

Public retains positive attitudes toward service and support animals

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Credit: North Carolina State University

How do people feel about service, emotional support and therapy animals in public spaces? It can get a bit complicated, according to a new pilot study by NC State University's Regina Schoenfeld.

Schoenfeld, an associate professor of veterinary education and development, along with colleagues from Colorado State University, wanted to determine whether recent controversies over the legitimacy of emotional [support animals](#) in [public spaces](#) had affected [public attitudes](#) toward service and therapy animals.

"There have been stories in the media about people bringing animals onto airplanes and in other public spaces and calling them support animals when in fact they are pets, and we wanted to see if this type of negative media coverage had affected public perception of these animals," Schoenfeld says.

One issue with public attitudes toward service animals is that there are three different categories of these animals, and the public very often doesn't know the difference.

The public is most familiar with service [dogs](#). These dogs, like Seeing Eye dogs for example, are individually owned and trained to perform specific tasks for a person with a disability. Their access to public spaces is protected under the Americans with Disabilities Act.

In contrast, therapy dogs work with mental-health providers and are owned by a health professional. They're commonly found visiting patients in hospitals or in psychiatrists' offices, and don't have a role in public spaces.

Finally, emotional support animals can be prescribed by a health professional and are defined as animals that provide assistance to someone with a diagnosed psychological disability. These animals are not required to have any specialized training, can be any species (as opposed to the dogs most regularly used in the previous categories) and are owned as pets. Like service animals, emotional support animals accompany their owners in public.

In a small [pilot study](#), Schoenfeld and her colleagues created an online survey to determine public attitudes about these animals. Respondents were screened to remove any who utilized any type of service animal. They received 284 usable responses out of 505 respondents.

Generally speaking, respondents were most comfortable around [service](#) dogs in public spaces, when compared to therapy or emotional support dogs, with approximately 60 percent of respondents supporting their presence in areas ranging from restaurants to airplanes to college dorm rooms. They were less comfortable with therapy dogs and emotional support dogs; however, a little over a third of participants (the actual number varied from 34.5 to 46.1 percent depending on the situation) still felt that they should be allowed in these spaces. Interestingly, the majority (63 percent) didn't feel that people with emotional support animals were presenting them fraudulently.

"It seems to come down to two main issues: visibility and trust," Schoenfeld says. "Service dogs are usually in the company of people with visible disabilities, whereas [emotional support](#) animals serve people with psychological disabilities, which are not visible. That's where the attitudes get a little murkier.

"It was encouraging to see that the responses from the study didn't seem to reflect the misrepresentation portrayed through the media," Schoenfeld continues. "Whether that is due to the reports being exaggerated or the population sample in the survey is something we would like to explore further."

More information: Regina Schoenfeld-Tacher et al. Public Perceptions of Service Dogs, Emotional Support Dogs, and Therapy Dogs, *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* (2017). [DOI: 10.3390/ijerph14060642](https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph14060642)

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