING EXPERIENCES IN RELATION TO MISSING OUT ON NEEDED VETERINARY CARE IN THE PAST YEAR (AMONG THOSE WITH A PET)



Source: Youth Survey About Pets (2020).

CONNECTEDNESS

The role of pets as companions is well documented in the literature (e.g., Carr & Rockett, 2017), and pets are widely understood to be integral members of a family (Cassels et al., 2017; Power, 2008).

Recent research has found that young people view pets and siblings as equal in the companionship they provide. However, youth often receive more satisfaction and engage in less conflict with pets than with their siblings (Cassels et al., 2017).

The vast majority of youth reported having a positive attachment to their pet, such as feeling connected to their pet, loving their pet, and feeling their pet was part of their family.

YOUTH WITH A PET WHO AGREED OR STRONGLY AGREED...

I love my pet	97%
My pet is part of my family.....	97%
I feel connected to my pet	96%
I talk to my pet.....	96%
My pet is my friend	95%
My pet makes me feel happy	95%
I feel like my pet likes me	92%
My pet and I have a special bond	91%

Source: Youth Survey About Pets (2020)

There were no differences in experiencing these positive connections between youth with a dog and youth with a cat. However, those with a dog or cat were generally more likely than those with another type of pet to have such positive connections.

“[My pets] are a part of the family as much as any other member.”

“Animals are more than a pet, they’re a best friend, a family member, a bond that will never leave.”

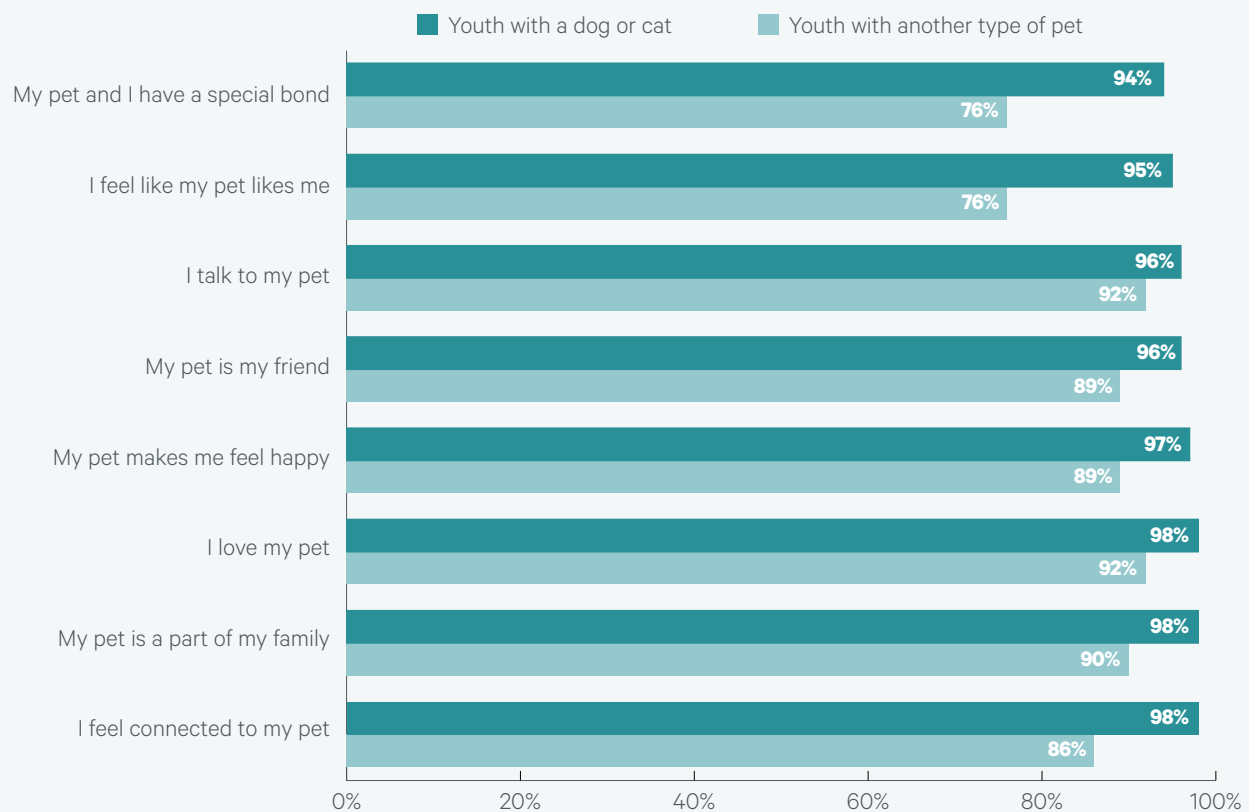
“[My pet is] so goofy and crazy just like me and my partner. He has brought us so much closer together and we are a family now.”

“My pet became my family when I had none.”

“My pet has become like my best friend.”

YOUTH SURVEY ABOUT PETS PARTICIPANTS

YOUTH'S CONNECTEDNESS TO THEIR CURRENT PET IN RELATION TO TYPE OF PET (THOSE WHO AGREED OR STRONGLY AGREED)



Source: Youth Survey About Pets (2020).

Note: The difference for 'I talk to my pet' was not statistically significant.

“My pet is a friend and comfort. We spend time together and chill out like friends.”

“She is my shoulder to cry on and partner to celebrate happy times with.”

“They have become my family and make my house feel like a home.”

“[My pet has] given me a friend when I didn’t have one, a non-judgmental friend to talk to and gain comfort from.”

YOUTH SURVEY ABOUT PETS PARTICIPANTS

CELEBRATING PETS

“It’s expensive as hell to buy gifts for your cat every week and build cat furniture, but also he enjoys it, so that’s fun.”

(Youth Survey About Pets participant)

Most youth bought gifts for their pet and celebrated their pet’s birthday at least sometimes, and the majority of those who did not do so reported that they wanted to. Findings were similar regardless of the type of pet youth had.

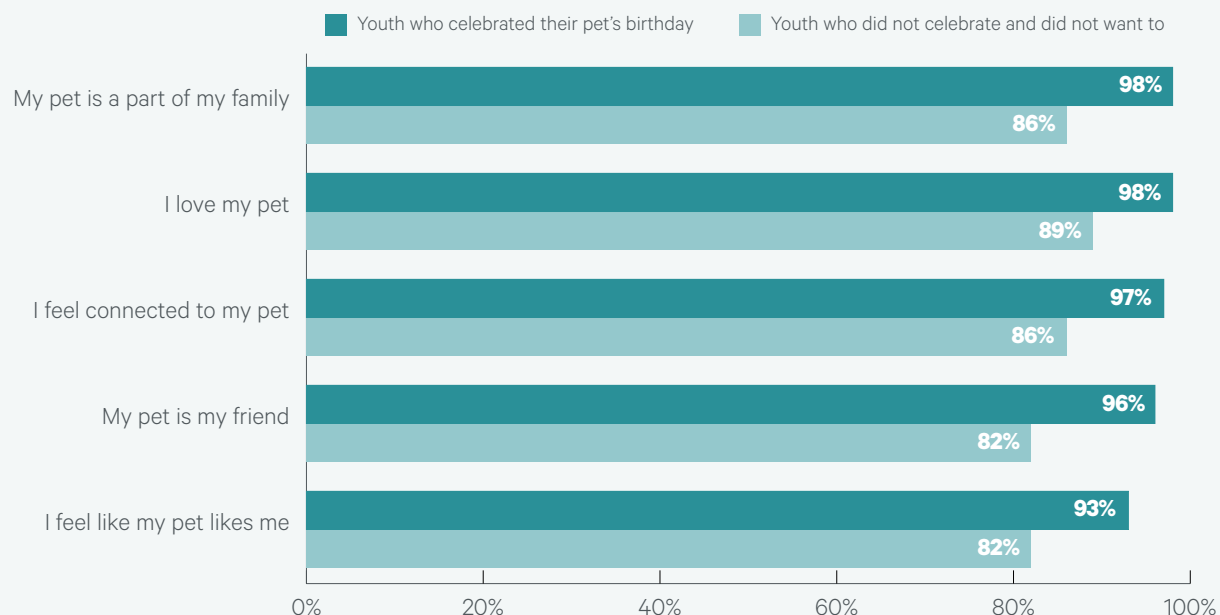
AMONG YOUTH WHO HAD A PET	NO AND DONT WANT TO	NO BUT WANT TO	YES, SOMETIMES	YES, OFTEN
Bought their pet gifts	2%	6%	60%	33%
Celebrated their pet’s birthday	7%	19%	25%	49%

Source: Youth Survey About Pets (2020).

Note: Percentages for ‘bought their pet gifts’ exceed 100% due to rounding.

Youth who celebrated their pet’s birthday generally reported higher levels of connectedness to their pet than youth who had no desire to do so. Those who did not celebrate their pet’s birthday but wanted to generally felt just as connected as youth who were able to do so.

CELEBRATING PETS IN RELATION TO CONNECTEDNESS (AMONG YOUTH WITH A PET)



Source: Youth Survey About Pets (2020).

Buying their pet gifts or celebrating their pet’s birthday was not associated with how well-off financially youth felt they or their family were.

SPENDING TIME WITH PETS

When asked how much time they spent with their pet, most youth (78%) felt it was the right amount of time for them, while 20% felt they spent insufficient time, and just over 2% felt they spent too much time with their pets.

How much time youth spent with their pet was generally not associated with their level of connectedness to their pet. However, youth who felt they spent the right amount of time were more likely to feel their pet liked them than those who spent insufficient time with their pet (94% vs. 83%).

SCHOOL AND WORK

Integrating dogs into the classroom can allow teachers to better understand behavioural difficulties and needs of specific students (Correale, Crescimbene, Borgi, & Cirulli, 2017).

“I brought my bearded dragon partially for emotional support to school once and was immediately sent home by the vice principal.”

(Youth Survey About Pets participant)

“I do not bring my pets to school!”

(BC AHS participant, Fraser)

Around a third of youth (34%) reported that pets were permitted at their school, at least sometimes, while another 20% did not know if pets were permitted. Among youth who were attending school, 23% had brought their pet to school.

Similarly, a third of youth (33%) indicated that pets were permitted at their work, while 13% did not know. Around 1 in 6 youth (18%) had brought their pet to their place of work (among those who worked).

Youth who brought their pet to work were more likely to feel like a part of their workplace than youth who never brought their pet to work (73% vs. 50%). There was no association between taking their pet to school and feeling connected to school.

Youth who had taken their pet to school may have done so because they felt unsafe there. These youth were less likely to feel safe at school than youth who had never brought their pet to school (58% vs. 78%). There was no link between taking their pet to work and sense of safety at work.

CHALLENGES ASSOCIATED WITH HAVING A PET

Findings are among youth with a pet and are from the Youth Survey About Pets, unless otherwise noted.

While pets can be beneficial to young people, they can also introduce challenges, particularly if they are poorly trained or if caring for a pet's needs is too demanding (Power, 2008).

In 2017, one in every five pets brought to the BC SPCA was surrendered due to housing issues (BC SPCA, 2018). The BC SPCA (2018) cautions that this statistic only includes the pets who were brought into their shelters and not those who were abandoned, given to other shelters, or sold.

People with pets who are in the rental market face additional challenges in securing adequate and affordable housing (Province of British Columbia, n.d.). Tenants with pets often settle for substandard living situations that do not satisfy their housing needs (e.g., more expensive and in less desirable neighbourhoods; Graham, Milaney, Adams, & Rock, 2018).

Pet owners who are homeless experience even greater difficulties in finding accommodation, as public housing and temporary shelters often prohibit pets (Slatter, Lloyd & King, 2012). The mobility of homeless pet owners is also limited as animals are generally not welcome on public transport (Howe & Easterbrook, 2018).

Research on homeless youth in Canada has indicated that young people often sacrifice their own needs, including housing and accessing services, in order to care for and keep their pet (Lem, Coe, Haley, Stone, & O'Grady, 2013).

When asked about challenges associated with having their current pet, most youth (61%) indicated they did not experience any challenges. Those who experienced challenges most commonly identified barriers associated with finding housing and/or taking part in leisure activities.

Some youth specified challenges not among the list of options, such as being unable to travel due to not having anyone to take care of their pet.

CHALLENGES HAVING A PET CREATED FOR YOUTH

Finding housing	23%
Taking part in leisure activities	17%
Keeping housing	7%
Accessing services for themselves (medical, mental health, etc.) ..	4%

Source: Youth Survey About Pets (2020).

Note: Among those who had a pet in the past year. Youth could mark all that applied.

“It’s difficult to have an animal in Vancouver now as many housing options do not allow pets of any kind. Those that do come at a premium with large upfront costs and often with many restrictions on the animal... Youth should not be significantly penalized financially for wanting to take advantage of the many positive health effects correlated with having an animal.”

“Nearly impossible (in BC at least) to find housing, especially affordable housing with a pet.”

“Housing is the biggest thing for me. Even when you find a pet-friendly place for rent, it is usually priced \$100-\$300 more than similar non pet-friendly homes. There are very few pet-friendly rentals in my area.”

“Having pets makes finding apartments much harder, and those that are available are much more expensive. I also can’t take trips away anymore. However, the net positives far outweigh these issues.”

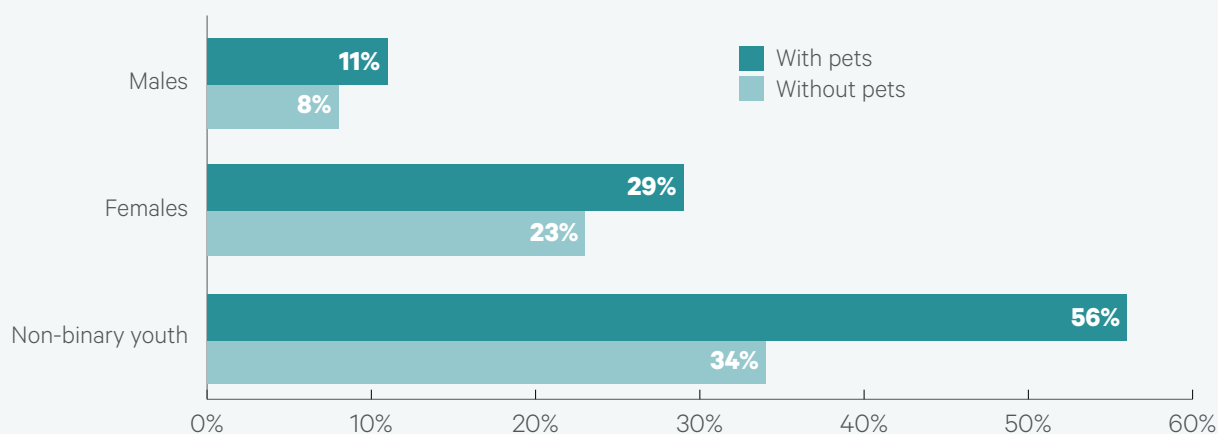
“[My pet] is essential to my mental health. I almost had to give him up due to my housing situation and I cried so much and felt my mental health plummet.”

YOUTH SURVEY ABOUT PETS PARTICIPANTS

Among students who completed the 2018 BC AHS, youth with a pet were more likely than those without a pet to have missed out on accessing needed medical care (9% vs. 7%) and mental health services (21% vs. 15%) in the past year. They were also more likely to have missed class in the past month (78% vs. 68% without pets) and to have experienced barriers to taking part in extracurricular activities in the past year (59% with a pet vs. 54% of youth without a pet).

Findings were similar among vulnerable groups of youth who completed the 2018 BC AHS. For example, among youth who had run away in the past year, those with pets were more likely than those without pets to have missed out on accessing needed mental health services (49% vs. 40%).

YOUTH WHO DID NOT ACCESS NEEDED MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES IN THE PAST YEAR



“We have unfortunately received a noise complaint from the few barks my puppy has let out while playing, and if we were to be evicted from our current pet-friendly apartment we would truly have nowhere to go, as pet-friendly rentals in general are so difficult to find.”

“There needs to be more housing available for young people with pets, people expect you to just give up your pet but they are part of your family. It creates a lot of barriers especially when you are on the street, because your pet comes with you everywhere. And it is good for both you and the pet to be together all the time! Just transit is hard to manage and taking your pet into buildings is pretty much impossible.”

“She makes me happy and comforts me when I’m distressed. She’s my reason for living. But on the other hand, I have no family or friends who can look after her, so I’m not able to get the mental health supports I desperately need (inpatient care).”

“I am often unable to do things I want to do like go on trips that I can’t take my dog on.”

YOUTH SURVEY ABOUT PETS PARTICIPANTS

FINANCIAL CONCERNS

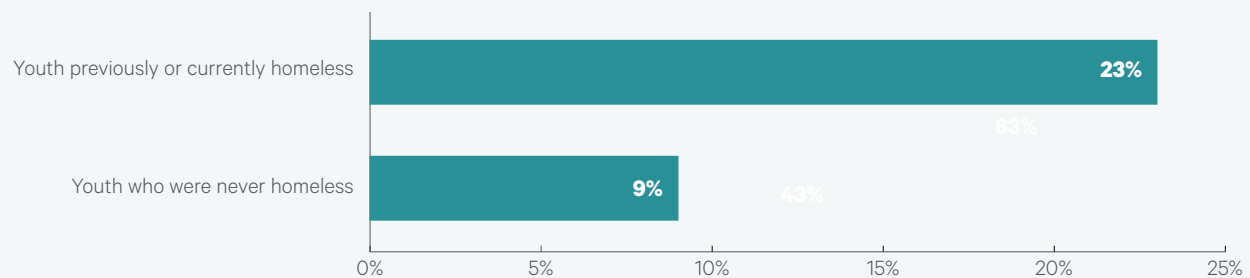
Youth who completed the BC AHS who had fewer resources available to them were less likely to have a pet. For example, they were less likely to have a pet if they:

- Had no space of their own to hang out (43% vs. 52% of those had this).
- Had no access to transportation (45% vs. 52% of those who had this).
- Did not own a smartphone (47% vs. 51% of those who had this).

Among those who completed the pet survey who had a pet, 11% worried about the financial cost of caring for their pet most or all of the time in the past year, while 47% worried about it a little or some of the time, and 42% never had this worry.

Not surprisingly, youth who were not at all well-off financially were more likely to worry about the financial cost of caring for their pet (28% worried most or all of the time vs. 9% of youth who were better off financially). Also, youth with homelessness experience were more likely to have this worry compared to youth who were never homeless, as were youth who lived alone compared to those who lived with others (25% vs. 10%).

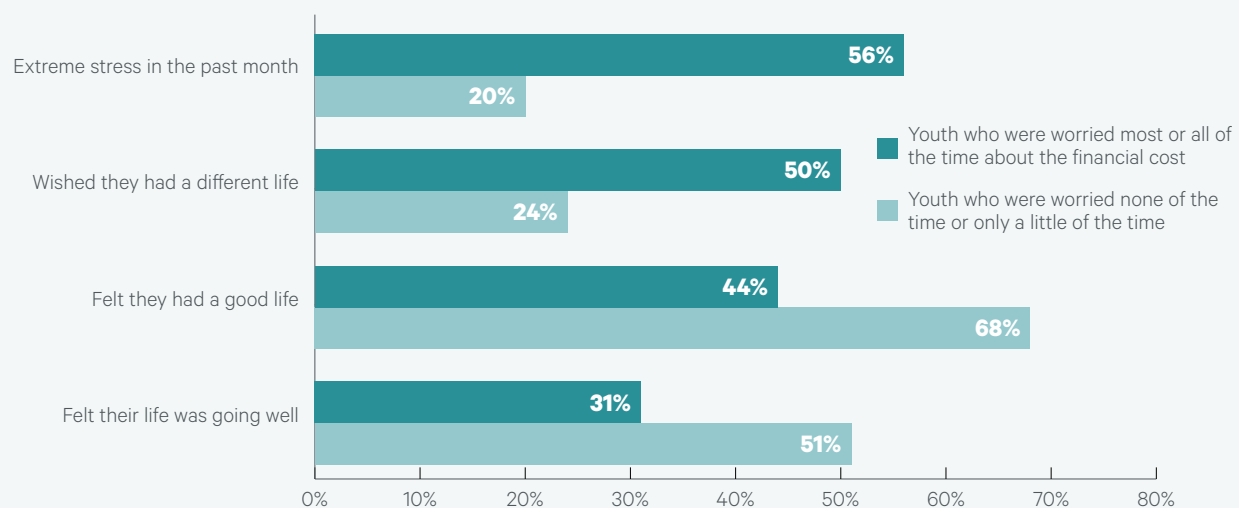
YOUTH WHO WORRIED MOST OF THE TIME OR ALWAYS ABOUT THE FINANCIAL COST OF CARING FOR THEIR PET (AMONG YOUTH WITH A PET)



Source: Youth Survey About Pets (2020).

Feeling worried about the financial cost of caring for their pet was associated with other challenges, including extreme stress, poorer mental health, and lower life satisfaction.

FEELING WORRIED ABOUT THE FINANCIAL COST OF CARING FOR THEIR PET IN THE PAST YEAR IN RELATION TO HEALTH & WELL-BEING (AMONG YOUTH WITH A PET)



Source: Youth Survey About Pets (2020).

“I’ve sacrificed food money for my cats, as well as any extra money I get!”

“One of my cats had serious health problems last summer and had to have surgery and on-going treatment. This was very stressful because it cost a lot of money and I was worried for his health... The cost does impact my ability to afford things, especially as a student.”

“I’ve always been worried about my [pet] one day needing a vet and not being able to afford it.”

“There are a lot more costs associated with pets than I had anticipated.”

YOUTH SURVEY ABOUT PETS PARTICIPANTS

SLEEP

Reflecting findings from other studies, the first Connections and Companionship report found that youth with a pet were less likely to get a good night’s sleep than youth without a pet. This was also the case in 2018. For example, 14% of youth with a pet slept for five hours or less the night before taking the BC AHS, compared to 12% of youth without a pet.

Also, youth with a pet were slightly less likely to wake up feeling rested (47% vs. 48%), despite being more likely to report turning off their electronic devices and going offline when they went to bed (42% vs. 40%). Some young people who completed the pet survey added comments about having lost sleep due to their pet.

“Because my pet is a puppy I have lost sleep, but I have also gained a friend who makes me laugh every day.”

“Sometimes he is the reason I don’t sleep well because he is a cat and he’s semi nocturnal and runs around and makes noise at night.”

“[My pet] has made my life more positive, and comforts me and cuddles with me when I’m sad. But she also wakes me up frequently in the night time, so it’s difficult to get enough sleep.”

YOUTH SURVEY ABOUT PETS PARTICIPANTS

BENEFITS OF HAVING A PET

“All of the cats and dogs I’ve had throughout my life have been very impactful. They have always helped me through rough times and made me feel as if I’m not alone.”

(Youth Survey About Pets participant)

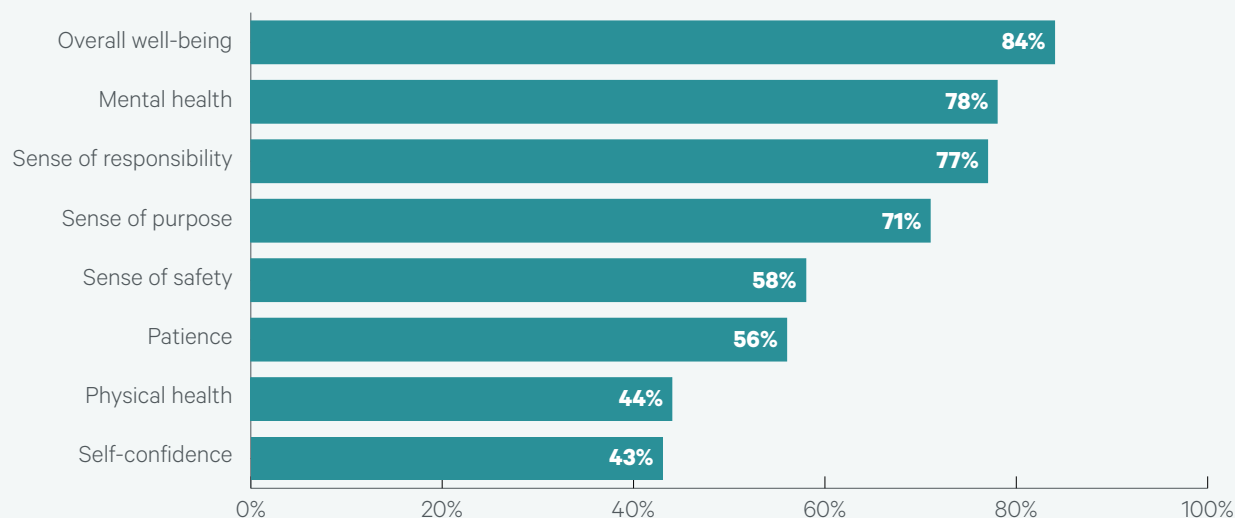
Taking care of pets can increase a young person’s self-perception (Mueller, 2014) and resiliency (Slatter et al., 2018), as well as their overall well-being and life satisfaction (Reis et al., 2018).

A number of studies have found that pets can reduce feelings of stress (Kerns, Stuart-Parrigon, Coifman, van Dulmen, & Koehn, 2018; Polheber & Matchock, 2014) and sadness (Cline 2010; Lem, Coe, Haley, Stone, & O’Grady, 2016).

The responsibility of caring for a pet is associated with reduced potentially harmful behaviours, such as substance use (Howe & Easterbrook, 2018). For example, among homeless youth, owning a pet has been associated with reduced substance use (Lem et al., 2013). It has also been suggested that caring for a pet provides individuals with fulfillment and support (Howe & Easterbrook, 2018; Slatter et al., 2018; Thompson, Bender, Ferguson, & Kim, 2015).

Most youth who completed the pet survey reported that having their pet helped to improve their overall well-being, mental health, sense of responsibility, and sense of purpose in life.

IMPROVEMENTS WHICH YOUTH ATTRIBUTED TO HAVING THEIR PET (THOSE WITH A PET)



Source: Youth Survey About Pets (2020).

Note: Among youth who indicated at least quite a bit of improvement.

There were similar responses to an open-ended question about how having a pet has affected youth's life. For example, many credited their pet with improving their mental health and sense of purpose. Some explained that tending to their pet's needs helped them tend to their own needs, which improved their well-being. Others described greater happiness, stability, sense of safety, self-confidence, and openness to new experiences because of their pet, as well as reduced depression, anxiety, and loneliness.

"[My pets] make me happier and more motivated to take care of them and myself."

"They make me happier, they ground me, and they give me more purpose."

"When I had a pet I had something to focus and care for other than myself. By taking care of my pet I in turn started to look after my needs. My pet brought happiness into my life."

"My pet helps me battle my depression... It's a lot easier to get out of bed when I know someone is relying on me for food/water/play."

"[My dog] has helped me battle depression even though she herself is not a service dog. ...She definitely is my light in the darkness and I would not have made it through what I did without her caring nature."

"Given me a purpose. I have severe mental illnesses and my bunnies have helped me when I've been at some really low points."

"They give me a lot of comfort and stability and have helped me create a daily routine."

"The emotional connection with my dogs makes me feel safe."

"He is very effective in calming my anxiety, and just looking at him brings me unspeakable joy!"

"[My pet] filled my life with purpose and hope when hope was lost."

"She has changed the way I have viewed life. She's such a happy dog and is always ready to do or go somewhere new which I have lacked the encouragement to do. She's brought me to open up a lot and to be willing to go on more adventures."

YOUTH SURVEY ABOUT PETS PARTICIPANTS

Some survey respondents commented that knowing their pet relied on them motivated them to adopt a healthier and more stable lifestyle.

“When I need someone, I wanna go to take care of my dog which helps me to take care of myself and my recovery with drugs. Been almost three years clean and my dog has been a big part of that because if I go downhill my dog wouldn’t have anybody to take care of him so I have to take care of myself in order to be with him, and for him to be happy and healthy.”

“I learned to stabilize my whole life. My dogs’ safety and well-being is my top priority so I spend all my spare time with them. Since getting my first dog I haven’t done drugs, stayed out partying, and have always ensured I have stable housing.”

YOUTH SURVEY ABOUT PETS PARTICIPANTS

BENEFITS LINKED TO CARING FOR A PET

In response to the open-ended question on the pet survey about how their pet affected their life, many youth emphasized the benefits that taking care of a pet had on them, such as a greater sense of responsibility, as well as improved patience and life-skills (e.g., cleaning, time management, budgeting).

Youth who were the ones who usually or always took care of their pet were more likely to experience benefits than those who took care of their pet less often. For example, if youth were the ones who usually or always groomed their pet when needed they were more likely to report an improved sense of responsibility (83% vs. 62% of those who did so less often), sense of purpose (78% vs. 58%) and patience (61% vs. 44%) due to having their pet.

Similarly, taking their pet to the vet when needed was associated with a greater sense of responsibility (81% vs. 65%), as was giving their pet needed medication.

“[My pet] taught me a lot of responsibility for something other than myself as I was tasked with taking care of his daily needs.”

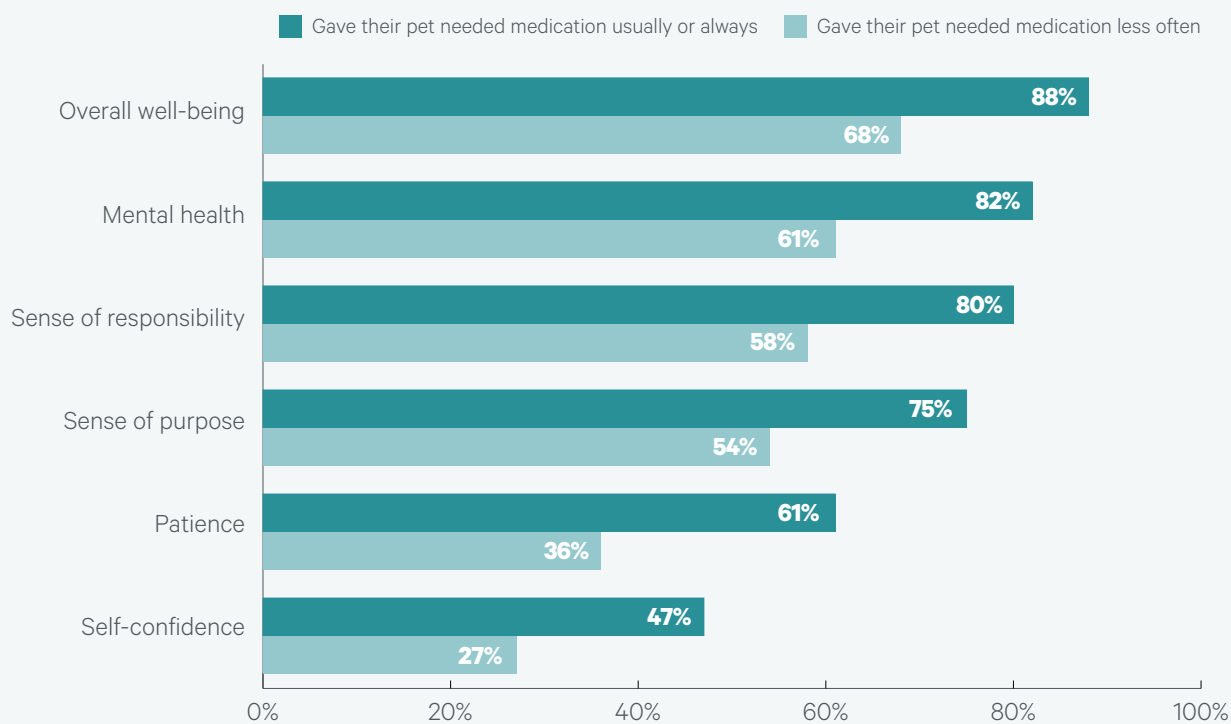
“Learned to be extremely patient, responsible, and caring.”

“Strengthened my sense of responsibility, especially with time management, financial planning, and ability to look for/find housing.”

“I have learned to plan financially better to help [my pets] and feed them well, as one of them has health problems.”

YOUTH SURVEY ABOUT PETS PARTICIPANTS

HOW OFTEN YOUTH WERE THE ONES WHO GAVE THEIR PET MEDICATION WHEN NEEDED IN RELATION TO IMPROVEMENTS IN THEIR LIVES



Source: Youth Survey About Pets (2020).

Note: Youth who indicated quite a bit or very much improvement.

“I learned how to keep a strict schedule (feed every day at 6, let out every hour, etc.).”

“I no longer let moldy dishes sit around my house, I don’t want [my pets] getting sick... I also get up earlier than normal to feed them.”

“Helps me keep up with cleaning around the house.”

“My pet causes me to get up early and walk them and has taught me responsibility and the ability to prioritize (always pets come first to me).”

YOUTH SURVEY ABOUT PETS PARTICIPANTS

EXERCISE

International studies have shown that youth with dogs are more likely to meet daily and weekly guidelines for moderate to vigorous exercise (Christian, Trapp, Lauritsen, Wright, & Giles-Corti, 2012; Engelberg et al., 2016).

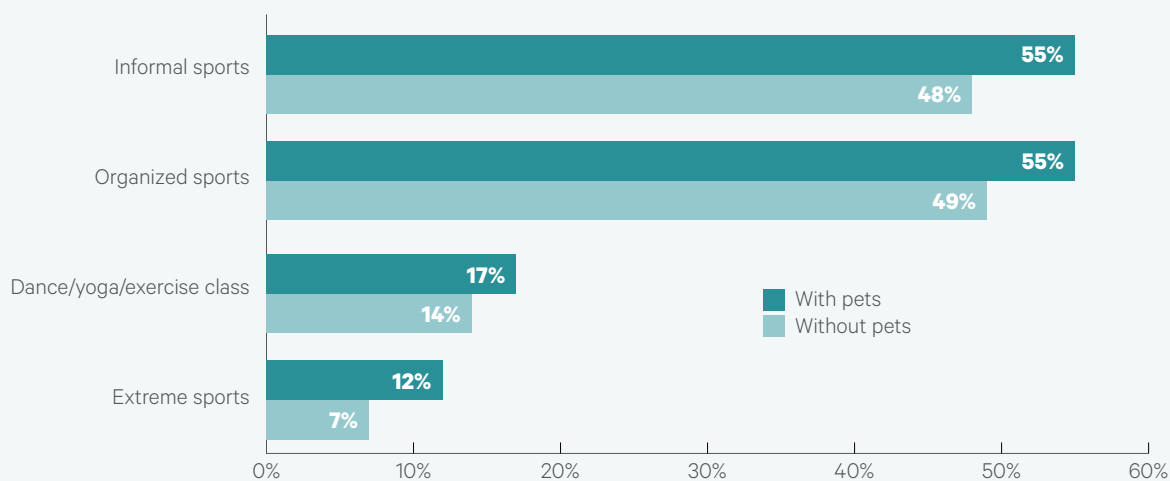
Taking care of a pet was linked to getting more exercise, which in turn was associated with better health and well-being.

Among youth who completed the 2018 BC AHS, youth with a pet were more likely to exercise regularly than those without a pet. For example, they were more likely to engage in moderate to vigorous exercise for 60 minutes a day on at least three days in the past week (75% vs. 68% without a pet), including exercising every day in the past week (19% vs. 16%).

Youth who experienced challenges in their life were also more likely to exercise if they had a pet. For example, youth with a physical disability were more likely to exercise for 60 minutes a day on at least three days in the past week if they had a pet (68% vs. 49% of those without a pet).

Youth with a pet were more likely than their peers without a pet to participate in physical activity on a weekly basis over the past year including informal sports; organized sports; extreme sports; and dance, yoga and exercise classes (78% vs. 71%). They were also more likely to participate in these activities at the highest frequency. For example, 19% of youth with a pet participated four or more times a week in informal sports such as hiking in the past year, compared to 17% without a pet (among those who completed the 2018 BC AHS).

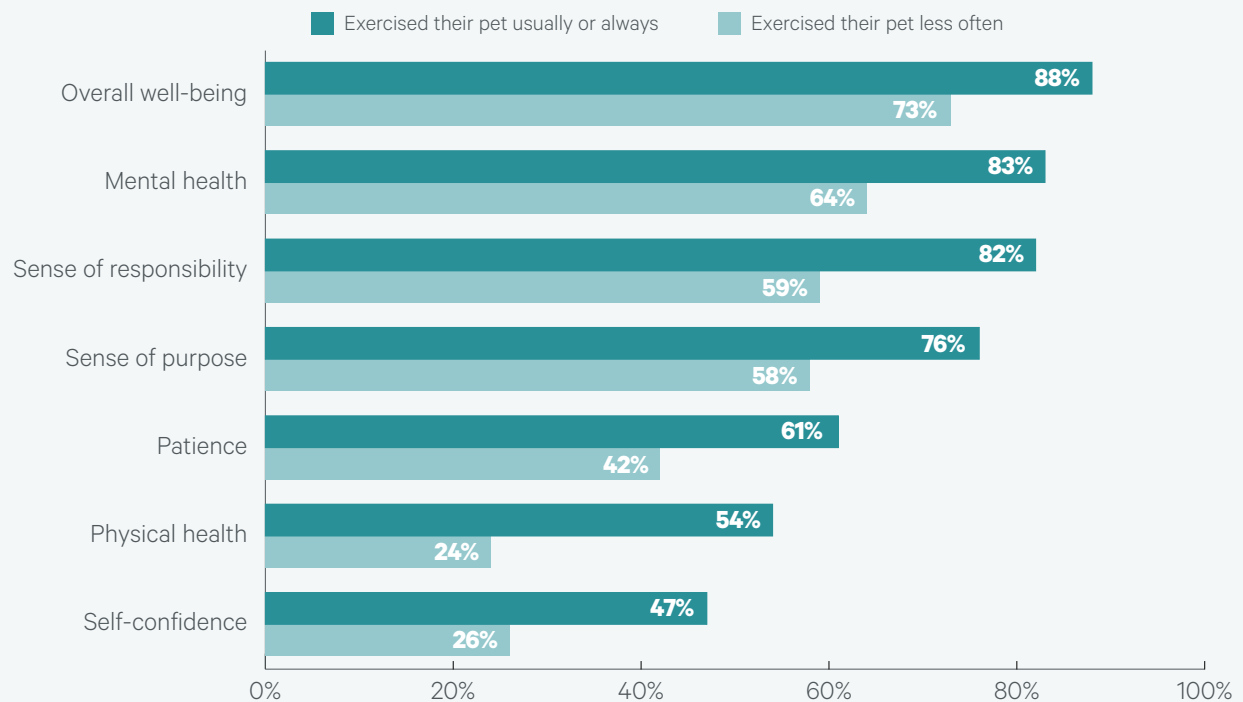
YOUTH WHO PARTICIPATED IN PHYSICAL ACTIVITY AT LEAST WEEKLY IN THE PAST YEAR



Source: 2018 BC AHS.

Among youth who completed the pet survey and had a pet, those who usually or always were the ones who exercised their pet were more likely to report improved physical and mental health than youth who exercised their pet less often.

HOW OFTEN YOUTH EXERCISED THEIR PET IN RELATION TO IMPROVEMENTS IN THEIR LIVES



Source: Youth Survey About Pets (2020).

Note: Youth who indicated quite a bit or very much improvement.

In response to an open-ended question on the pet survey about how their pet affected their life, a number of survey respondents explained that needing to exercise their pet contributed to an increase in their own level of physical activity, time outdoors, and improved health.

“Having a dog gave me another reason to be active because I needed to take my dog on walks frequently.”

“[I’ve learned] how to run. Seriously. [My dog] sets a pace and I could never do that before. It sounds strange but we’ve started recently running 5k and it’s perfect with him.”

“I go on hikes almost every day with [my dog] which improves my overall mood and health.”

“I know having a pet really improves my mental health and it gets me out for more walks. I enjoy taking my dog places with me and bringing her for hikes, car rides, walks, and swims.”

“My dog has made me more physically active and has improved my physical health.”

“My dog got me out of the house every day for walks. It reduced my anxiety and depression overall, and gave me a reason to live. More time spent outside.”

“[Our dog] has got me to move more and makes me happy. As a family we are getting out more and he joins us on hikes etc.”

YOUTH SURVEY ABOUT PETS PARTICIPANTS

CONNECTED TO NATURE

A Finnish study found that girls aged 13-16 became connected to nature through their pets, and that both their pets and being in nature improved their emotional and physical health (Wiens, Kyngäs, & Pölkki, 2016).

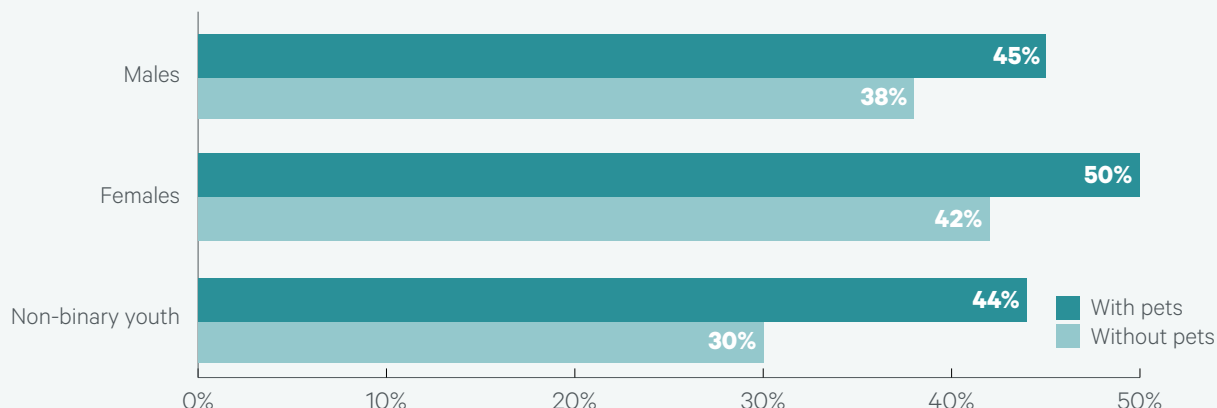
“I am one with nature and animals.”

(BC AHS participant, Interior)

Among youth who completed the pet survey, those who often or always exercised their pet were more likely to feel connected to nature than those who exercised their pet less often (58% vs. 41%).

Among youth who completed the 2018 BC AHS, 48% of youth with a pet felt connected to nature, which was higher than the rate among youth who did not have a pet (40%).

YOUTH WHO OFTEN OR ALWAYS FELT CONNECTED TO NATURE



Source: 2018 BC AHS.

Note: Among youth with pets, the difference between males and non-binary youth was not statistically significant.

Youth felt more connected to nature when they had a pet, regardless of whether they lived in an urban area (47% with pets felt connected vs. 40% without pets) or a rural area (53% vs. 44%).

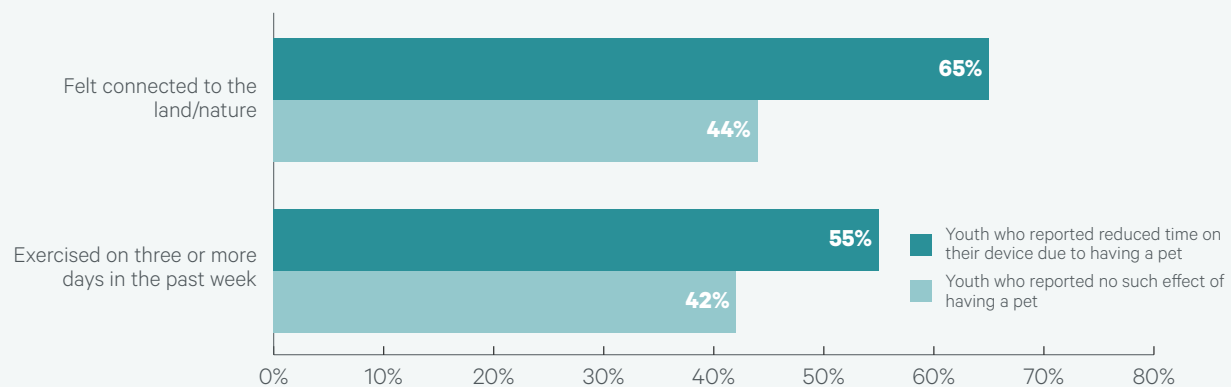
Youth with pets were slightly more likely than those without pets to have felt they spent the right amount of time in nature (56% vs. 55%; among those who completed the 2018 BC AHS).

REDUCED SCREEN TIME

Over half of youth (57%) who completed the pet survey reported that having their pet reduced the amount of time they spent on their phone or other electronic devices, while 42% indicated it had no effect on their screen time, and a very small minority reported that having their pet increased the amount of time they spent on their device.

Youth who experienced a reduction in the amount of time they spent on their device were more likely than those who reported no such change to indicate improvements in their mental health (85% vs. 68%), sense of purpose (81% vs. 58%), and physical health (54% vs. 30%) which they directly attributed to having their pet.

Reporting reduced screen time due to having their pet was also associated with a greater likelihood of exercising on three or more days in the past week and of feeling connected to nature.

**REDUCED TIME ON THEIR DEVICE DUE TO HAVING A PET IN RELATION TO HEALTH AND WELL-BEING
(AMONG YOUTH WITH A PET)**

Source: Youth Survey About Pets (2020).

"I learned [through having my pet] not to be scared of little things, and I spend more time doing things other than going on my phone."

"I've been a lot happier... because I spend less time on my phone and more time with my dog."

"I am on my phone a lot less. Instead, I am spending it with [my pets]. I do flight and trick training and take them on walks when before I got them, I likely would have been spending that time on the internet."

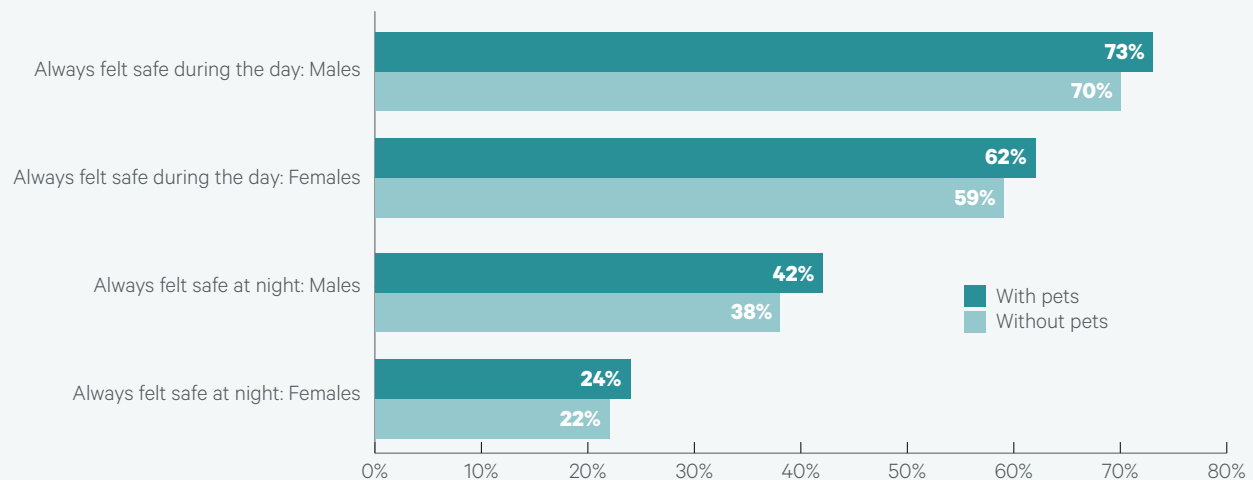
YOUTH SURVEY ABOUT PETS PARTICIPANTS

FEELING SAFE

An Australian study found that youth who had a dog reported feeling more comfortable walking in their neighborhood without an adult than those who did not have a dog (Christian et al., 2012).

Reflecting findings from the 2013 BC AHS, having a pet increased youth's likelihood of feeling safe in their neighbourhood. For example, males and females who completed the 2018 BC AHS were more likely to always feel safe there during the day and at night, and non-binary youth who had a pet were more likely to often or always feel safe in their neighbourhood during the day (76% vs. 66% of those without a pet).

YOUTH WHO ALWAYS FELT SAFE IN THEIR NEIGHBOURHOOD OR COMMUNITY



Source: 2018 BC AHS.

However, the link between having a pet and feeling safe in their neighbourhood was driven by youth in urban areas and was not seen among youth in rural areas.

ACCESS TO CARING ADULTS IN THE COMMUNITY

Youth who take care of pets are more likely to report feeling that they contribute to their communities (Mueller, 2014). Pets can also act as a link between members of a community (Wood, Giles-Corti, Bulsara, & Bosch, 2007).

Among youth who completed the 2018 BC AHS, those with a pet were more likely report there was an adult in their neighbourhood or community (outside their family or school) who really cared about them (69% vs. 60% of those without pets). This was true for youth attending schools in rural areas (74% with pets vs. 67% without pets) and urban areas (68% vs. 60%).

It was also the case for youth with challenges in their life. For example, among youth with Depression, those with a pet were more likely than those without a pet to report they had an adult in their neighbourhood or community who really cared about them (58% vs. 52%), as were youth with Anxiety Disorder who had a pet (65% vs. 59% without a pet).

As in 2013, youth with a pet were also more likely to have an adult outside their family they would feel comfortable talking to if they had a problem (30% vs. 25% without a pet; among those who completed the 2018 BC AHS).

FEELING SKILLED AND CONFIDENT

Reflecting the pattern from five years earlier when youth with a pet were more likely to identify a skill they had, 80% of youth who completed the 2018 BC AHS who had a pet were able to name something they were really good at (such as sports, school, or art), compared to 77% of those without pets. This was also the case for older youth, who generally are less likely to feel skilled. For example, among those aged 17 and older, 79% of those with a pet could name something they were good at compared to 73% of those without a pet.

“I’m really good at riding horses.”
(BC AHS participant, Interior)

Most youth who completed the pet survey (66%) could identify something they were really good at, and several specified they were good at caring for or connecting with their pets or other animals.

ANIMAL-RELATED SKILLS WHICH YOUTH FELT THEY WERE GOOD AT...

“Taking care of my dog and myself.”

“Keeping myself and my dog alive.”

“Giving my dog attention.”

“Working with animals.”

“Parrot care.”

“Dog training.”

“Identifying lots of animal species and connecting with animals.”

“Dog walking for my job!”

“Cuddling with my pets as well as doing research on proper animal care.”

“I am really good at caring for animals and knowing their body language.”

“Loving my dog.”

“I’m a great caretaker and mother to my pet.”

“Taking care of and connecting with animals.”

YOUTH SURVEY ABOUT PETS PARTICIPANTS

CONNECTION, LOVE, & ACCEPTANCE

Pets can offer youth connection and friendship, and are often viewed as a confidant (Wiens et al., 2016).

Young people's positive attitude toward pets has been associated with greater empathy (Jacobson & Chang, 2018).

"Sometimes it's hard making connections with people but with pets, I'm speaking for myself here, it's much easier."
(Youth Survey About Pets participant)

Among those who completed the pet survey, youth who felt more connected to their pet were more likely to directly attribute having a pet to improvements in their overall well-being and mental health than those who felt less connected. Feeling more connected to their pet was not associated with other improvements, likely because the vast majority of survey respondents felt very connected to their pet.

In response to open-ended questions about what they have learned from their pet and how their pet has affected their life, many youth identified learning about and experiencing unconditional love, acceptance, and the strong bond they can develop with others.

"I learned that I have the ability to care for another living thing, and love and be loved in return."

"I've learned that there was truly a piece of my heart and soul missing before I met my dog. It's shown me how deeply you can love someone."

"[My pet] taught me how to love unconditionally."

"They love and care for you as much as you love and care for them."

"Animals are better than people. They are easier to talk to, because they don't talk, and you can just vent on them and they would listen and not talk. Unlike most humans."

"From having pets I've learned that words aren't always needed to form a deep and unbreakable bond."

YOUTH SURVEY ABOUT PETS PARTICIPANTS

FRIENDSHIPS

Pets can be a way for people to connect with others, both in person and online (e.g., Wood et al., 2015).

In 2013, youth with a pet who completed the BC AHS were more likely than those without a pet to have a greater number of friends in their school or community. In 2018, youth with a pet were slightly more likely than those without a pet to have at least one in-person friend in their school or community (97% vs. 96%), and also to have at least one online friend they had never met in person (35% vs. 32%).

YOUTH'S SUGGESTIONS FOR SUPPORTING YOUNG PEOPLE WITH PETS

Findings in this section are among all youth who completed the Youth Survey About Pets.

“The cost of vet care and housing is downright the biggest issue/barrier for owning pets.”
(Youth Survey About Pets participant)

Pet survey respondents were asked an open-ended question about how young people with pets can be better supported. Their suggestions primarily focused on financial supports (such as more affordable vet care) and housing, followed by educating youth on how to care for their pet. Other suggestions pertained to access to emotional support animals, and for there to be more pet-friendly establishments and transportation options.

FINANCIAL SUPPORTS

Youth's suggestions included:

- Greater availability of payment plans for veterinary costs (instead of having to pay all at once).
- Lower costs for spaying/neutering, including specific programs for low cost spays/neuters, and grants for spaying/neutering.
- More affordable pet insurance.
- Other financial supports for youth with pets—such as government allowances to support sick pets; subsidies to pay for vet care; crisis grants if youth cannot afford needed vet care; and free or lower cost veterinary care, including sliding-scale fees based on income.
- Availability of food banks that carry pet food and supplies.
- Lower adoption fees.
- Free pet boarding for those who need to access inpatient support (e.g., for mental health or substance use challenges).

“With more financial support it would be a lot easier with vet bills. Being a young youth and having my own dog that’s been one of the hardest things.”

“There should be allowances to help support pets if youth are receiving a living allowance.”

“Some sort of crisis grant if a youth has a pet who gets sick.”

“If the youth is on a Youth Agreement maybe consider having extra money given. I had to pay an unexpected vet bill that was \$800 with no help from my social worker.”

YOUTH SURVEY ABOUT PETS PARTICIPANTS

“Make veterinary care either free or low-cost, as well as transportation to the vet available. And maybe some sort of food bank that carries pet food and supplies.”

“Offering payment plans at vets.... and having a ‘fund’ for people with pets that are low income that can be used for emergency situations.”

“I believe vet bills should be reduced more if we’re expected to keep pets out of pain. I have two animals who are very old...they are clearly in pain every day unless we give them medication, which is expensive.”

“Our animal companions should have free healthcare...Strays also deserve this treatment... they’d be able to get spayed and neutered.”

YOUTH SURVEY ABOUT PETS PARTICIPANTS

HOUSING

Youth identified challenges with finding affordable pet-friendly accommodations, including market rentals as well as post-secondary dormitories. Many suggested not only greater availability of affordable pet-friendly housing, but also that landlords should be required to permit pets.

“Usually, in my experience, lower priced rentals don’t accommodate pets, and these are some of the only places young people can afford housing. In turn, many young people are forced to give up the opportunity to own pets. It would be nice if rentals were unable to refuse animals, or at least take them with a deposit.”

“Better housing options. Rent not being triple because of having a pet.”

“Livable housing that is in our budget that would allow our furry companions.”

“Pet deposits are understandable but banning pets entirely is not.”

“More pet friendly housing. Lots of times when looking for rentals, it’s no pets allowed. My pet is my family and I don’t want him to be excluded.”

“When I did attend university I found separation from my cat difficult. I think the option should be provided for students to have (some) pet friendly dorms, or resident animals in the building.”

YOUTH SURVEY ABOUT PETS PARTICIPANTS

EDUCATION & TRAINING

Youth felt that young people with pets should have better access to information and training on how to properly care for their pet (e.g., nutrition, grooming, exercise, vaccinations), as well as more knowledge about pet insurance.

Further, there were suggestions that more youth-friendly resources should be available to help educate young people on the responsibility that comes with having a pet, including associated costs. Having this information and awareness could help young people make more informed decisions about whether or not they should get a pet. Some felt that young people should be taught about pet care starting in childhood.

“Help educate youth on how to take care of their pets and understand the responsibility before getting a pet.”

“Youth need better education on proper health care and grooming. Also they need to have awareness of costs/pet insurance explained.”

“It would be useful if there were classes or programs available through animal shelters to teach new pet owners how to properly care for their pet as it would greatly benefit both parties.”

“Youth can be better supported by understanding how much time and work goes into animals before they get one. Pets are a commitment and there need to be ways to educate future pet owners.”

“Maybe like workshops on how to properly care for pets... It’s sad when people get pets and then give them away.”

“More access to information about proper animal nutrition and costs of food.”

“Create online video tutorials or programs for first-time pet owners in new situations, such as new puppy or kitten, sick animal, socializing animals, etc.”

“Teach kids about caring for animals as part of their growing up and school life. Encourage them to volunteer with shelters and training organizations.”

“Education and volunteer work that is appropriate for young people and their age would help them realize the responsibility that comes with having a pet.”

YOUTH SURVEY ABOUT PETS PARTICIPANTS

MORE PET-FRIENDLY COMMUNITIES

In addition to suggestions about pet-friendly housing, youth felt that other establishments should be more pet-friendly, such as stores, workplaces, and schools.

They also felt there should be more options for transporting pets, including pet taxis and a transportation service to the vet.

“We could be allowed to bring our pets into stores and workplaces maybe after proving their training is sufficient.”

“Permitted in more places. More pet friendly buildings.”

“Allow pets at schools or work.”

“The ability to bring a caged animal onto public transit in order to bring them to veterinary appointments etc.”

“Having more areas and establishments be pet friendly so young people can incorporate them into their lives better.”

“Pet taxis for those that don’t have a car and are too anxious to take their pet on the bus.”

“Make transportation to the vet available.”

YOUTH SURVEY ABOUT PETS PARTICIPANTS

SERVICE ANIMALS/EMOTIONAL SUPPORT ANIMALS

Youth felt that service animals should be easier for young people to access if they need one. They also felt that emotional support animals should be allowed in youth’s housing accommodations and university residences.

“Service animals are extremely expensive and hard to get especially for young people with diseases and health issues. It should become easier to get one, financial wise.”

“Easier access to service animals. I have a close friend living with PTSD who cannot afford the training costs to train a support dog (but has enough to take care of one). Additionally, for many people my age they cannot access reliable and safe housing if they have a pet.”

“Allowing ESA’s [Emotional Support Animals] in housing such as university residences (where logistically feasible).”

“Better access to emotional support animal supported housing. I know it is important to my health but I’m poor and can’t afford to live in a place that allows them. Even though it would help me function and eventually get a job.”

YOUTH SURVEY ABOUT PETS PARTICIPANTS

CONCLUSION

There is currently little information available about the role of pets and other animals in supporting positive youth development. This report has added to our knowledge base by sharing data from over 38,500 young people in BC.

Similar to the first Connections and Companionship report, this report has shown the comfort and friendship that pets can offer youth, and particularly those who experience challenges such as trauma and disconnection. It has also demonstrated the contribution that pets can make to more positive health and well-being for their guardians. For example, caring for a pet was associated with a greater likelihood of youth exercising, feeling connected to nature, and feeling skilled (2018 BC AHS), as well as with reduced screen time (Youth Survey About Pets).

However, the report also highlights the barriers and pressures associated with having a pet, particularly for youth who worry about being unable to afford veterinary care when their pet needed it. Almost 4 in 10 youth who were not financially well off reported their pet had missed out on needed vet care in the past year. This is not only concerning from an animal welfare perspective but also for the distress experienced by the youth, particularly as those who were worried about the financial cost of caring for a pet were more likely to experience extreme stress, poorer mental health, and lower life satisfaction.

The first Connections and Companionship report was published in 2016 and brought attention to the challenges that homeless youth with pets faced when attempting to access housing and services in BC. Although some youth services made changes to their policies to be more inclusive of pets following the release of that report, those challenges are clearly still present in 2020. For example, youth have continued to report problems finding and maintaining housing, missing out on leisure activities, and forgoing needed health and wellness services (Youth Survey About Pets; 2018 BC AHS). Many survey participants also articulated their hopes that service providers would consider making accommodations for companion animals to ensure youth do not have to choose between their pet and accessing the services and supports they need.

Given the current pandemic and the positive influence that pets have been shown to have on physical and mental health, it seems more important than ever to listen to the suggestions made by youth who completed the pet survey. These include the need to support youth to have better access to information and training on pet care, as well as access to pet-friendly services and housing that is safe and affordable.

This study is one of the few in Canada to look at the role of pets in the lives of young people. More comprehensive research is needed to continue to explore the possible health effects of having a pet. Such research can increase our understanding of the benefits and challenges young people experience when they have a pet, and ensure they are supported to fulfill their responsibilities to any animal in their care. In the meantime, it is hoped that the findings in this report and youth's suggestions will contribute to changes in policies and practices which will improve outcomes for young people and their pets.

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