

JUST SIX  
QUESTIONS

RESEARCH  
SUMMARY



## Key Details

### KEY WORDS

Depression, homeless, pet ownership, street-involved, youth

### POPULATION GROUP

Street-involved youth

### STEPPING UP THEMES

Health and Wellness

### RESEARCH ORIGIN

Canada

### SOURCE

Academic

**“The relationship between many street-involved youth and their pets has benefits, for example, helping these youth cope with loneliness, providing them with companionship, unconditional love, and non-judgmental support, and motivating them to act more responsibly and make better choices to avoid being separated from the pet”**

# The Protective Association between Pet Ownership and Depression among Street-Involved Youth: A Cross-Sectional Study

## 1. What is the research about?

This research is about the impact pet ownership has on mental health status of street-involved youth. Street-involved youth have high rates of mental health illness; the majority of these individuals do not have access to therapy or treatment. Outside of traditional medical mental health interventions, this research explores “how a pet may provide homeless youth with emotional support and help them deal with the adversity associated with homelessness, including poor mental health” (p. 125).

Previous studies demonstrate that relationships with pets can be important, positive, and motivating factors in the lives of street-involved youth. The researchers describe the “pet before self” effect where youth make decisions that prioritize their relationship with their pet. For example, they will choose to sleep on the street with their pet rather than in a shelter that refuses their pet. They will avoid substances and involvement with the law in order to remain present for their pet. Youth with pets adopt a more structured life and feel a sense of pride, responsibility and connection with their pet. Pet ownership can also be a “social facilitator” in that owning a pet may lead to more social interactions, which can help a street-involved young person to feel less invisible.

## 2. Where did the research take place?

This study took place in Ontario, Canada.

## 3. Who is this research about?

This research is about street-involved youth, age 16-24, who lived in four cities in Ontario: Toronto, Hamilton, Ottawa and Kingston.

## 4. How was the research done?

A participatory action research approach was employed in this study. Three paid peer-youth researchers were hired to participate in all aspects of the study. Two were pet owners.

Researchers and one of the peer-youth researchers designed a survey to test whether street involved youth with pets have lower rates of depression than street involved youth who do not have pets. The survey included questions about the human-animal relationship, drug-use, living situation, and self-reports of depression and loneliness.

189 street-involved youth, some pet owners, and some not, were surveyed in four large cities in Ontario between March and June 2011.

Posters located in drop-in centres and shelters were used to recruit the youth. Peer outreach workers in the communities, as well as word of mouth, also helped to attract participants. Program staff administered surveys at seven youth serving locations in Ontario, five of which were drop-in centres, or youth shelters. Youth received a \$20 honorarium for their participation.

### 5. What are the key findings?

89 participants owned pets. Of the pet owners, 52 were male and 35 were female. A total of 121 pets were owned by youth in this study. The sample was representative of street-involved youth in Canada. The age of first leaving home ranged from 10 to 24, with a mean age of 15.7. The level of education Grade 11 or lower (61.0%). And, consistent with previous studies, most youth were Caucasian (67.2%) and males were two times more likely to be street-involved than females (65.1% to 34.9%).

The research found that pet ownership has an impact on rates of depression. For street-involved youth in the study, 64.5% reported experiencing depression. Fewer males (57.6%) reported depression than females (78.8%). Controlling for gender and drug use, youth who did not own pets were three times more likely to be depressed than youth who did own pets.

The researchers caution that this is an analysis of point-in-time data and it can't be used to make causal claims (e.g. pets decrease depression in street-involved youth).

### 6. Why does this research matter for youth work?

This research has some important policy implications for street-involved youth. Research demonstrates that the general quality of mental health for youth on the street is poor. This study suggests pet ownership has a positive impact on the lives of street-involved youth. Pets are identified as a protective factor against depression, yet policies of most shelters and service agencies are pet free, presenting a barrier for pet owners. Organizations and programs should explore options for meeting the needs of street-involved youth and their pets. If a street-involved youth is caring for a pet, the pet relationship may motivate the youth to seek additional supports and opportunities.



Lem, M., Coe, J., Haley, D., Stone, E., O'Grady, W. (2016). *The Protective Association between Pet Ownership and Depression among Street-involved Youth: A Cross-sectional Study*. *Anthrozoos* 29(1). 123-136.