

# Dogs provide critical support for homeless people, study finds

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Homeless man with his dog on a London street. Credit: Nick Fewings on Unsplash

Homeless people and their dogs have a mutually beneficial relationship, with the dogs providing critical support for their owners' emotional and mental health while owners make every effort to protect dogs and meet their welfare needs, new research has found.

A new study by academics at the University of Bristol Veterinary School and published in the *Zoophilologica Polish Journal of Animal Studies* highlights the importance of making sure there are sufficient services available for [homeless people](#) with animals and points out that allowing dogs to remain with their owners could improve engagement with charity services.

The U.K. [homeless population](#) is increasing. Companion animal ownership among homeless people is not uncommon, but the positive and negative consequences of this association for both humans and animals are not fully researched.

The researchers carried out semi-structured interviews with 21 homeless dog owners in the South West, recruited via a dog welfare charity that works with homeless people and their dogs. The interviews covered how their dog impacted them, how they met the dog's welfare needs and the costs and benefits of a homeless living for both the owner and the dog.

Dr. Chelsie Bailey, one of the study's authors and an Honorary Teaching Associate at Bristol Veterinary School, said, "One of the most positive findings our study found was that not one of the dogs we saw lacked basic veterinary care, and this was due to the accessibility provided by the centers linked with Dogs Trust."

The researchers found dogs provided similar benefits as dogs owned in households, but additionally owners believed dogs helped with their routine, assisted them through [mental health issues](#) and gave continuous emotional support. Owners noted difficulties accessing long- and short-term accommodation, and services, such as shops, due to their dog, and generally only entrusted other individuals to look after their dog in urgent cases.

All the dogs received veterinary care as needed, were treated against

parasites, and fed adequately. The main concern expressed by owners was providing somewhere warm enough and large for their dog to sleep, but the research team suggest access to a safe place to avoid frightening stimuli may also be important. During the interviews many owners used the dog to help facilitate a discussion about themselves, allowing them to open up about the difficulties of their past, and future.

Dr. Nicola Rooney, Senior Lecturer in Wildlife and Conservation at Bristol Veterinary School and one of the paper's authors, added, "Dogs can play an incredibly important role in enhancing [mental health](#), and this study shows this is equally true for the homeless community. Homeless dogs compared favorably to home owned dogs in many areas when considering how their welfare needs were met. The dogs we studied had high levels of human companionship and access to veterinary care and flea and worm prevention.

"However, several potential issues were identified surrounding thermal comfort, contact with other dogs, and the ability to avoid things which may scare them, although the latter two issues are likely equally common in the homed dog population. Tailor-made education initiatives addressing the challenges specific to this population may be valuable."

Dr. Bailey added, "One issue highlighted in this study was the variation in what some shelters and day centers classed as 'dog friendly.' For example, we found some shelters and day centers provided food but didn't allow dogs into the premises which meant the owners were less likely to access proper support. Places that would allow owners to keep their pets with them at all times could help owners seek further support and access support properly."

The study highlighted the importance of ongoing charity work to inform homeless people with dogs about the help and support that is available to them. Most charity schemes require and assist with the dog being

neutered. This research suggests that this requirement deterred some participants from using this service leading to further mistrust, and potentially affecting the veterinary care that is wanted for the animal in the future. Uptake is likely to increase if individuals do not have to neuter their dogs to be eligible, or if attitudes towards neutering [dogs](#) in the homeless population were to change.

**More information:** Chelsie Bailey et al, "A Part of Me": The Value of Dogs to Homeless Owners and the Implications for Dog Welfare, *Zoophilologica Polish Journal of Animal Studies* (2023). DOI: [10.31261/ZOOPHILOGICA.2023.S.05](https://doi.org/10.31261/ZOOPHILOGICA.2023.S.05).  
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