



**How Pets Affect the Lives of People Experiencing Poverty and
Precarity in Ontario**

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of Valparaiso University by
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in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
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Abstract

What do the personal experiences of people experiencing poverty and precarity with their pets tell us? Many people believe that having companion animals is only acceptable if you have the means to pay for their care. Yet research related to homeless pet owners and those experiencing mental illness, point to the emotional support, health benefits and companionship that pets can provide. In this introductory participatory research study, the effects of pet ownership on everyday life in Ontario was examined in relation to poverty and precarity through a survey and interview. Participants were asked to recommend community programs that would support their needs. The findings suggest that not only do pets play a critical role in the health, companionship and mental well-being of their guardians, pets can even save lives. Participants most wanted financial assistance for veterinary care, sensitivity training for social service and animal welfare professionals, pet food available in food banks, and pet friendly public transit. Suggestions on how to implement these programs are discussed along with next steps and ideas for stake holders to consider in future community programming.

Key Words: pets, companion animal, pet owner, pet guardian, poverty, precarity, participatory research, veterinary care, Ontario, one-health model, food bank, social service, community program, animal welfare, public transit, sensitivity training

Chapter 1: Introduction

Goal

Through this thesis I'd like to investigate the role pets play in the everyday lives of people experiencing poverty and precarious situations. I will be conducting a participatory research study that allows participants to share their stories and influence the course of research. At times people have to face incredibly stressful and often unexpected emergencies in their lives. Hospitalization, incarceration, natural disaster, mental illness, domestic violence and homelessness leave people struggling to take care of themselves and find alternative accommodation and support. If these people also have companion animals, the situation gets even more complicated and stressful. I hope to gain insight from the people who are experiencing these challenges in how they see their futures, and what ideas or solutions they might implement if they had the opportunity. When participants are able to share their personal stories and use the knowledge to inform solutions it can be an empowering experience (Cornwall & Jewkes, 1995; Ocean, 2005).

I am the director of Second Hope Circle (SHC), a registered nonprofit that focuses on assisting pets, their guardians and nonprofits through education, community programs and financial aid. Through this research study, my goal is to inform future programs and services that Second Hope Circle might offer. While I have thought extensively about starting a temporary foster care program and a financial assistance program to help people and pets, I have not personally experienced precarity or a situation that might make it challenging for me to keep my pets. I want SHC's programs to be firmly grounded in the personal experiences and ideas of those affected, in order to be of most use to the community.

This research project will begin the formation of connections with local social service organizations. Ideally these relationships will extend past the research so that we can continue to focus on human-animal welfare.

Rational

Working in the field of animal welfare, it quickly became apparent that it would be challenging to assist pets without also assisting their guardians. Most of the people who contact Second Hope Circle are individuals who refer to themselves as 'low income', dealing with poverty, disability, mental illness, or are part of the student or senior populations. I hear from the individuals themselves, concerned family members and social service providers. The majority of requests for assistance are due to a passionate desire to remain with their pets. Usually there is an emergency, financial difficulty or the person has been living in a precarious situation that is threatening to separate the guardian from their companion animal. Refer to Appendix A for personal stories from pet guardians experiencing precarity from Ontario and British Columbia.

One of the main goals of Second Hope Circle is to help keep people and pets together. Fewer animals surrendered and in need of new homes lessens the financial burden on shelters and rescues. Beyond numbers is the incredible bond I have seen between caregivers and their pets. Both people and animals benefit from these powerful relationships emotionally and physically. I have met guardians who would do anything for their pets, and animals that have become depressed after being rehomed. Helping to maintain the human-animal bond is the main goal of this project. Guardians who are facing extremely difficult and unexpected situations don't want to give up their pets. And it's often

in the best interests of both people and pets to stay together. While my personal experiences with Second Hope Circle have informed my interest in the topic of pets and precarity, there is very little scientific literature on the subject. What the limited literature does show is that helping animals increases the health, well-being and social service utilization by human caregivers. This research will continue to fill in gaps in the literature and assist Second Hope Circle and other social service organizations to educate themselves and inform programs and services.

Population

The main participants are those individuals who agree to share their stories and insights during the study. Participants will have had or currently experience poverty or a precarious situation with one or more companion animals. Or they will have faced an emergency situation where there was a threat or outcome of separation from their pet. During the time period of precarity they will have been living in Ontario. The participants will most likely be utilizing the help of a social service agency such as a woman's shelter, youth centre, homeless or drop in centre, hospital or animal shelter. While this research project may not be able to directly assist participants with their current situations, the participation in the project will provide the opportunity to have their voices heard. Participants will be provided with current available resources and facilitated when possible on ideas of their own design. Future pet guardians in the community will be able to benefit from this research by increased access to social services.

This research project will also benefit social service organizations in the community. Many organizations are unaware or unsure how to assist both humans and animals.

Organizations will benefit by increased knowledge of human animal welfare, and have research to back up proposed programs. I hope the project will foster increased connection and cross reporting with other community organizations. Lastly, the companion animals of those involved in the study (and future guardians) will benefit from the research. The research will inform future programs and services, which will help people and pets remain together.

Methodology

In order to further examine the role pets play in the lives of people living in precarious situations, participatory research (PR) will be considered. According to Cornwall and Jewkes (1995), PR is unlike standard research in that PR is focused on issues of power. Not only does PR attempt to reduce uneven power dynamics between researcher and participants; the main goal is often to disrupt the oppression and lack of power felt by participants in their community. PR encourages choice, and presents opportunities for participant's choices to be acted upon (Cornwall & Jewkes 1995).

In the literature review found in Chapter 2, several solutions are proposed by a variety of different authors to assist people and their pets. I myself have considered different solutions and attempted to implement them through Second Hope Circle. Yet it's the people we are trying to help that must utilize *our* solutions and find them helpful, and often they don't. PR allows participants to direct the research towards themes and actions that make sense for them. This ability to have power over the research can empower individuals if also paired with community empowerment and facilitation for change. One of the women involved in the participatory research project, *Policies of Exclusion, Poverty and*

Health stated that, “When I read the goals of the project, I thought: I can have my voice heard. I can work with other women who want to see the same changes happen, to give women their strength and dignity back (p. 155).” Not only is empowerment important, when solutions come from the affected community, they can work towards creating their own projects and ideas to implement them. The implementation of solutions by the community (facilitated by experts when asked) is much more sustainable than an outside group coming in and doing everything themselves. For the reasons of personal experience, empowerment and sustainability, PR seems to be the best choice for this research project.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

People have to face incredibly stressful and often unexpected emergencies in their lives. Hospitalization, incarceration, natural disaster, mental illness, abusive home environment and homelessness leave people struggling to take care of themselves and find alternative accommodation and support. Poverty and precarity are additional factors that may contribute or make challenging situations that much more difficult. A person facing a challenging situation who also has companion animals, has yet another hurdle to overcome. Animals are not allowed in most social institutions like shelters, community centres and hospitals. If there is no one in your support system who can look after an animal for a short (or long) amount of time, where do you take that animal if an emergency situation arises? Often, these pets are surrendered to local city animal shelters. Pets may also be abandoned outside or left behind in the person’s former residence. Additional options could include finding an animal rescue with an available foster home, or euthanasia

at a vet clinic or city-run animal shelter. While some of these options may be available, they are unlikely to be the best options for the pet or guardian. Surrendering or abandoning a pet you would keep under different circumstances is extremely difficult emotionally. This can lead to additional stress and complicated grief during an already traumatic time, and limit physical and emotional healing (Lem, Coe, & Haley, 2013 & Holcombe, Strand, Nugent, & Ng, 2016), p70). In fact, as this literature review will highlight, considering the person and pet as a unit actually improves both human and animal welfare.

There is very little literature that focuses on the issues faced by people living in precarious situations or facing emergencies who have pets. Related research includes people who are homeless (especially youth) and their pets, how social workers should consider pets, domestic violence and pets, and the importance of companion animals for a variety of different populations. The following review tries to focus on literature from Canada but does include a few studies from the United States. While the topics are diverse, they all focus on the importance of pets in people's lives and how this might affect someone going through a challenging time in their lives. The human animal bond can be incredibly powerful.

Poverty and Precarity

Precarious situations usually involve a lack of consistent employment, food or housing. A person may be experiencing poverty and homelessness. Immigrants, women, people of indigenous background and those born to parents living in poverty are all more likely to experience precarity (Mascella, Teja, & Thompson, 2009). Additionally, Ocean and WISE (2005) found that abuse experienced by women living in Vancouver was a predictive

indicator of future poverty. Many people living in poverty also have pets. In a participatory research project conducted by Ocean (2005), a third of the participants living in poverty mentioned having pets in the past, present or future. High percentages of pet guardians were reported in other studies on homeless youth and adults, women leaving domestic violence and people seeking help for their mental health, including as many as 50-70% of those interviewed (Hunt & Stein, 2007; Lem, Coe, & Haley, 2013; Powelson and Smith, 2017; Rhoades, Winetrobe, & Rice, 2015; Ascione et al., 2007). What would someone in a precarious situation want to say about their companion animal? What would they want us to know?

When a guardian contacts a rescue, shelter, social worker, or other service provider it is usually recommended or assumed that they will rehome their pet. Why are pets rehomed in the first place? Research points to the fact that there is usually more than one reason why a pet is relinquished. Allergies, moving, behavioural issues and financial reasons are the most cited responses for why a person has decided to surrender their pet (Lambert et al., 2015). In another study focused on dog surrenders in Los Angeles, "Cost, and notably medical costs for veterinary concerns, was a frequently mentioned factor for relinquishment (p1324)." An inability to pay for the dogs' needs was commonly cited as something that had changed in the household that contributed to the decision to relinquish the dog. Contacting the shelter was often the first thing a guardian had tried when considering the relinquishment of their dog. However, when asked, most of the guardians were willing to pursue assistance from the shelter before deciding to relinquish (Dolan et al., 2015).

Researching why pets are surrendered is an important step in finding a solution to

minimize the number of pets needing homes. In a study titled "*A Case study in how institutions 'think' about clients' needs*" (2003), Irvine conducted ethnographic research at an animal shelter in the US. She found that there are some specific ways in which staff members limit the way in which they are able to help both people and pets. Animal shelters and rescues generally use a short survey with preset responses when a pet is surrendered. This can be restrictive, and means that someone bringing their pet into the shelter to surrender may not select all of their reasons for their course of action. This leads to an inaccurate representation of why the pet has come to the shelter. The experience can also be challenging emotionally. If the guardian considers the real and imagined threat of negative remarks from shelter staff, it can create an environment that encourages the guardian to leave their pets and get out of the shelter as quickly as possible (Irvine, 2003). In fact, animals are often left outside shelters in the middle of the night. It's unusual for shelter staff to interview a guardian with an incoming animal, not only because of time constraints but because guardians and staff may be unwilling or too distressed to do so (Irvine, 2003). The language, attitude and actions of people working in the social service field can have far reaching effects. The way service providers label their clients can perpetuate the 'definitions' associated with those labels. The example Irvine uses the term 'surrender' for the action of re-homing a pet through a shelter. Animal shelters use this term (compared with rehome, abandon, give away, give up etc.), as a way to encourage working with a shelter. The implication is that 'good pet owners' work with shelters and it's the right thing to do. Yet the shelter may also malign those who surrender their pets as 'bad pet owners' for re-homing their pet at all (Irvine, 2003). When guardians feel judged or misunderstood they do not trust or want to work with animal shelters. Many of the people

seeking help through Second Hope Circle had previously contacted another organization and were made to feel badly about their decision to rehome or seek assistance.

Additionally, a number of people have approached SHC after contacting ten or more other organizations that did not respond to them at all.

In a study by Zimolag & Krupa (2009) on the affects of pet guardianship on individuals living with serious mental illness in Ontario Canada, 18% of respondents were pet guardians. They felt the lower percentage of pets (compared with 53% of Canadians households having a cat/dog) might be explained by the precarity of housing experienced by participants. All of the people living in community situations met the criteria for poverty, and the researchers felt that financial constraints could be one reason for the lower percentage of pet guardianship. Additionally, while Ontario cannot evict a tenant with a pet (unless that pet is causing damage/is dangerous/interfering with other tenants), this remains a fear for many people and many landlords will illegally insist that tenants not have pets. The pet guardians in this study scored higher on the Global Assessment of Functioning (GAF) test, which may mean pet guardianship is beneficial, or that the pet guardians had fewer symptoms to start with. The pet guardians also scored higher on community integration. The authors found that the financial costs associated with pet ownership were the main barrier of having a pet for people with serious mental illness. Sixty three percent of the non-pet owner respondents said they wanted a pet. Zimolag & Krupa had recommendations for social service providers including providing support and education in improving individual skills related to caring for a pet, workshops on how to care for pets, pet groups, and creating a plan of care for the pet that support workers are included in.

Violence and Animals

Violence against women and children is connected to violence against animals (Cartwright, 2017). Women will delay leaving an abusive home if they fear for their pets' safety (Ascione et al., 2007). Children living in a home with domestic violence are 20 times more likely to have seen animals abused (Ascione, Weber & Wood 1997b) and men who witness abuse to animals before age 13 are more likely to participate in acts of cruelty in the future (Daly & Morton, 2008). A study by Currie (2006) found that children exposed to animal abuse were three times as likely to abuse animals than those in a control population. In a study titled "*Examining the nexus between domestic violence and animal abuse in a national sample of service providers*", Krienert, Walsh, Matthews, & McConkey (2012) looked at the prevalence of animal abuse in domestic violence situations from women's shelter staff in the United States. Seven hundred and sixty-seven shelters responded to the survey. Krienert et. al. found that 94% of respondents with animals delayed leaving an abusive home for fear of their pet's safety, and 80% of children at the shelters discussed witnessing animal abuse. Shelter staff in this study reported that 43% of the women staying at the shelter reported that their children had abused animals. It was found that 45% of shelters ask questions about animals in their intake evaluations, and 57% of the shelters reported some level of assistance in finding care or placement for animals. Importantly, staff mentioned the barriers to providing care for companion animals,

“For those agencies indicating that they did not offer companion animal-related programs or assistance, the most common reason identified was a lack of resources

(50%), followed by a lack of space (40%), safety issues (27%), medical concerns (24%), and lack of awareness (5%)” (Krienert, et. al, 2012, p287).

Agencies that do provide some sort of care or sheltering of pets most frequently used animal shelters, followed by community volunteers and veterinarians. The results from Krienert et al. (2012) study showed that depending on the partnership, many animal shelters provide anywhere from a few days to 45 days of care for animals. However, many of the animal shelters would charge for this service after a certain length of time, or the animals were available for adoption during this time. Shelters reported that women would often decline these services due to lack of funds or fear that their pets would be adopted. Unlike the shelters that were surveyed in Krienert et. al’s 2012 study, the majority of women’s shelters in Ontario do not have partnerships with local animal shelters to provide temporary care of pets. All animal shelters in Ontario will offer 72 hours of temporary foster care for animals coming from emergency situations (natural disaster, incarceration, abusive home etc.). After this time is up, if no additional space permits, the animal can be placed for adoption if not claimed. From personal communication with animal and women’s organizations, most women in Ontario would need a minimum of five weeks of care for their pets. In fact, Desmarais & Sher (April, 2017), board members of SafePet Ottawa state that many women need three to six months of care for their pets. The main reason for this is lack of affordable housing that accepts pets in Ontario. The shelters surveyed by Krienert, et. al (2012) reported that they would like to offer more pet related services if there were more assistance, funds or space available. Space, resources, time, and fears about allergies often limit the provision of kennel space at social service agencies. Lem and Rainbow (NAWC, 2017) discussed a new partnership between Community

Veterinary Outreach and Interval House in Ottawa. Since Interval House is new, it has the unique situation of having unused space (unlike many other women's shelters). This is allowing Interval House to build a kennel and shelter for companion animals in the basement of the facility so the women who stay at the shelter can remain with their pets.

Researchers Faver & Strand (2003) conducted a study titled "*To Leave or to Stay? Battered Women's Concern for Vulnerable Pets.*" The sample for this study came from a southeastern US state, and included 61 women from six women's shelters. Two of these shelters were rural and four urban, to determine if there were differences between these two groups. Over nine months, staff from the different shelters distributed questionnaires to clients. It was found that 48.8% of respondents had a partner that threatened their pet, and 46.3% reported their partner had actually harmed their pet. 26.8% reported that concern for their pets delayed their decision to leave the home and seek shelter. On all of these measures, rural women reported higher incidents of concern, fear and delay for pets. By contrast to Faver & Strand's (2003) study, Krienert, et. al (2012) found that staff respondents reported 94% of women delayed leaving an abusive home. These are very different results and could be due to location, sample size or bias. Regardless of the discrepancies between these two studies, both highlighted the need for sheltering services for pets. Faver and Strand recommended temporary foster care stating, "Such programs remove an important barrier to women's ability to leave their batterers" (Faver and Strand, 2003, p1376).

Human-animal welfare

In a panel presented at the National Animal Welfare Conference (NAWC), Leblanc, Lem, & Rainbow (2017) explained the effects on both people and animals who are homeless together in Toronto. After accessing veterinary services, only 55% of homeless youth found the experience helpful. Lem stated that this was concerning, as young people who have one bad experience with social service providers will not seek out additional services. For example, if a homeless youth has an unfavourable experience accessing vet care for their pet, they are unlikely to seek assistance for health issues or dental care. This information was used to present the importance of animal welfare groups helping both people and animals through low cost veterinary care and other services to ensure the experience is a positive one. In another panel presentation at the NAWC by Powelson & Smith, it was found that over 50% of youth in British Columbia had a pet. Street involved young people who had a pet were three times more likely to be attending school than those without a pet. Homeless youth with a pet also reported using and experimenting less with drugs and alcohol, and made more of an effort to avoid incarceration (Powelson & Smith, 2017). The everyday lives of vulnerably housed young people and adults are affected in both positive and negative ways by caring for companion animals.

In a study by Rhoades, Winetrobe & Rice (2015), homeless youth who had pets were less likely to be able to find housing or access services. In this study titled, "*Pet Ownership Among Homeless Youth: Associations with Mental Health, Service Utilization and Housing Status*", 398 youths were interviewed from two California drop-in shelters, and it was found that 23% had pets. Half of the respondents with pets found it more challenging to stay in a shelter. More than half of the youth responded that their pets made them feel

loved, safe, and provided company. Sixty percent of respondents with pets reported that they made sure their pets ate before they did. Those with pets reported significantly less feelings of loneliness and depression compared with homeless youth that did not have pets. Rhoades et al. (2015) consider human-animal welfare to be equally important stating, “Ideally, agencies serving homeless pet owners would consider the homeless person and his/her pet to be a unit and strive to house and serve the unit, including at healthcare facilities”. Recommendations from this study included the need for drop-in centres to welcome pets, provide pet food and veterinary services, pet-friendly housing options and social service organizations acknowledging the importance of pets.

A study conducted in Toronto titled “*Effects of Companion Animal Ownership among Canadian Street-involved Youth*” found similar results to Rhoades et al. Each night in Canada, 150 000 youth may be homeless. Many of the vulnerably housed young people interviewed reported that having a pet made it more difficult for them to seek shelter or access housing. Employment opportunities were also limited for five male youths because there was nowhere and no one to look after their pets while they were working. Losing a pet was significantly more challenging for homeless youth than the general population, with 20-30% experiencing complicated grief versus only 2-3% of the general population (Lem, Coe, & Haley. 2013). More than half of those interviewed reported that they reduced their substance intake and intoxication for their dog. Lem et al. (2013) had a number of recommendations including the provision of pet food and veterinary care. It was recommended that when new social service agencies are built, they should include kennelling and space for companion animals. Improving supports for companion animals can increase service utilization for street involved youth.

A study titled “*Reunification of child and animal welfare agencies: Cross-reporting of abuse in Wellington County, Ontario,*” by Zilney & Zilney (2005) delved into the issue of cross reporting between different social service organizations. This study developed a checklist for Family and Children’s Services (FCS) and the Guelph Humane Society (GHS), both in Ontario, Canada, so that investigators from both organizations could report on incidents of child and animal welfare concerns. With the development and utilization of the checklist, FCS investigators found concern in 20% of the homes they visited that had companion animals. GHS investigators made ten referrals to FCS for child welfare concerns. Reports of concern for animal welfare were geographically significant, and the reported concerns included visible excrement or injury, behaviour and unsuitable living conditions. Most interestingly, GHS investigators made more referrals to FCS, even without actual evidence of abuse or neglect. Comparatively, FCS investigators made fewer referrals to GHS even when reports of neglect and behavioural issues were recorded. Zilney & Zilney (2005) believe this is due to increased caution when dealing with children. The referrals were evaluated in the discussion section of the study, and show that abuse and neglect of children went hand in hand with abuse and neglect of animals in almost all of the referrals. Both organizations have now incorporated intervention strategies to continue cross reporting, highlighting the importance of considering human and animal welfare.

Human-animal bond

The everyday lives of people are affected by a complex host of different attributes including precarity, age, health, ethnicity, gender, and historical and cultural contexts. The way pets affect people’s everyday lives is influenced by cultural norms (Risley-Curtiss et

al., 2006a). Importantly, white people often believe that people of colour (POC) do not care as much or at all about animal welfare. Based on additional literature, this assumption is untrue (Richard, 2004; Risley-Curtiss 2006b, Holley & Wolf, 2006). Social service agencies should acknowledge that their service providers might have this assumption, and address the relevant research with them. In a participatory study titled "*She Was Family*" by Risley-Curtiss et al., (2006a), 15 women of colour were interviewed to find out more about their lives and thoughts about animals. The study was participatory in that the women were able to share their stories, and were then invited to analyze the data and help prepare the manuscript for publishing. Several key themes emerged from the interviews including reciprocity, family, changes to the relationship and perceived ethnic community views. One participant said of her pets, "Your everyday need is to make sure they have all that they need, [and] their need is to make sure that you have all that you need... It's a sharing process (p438)." Although a small study, the personal stories and accounts lend to the idea of pets influence on everyday lives. For example, 13 of the women felt like the pets were family and several women recounted how their families made sacrifices to have pets while they were growing up,

"They told about their parents grieving when pets died, a parent cooking a meal for a dog, hiding a dog from a landlord, and getting immunizations or other treatment for their pets-often at a great sacrifice owing to the families' low incomes." (Risley-Curtiss et al., 2006a, p441).

This study highlighted the reciprocity of human animal relationships, how the women in the study considered the pets to be their family and how cultural contexts can influence

how people think about animals. Risley-Curtiss et al. (2006a) identified important implications of their findings. Social workers should ask questions related to pets when doing intakes and assessments. If pets are an important part of their client's life, they should incorporate the pet into potential interventions. Social workers were also encouraged to assist women with the loss or separation from a pet "especially in the areas of domestic violence, hospitalization, foster care, hospice, and homelessness," by advocating for policies that allow pet friendly housing and services, and educate themselves on the challenges faced by people separated from a pet. (Risley-Curtiss et al., 2006a, p445).

Hunt and Stein (2007) developed a 'pets policy' in a housing organization for people with mental illness. Their study titled "*Who Let the Dogs In? A Pets Policy for a Supported Housing Organization*," assisted a supportive housing organization by consultations over a yearlong period. The researchers met with staff members at various levels of the organizations from maintenance workers to caseworkers. The researchers facilitated meetings between staff and clients and advocated on behalf of the clients. At the beginning of the study, a 'no pets' policy was a matter of contention between staff, and several tenants were breaking the rules by having pets. Through the study, a 'pets policy' was implemented with appropriate forms, education, and procedures for dealing with potential conflicts. Advance directives were created to help tenants plan for time away at hospital and unexpected emergency, by having a plan in place of who would provide care for their pets (Hunt & Stein, 2007, p175). After the 'pets policy' was implemented, case managers noticed improvement in their tenants that had pets,

"Housing case managers reported that, compared with other consumer tenants,

many consumers with pets appeared to experience fewer hospitalizations, reported feeling less depressed and lonely, maintained better housekeeping, and seemed more socially connected with other people who shared their interests in pets.”

(Hunt & Stein, 2007, p. 180).

The results indicated that those who had pets in their lives were healthier and happier. Unfortunately the organization that Hunt and Stein (2007) worked with did not continue monitoring the success and challenges of the new ‘pets policy’. It was noted that this was a missed opportunity for the organization, which could have continued to adapt, and advance the ‘pets policy’ to changing needs.

Conclusion

Social service organizations frequently find themselves in a position to help vulnerable populations that may not fall under their mission’s guidelines. The literature reviewed here has highlighted not only the importance of cross reporting incidence of abuse and neglect, but also the benefit of considering animals when trying to help people. The people involved in many of the reviewed studies were unwilling to give up an animal even when having the animal was endangering their lives, or preventing them from accessing housing or other services. In *Policies of Exclusions, Poverty and Health* (p146), pets are one of the themes mentioned in ‘*The Issues*’ chapter written by the 21 women who participated in writing the book. They said,

“Landlords that permit pets are hard to find, yet our stories reveal that the presence of a pet can be the only thing keeping a women (most often single) alive. To expect her to give up her pet to find shelter is cruel, even dangerous.” (Ocean, 2005).

When organizations take both human and animal welfare into consideration, they will be better equipped to assist their clients holistically. The reviewed literature highlighted some possible solutions to the issues faced by people living in precarity but there was a lack of information on best practices for human-animal programs. There is also a lack of information on what happens to pets during emergency situations like homelessness and hospitalization. My proposed study will focus on providing first hand stories of people living through poverty and precarity with their pets. It will further our understanding of these situations and participants will be able to highlight their person challenges, ideas and solutions to the difficulties they face.



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Abstract

What do the personal experiences of people experiencing poverty and precarity with their pets tell us? Many people believe that having companion animals is only acceptable if you have the means to pay for their care. Yet research related to homeless pet owners and those experiencing mental illness, point to the emotional support, health benefits and companionship that pets can provide. In this introductory participatory research study, the effects of pet ownership on everyday life in Ontario were examined in relation to poverty and precarity through a survey and interview. Participants lived in Ontario Canada, and had pets while experiencing poverty/precarity. In addition, participants were asked to recommend community programs that would support their needs. The findings suggest that not only do pets play a critical role in the health, companionship and mental well being of their guardians, pets can even save lives. Participants most wanted financial assistance for veterinary care, sensitivity training for social service and animal welfare professionals, pet food available in food banks, and pet friendly public transit. Suggestions on how to implement these programs are discussed along with next steps and ideas for stake holders to consider in future community programing.

Key Words: pets, companion animal, pet owner, pet guardian, poverty, precarity, veterinary care, Ontario, one-health model, food bank, social service, community program, animal welfare, public transit, sensitivity training

Chapter 3

I love my pets more than I can adequately describe. I enjoy taking care of them, I feel connected to them, they support me when I'm going through a difficult time and I consider them family members. I often wonder what I'd talk about half the time if I didn't have pets and having a dog has encouraged me to take walks outside which I love. I imagine that many people who are about to read about my thesis work feel similarly. You likely have or have had pets and had a loving relationship with them. They provide support, comfort and joy to our everyday lives. When a pet lives with someone who is experiencing poverty or a precarious situation, does something change? Why do many people and service professionals decide that those people should not have pets, and that their pets should be rehomed? Is the bond they experience any less significant? My study in fact shows the opposite. People experiencing precarity and poverty often have a much stronger relationship with their pets, so much so that they are willing to forgo food in order to feed their pets, and many respondents stated that their pets literally kept them alive.

I began my thesis with the hope of discovering what community programs and services were most needed in Ontario by people who are experiencing poverty and precarity with their companion animals. I wanted to hear from people directly about their experiences, I wanted to know the challenges they faced and the joys and love they shared with their pets. The study has highlighted programs and services that are most desired by pet guardians who identify as experiencing poverty or precarity.

I began the study with a survey. Community partners were invited to share the survey with their clients either online or as a hardcopy. Forty-eight community organizations were contacted, predominantly ones who operate in Southern Ontario. Of the

organizations contacted, 14 responded to the invitation and of those organizations, 3 organizations agreed to promote the survey via social media or to their clients, and several other organizations stated they needed to discuss it with board members or staff before agreeing to participate. Most distribution was done by myself through the organization that I direct called Second Hope Circle (SHC). SHC assists people, pets and nonprofits through humane education, community programs and financial aid, with the goal of keeping people and pets together. I posted a link to the online survey via our website and social media pages, I paid for Facebook advertising and directly contacted past Second Hope Circle clients. This yielded 200 responses to the survey from people living across Ontario. The number of responses to each question varies, but at minimum there are 118 responses per question, with most questions receiving participation from 150-180 people. Values talked about in this section refer to respondents of each question, please see Appendix B for additional information on survey values.

The mean age of respondents was 43, with 25 of the respondents being youth (age 24 and under), and 11 of the respondents being seniors (age 65 and over). Eighty-two percent of respondents said they had experienced precarity at some point in their lives, with 48% stating they were currently experiencing precarity. Other issues respondents identified as precarious included mental and physical health issues, looking for a new job, being precariously employed and receiving government assistance.

Seventy-two percent of respondents said they were currently experiencing poverty, 61% had incomes less than \$20,000 and an additional 30% were earning between \$20,000 and \$40,000. Depending on the number of people living in their household, these values are below the poverty line in Ontario. Thirty-one percent had a physical disability, and an

additional 7% selected 'other' and discussed mental illness or temporary disabilities.

Fourteen percent of respondents said they were living with a dependent adult, 20% were caring for children under the age of 18 and 29% were living with an intimate partner.

When asked 'Have you had pets? Check all that apply,' respondents selected cats, dogs and fish most frequently (84%, 74% and 42% respectively). Ninety-seven percent of respondents currently had a pet, with numbers of cats and dogs being the highest companions respectively, followed by exotics, fish, rabbits, rodents, birds, farmed animals and ferrets. People who did not currently have a pet were asked why, with most respondents citing financial reasons. Most respondents acquired their animals from a rescue or shelter (36%); then friends, family and neighbours (21%); found them (15%); breeder (12%); and classified advertisement (10%). The remaining 6% acquired their animals from pet stores, auctions, animals who bred (or were bred?) or personal rescue situations. These results could indicate which animals should be targeted for community programs.

Most respondents were not considering getting another pet at this time even if they wanted one, citing financial difficulties, or too soon after the loss of a pet. Eighty-three percent of respondents said they had cared for a stray animal. Thirty-seven percent said yes, they have had to give an animal up because of precarity or poverty. A fairly equal number of respondents (with slightly more yes responses) said they had been told they shouldn't have a pet. When asked what the reason was and how that made them feel, one respondent said; "Made me feel horrible. I put far more effort into caring for my animals than I do myself, no matter how horrible I feel, and I'd rather go hungry than let my animals go without something they need." And another respondent stated; "It made me feel

ashamed of my financial situation and like other people felt that I was less and shouldn't have the same opportunities due to being low income." Another participant shared that being told they shouldn't have a pet "Made me feel horrible. Why don't we deserve to have a family pet?" This question highlighted how emotionally charged having a pet can be, and also how people feel criticized for continuing to care for a companion animal while experiencing precarity and poverty. It was common for respondents to feel "hopeless", "worthless", "useless", "stressed", "unworthy", "inadequate" when told they shouldn't have a pet. They also felt "despondent", "angry", "sad", "horrible", "sick" and "unsupported". Many people wished that the person who made the comment understood how much their pets meant to them, and how in many cases the pet was considered "lifesaving" and "supporting them emotionally". Others expressed shock and concern about the idea of abandoning a pet they loved and felt responsible for, while several people did not believe pets should only be for the wealthy. A few people mentioned thoughts of suicide when considering re-homing a pet or being told they shouldn't have a pet. However well meaning the original commenter was, telling people they shouldn't have pets can negatively affect their self-esteem, mental health and even jeopardize their life.

When asked, "What is the biggest challenge you face as a pet guardian?" 74% said veterinary care and 11% pet expenses (including food, litter and grooming). Only 14% of people did not mention a financial concern and listed specific worries and fears related to living arrangements, spending time with pets, safety and providing the best quality food. One respondent said they did not have any challenges. In the comments of this question many people emphasized the care they provide their pets; "I also want to stay in this place for the rest of their lives rather than stress them out moving or have to surrender them,

and it limits my options of lifestyle.” And another respondent stated; “They come first and so at times bills must wait if there is an emerg (sic) vet visit required etc. Thats (sic) a challenge.” Others spoke about how they wanted to access regular veterinary care but struggled to do so,

“Taking her to the vet. My kitty will need major dental surgery within the next year. Though I currently have a good job, I got into a lot of debt due to my unemployment and it will be hard to pay for the debt and surgery.”

Additionally, many participants spoke about financial planning for future veterinary costs and food and how it was a struggle, “Planning for needed vet care - deciding whether to delay things that are really necessary, so i can save some money in case i'll need it just to feed them if i don't get a job soon.”

Within the survey there were several scale questions, with 7 being the most positive, 4 being equal positive/negative and 1 being the least positive. When asked what kind of experiences they've had with service professional for themselves, 43% responded '4' (equal positive and negative experiences), 43% were on the positive side of experiences and 14% were on the negative side of experiences. When asked the same question but for their experiences with their pets, the results were slightly more positive: 32% said equal positive and negative, 60% said positive and only 8% said negative. There could be an opportunity here for community health centres and clinics to incorporate animal care into their platform which may in fact improve overall positive experiences with service professionals for people. In a study on one-health models, Panning, Lem, and Bateman (2016), found that the bond between homeless people and their pets could be utilized to help reach populations that are usually under served by health practitioners. The

researchers also spoke to the benefits that come from collaborations between multiple disciplines including veterinarians, health practitioners and social workers. In a panel presented at the National Animal Welfare Conference (NAWC), Leblanc, Lem, & Rainbow (2017) explained the effects on both people and animals who are homeless together in Toronto. After accessing veterinary services, only 55% of homeless youth found the experience helpful. Lem stated that this was concerning, as young people who have one bad experience with social service providers will not seek out additional services. For example, if a homeless youth has an unfavourable experience accessing vet care for their pet, they are unlikely to seek assistance for health issues or dental care. This information was used to present the importance of animal welfare groups helping both people and animals through low cost veterinary care and other services to ensure the experience is a positive one.

A commentary by DeHaven (2014), spoke about the need for more comprehensive health plans for animals in the US and how the number of vet visits had gone down from 2001 to 2011 while the prevalence of preventable diseases had gone up. His assertion was that, “We are delivering less than optimal health care to our patients by not adequately emphasizing the value and importance of preventive health care. (p. 1017)” Yet the comments received in this study speak to a larger barrier than education. Many respondents said they wanted to take their pet for routine checkups but the cost was prohibitive. Even when the cost was not prohibitive, taking an animal on public transit often was. Others mentioned the requirement of an examination fee just to pick up a deworming product or having multiple tests done at once, instead of one at a time (to reduce potential unnecessary costs). The participants in this study recognized and valued

preventive care for their pets, there were simply too many barriers in place to make it easily accessible.

When asked how a service professional (either for people or pets) could have improved their experience there was a range of comments. Several themes emerged including costs of services for pets, payment plans, compassion and empathy, understanding of poverty, less judgment, respect, cross communication between service organizations, listening to and working within a person's budget, understanding of trauma, and communication. Several people also mentioned situations where they were told to leave a pet behind/surrender a pet when entering a women's shelter. These ideas were mirrored during the interview portion of this study, and will be discussed later.

Respondents were asked on a scale of 1-7, with 7 being most and 1 being least, "How closely bonded are you with your pet(s)?", 88% selected 7. When asked "How important are having animals in your life?" 85% selected 7. When asked, "How happy do your pets make you feel?" 86% said 7, and when asked "How often do you talk about your pets with other people?" 45% said more than once a day, 36% said once a day and 15% said once a week. These questions highlight the incredible bond that people share with their pets and the benefits for mental wellbeing. There was one question that had more variation in responses, "How stressed do your pets make you?" 31% said 1 (most stressed), 25% said 2, 20% said 3, 14% said 4. Having pets while experiencing financial challenges, and physical and mental illness is definitely stressful. Yet as already mentioned, the imagined or real situation of having to rehome an animal was devastating and stressful to respondents. This could be reflected in the values shown in the stress question.

When asked, “What is the biggest impact of having a pet while also experiencing poverty/precarity?” many people spoke about the benefits they get from caring for a pet. A majority of 59% of responses spoke of positives related to having a pet, while 41% spoke of the negatives. Positives that were mentioned include love, support, stress relief, companionship, purpose, happiness, calmness, and giving the person a reason to wake up in the morning. “They keep me alive. With my history of depression, anxiety, and now PTSD, they really help. Literally life savers. I also live with no other humans, so they keep me company.” Negatives included financial strain, worry, stress, anxiety, fear, grief, providing the best care, skipping meals so pets could eat or have care, and discrimination. Even when people related a negative aspect of having pets while experiencing poverty, many times the person related this to their love for their pet and the love they receive from their pet. Some respondents described how keeping a pet was challenging but worth it for all the positives their pets also provided. “Living in constant worry the only thing that makes me happy could become very sick and I won't have the funds to help him.”

When asked, “Do you see yourself experiencing poverty in the next...?” Only 22% of respondents felt they would not be experiencing poverty/precarity; 34% felt they would be for the next 1-2 years, 21% for the next 3-5 years, and 23% selected 10 or more years. For many people included in this study, poverty isn't simply going away. These values highlight the need to create programs that assist people in the long term, not just on a temporary or emergency basis.

Participants were asked if they would be interested in being interviewed further. Eighty-five respondents said yes. I emailed the respondents with information about how they could schedule an interview and 16 people scheduled and completed an interview.

Much of the information gathered during the survey was mirrored in the interviews. However, the interview's main focus was developing detailed ideas around community programs, what those programs would look like, what features they would have and where they would be advertised. To see the list of interview questions, please refer to Appendix C.

The interview began with an introduction and I then asked participants to briefly tell me about themselves and their pets. Nine major themes for community programs arose from the survey and these were listed for participants who said 'yes' or 'no' depending on whether the program would be valuable to them. The most valuable program was a veterinary subsidy or payment plan with 100% of participants saying yes; followed by a low-cost vaccination, microchip or flea/tick clinic (94% said yes) with several people emphasizing vaccinations. Sensitivity training for animal welfare professionals came in third with 88% of participants saying it would be valuable to them and having pet food banks incorporated into food banks for people came in fourth with 81% saying it would be valuable. Seventy-five percent of participants felt that a program for end of life care for pets (euthanasia, palliative care etc.) and dental care for people would be valuable to them. Pet friendly housing (69%) and pet friendly buses and taxis (63%) were also mentioned. Education on managing allergies to pets was not important to the people I interviewed, with only one person stating it would be valuable to them. Participants were asked what community services they currently use, and answers included food bank, government assistance programs, community health centre, city community service provider, SPCA spay/neuter clinic, Fixed Fur Life (a community program in Quinte Ontario), meal programs and a soup kitchen.

Interview participants were asked, “If you could snap your fingers and create the perfect community program for your needs, what would it include?” There were many ideas shared, with the most common being financial assistance for veterinary care, and pet food banks, please see Appendix D for a list of additional programs mentioned by participants. They were then asked where programs should be advertised in their community. Online sources such as social media and websites was the most popular response (mentioned by 63% of respondents), followed by public spaces (50%), social service organizations (44%), newspapers (38%), animal organizations (38%), pet stores (31%) and veterinary clinics (25%). Other advertising spots mentioned included medical professionals, radio, word of mouth, religious houses, grocery stores and television. Knowing where people experiencing poverty/precarity are most likely to see a community program advertisement is useful for any social service agency and will encourage participation and engagement.

I asked participants to share their personal experiences with social service professionals, provide information on what they wanted professionals to know about themselves and their pets and provide ideas on how professionals could be more helpful. Participants wanted service professionals to (1) provide compassion and experience empathy with their situation (often mentioned as “bedside manner”), (2) have knowledge of what it’s like to experience poverty and precarity, (3) speak at their level of understanding without talking down at them, (4) provide assistance, care and services without judgment or assumptions, (5) have better communication with client including answering questions, talking about costs and treatments in advance, (6) increased communication between social service agencies if a referral of service is needed (including

knowledge of existing programs) and (7) volunteer with an organization assisting people and their pets for “hands on experience’.”

Based on the results of the survey and interviews, there were four main issues that pet guardians raised which Second Hope Circle may be able to assist with. The first and most important was access and cost of veterinary care. The second was sensitivity training for animal welfare professionals. The third was pet food availability at food banks or pet food banks. The fourth was the accessibility of public transit for a pet guardian who wants to bring their pet with them. Designing programs to meet these needs will take thought and time because these are large multifaceted challenges that are province wide. Yet communities differ from each other, with some communities having better services than others, especially when considering cities vs. rural communities, with rural residents having fewer service options.

Veterinary Care

How to make veterinary care more affordable and accessible is one of the most challenging program suggestions that came out of this project. Veterinary clinics are businesses and have a vested interest in making money while also providing lifesaving care to animals. It is unrealistic to expect them to offer their services for free. Yet it seems there are a few small ways in which to provide lower cost medical care while considering larger ways to increase the affordability of service. Participants of both the survey and interview wanted access to subsidies or payment plans, low cost clinics for routine medical care including vaccinations, spay/neuter, microchip, flea/tick prevention and end of life care for pets including euthanasia and palliative care.

Many veterinary clinics and animal organizations already partner to provide low cost microchips, vaccinations, and spay/neuters. Yet these programs may only be available in larger cities, and only on select days or once or twice a year. The location of these one day clinics may be inaccessible by public transit or during the day when people work. A first step in providing accessible routine veterinary care would be increasing the frequency, accessibility and locations of these low-cost clinics. How? There are a few grant opportunities available for these kinds of programs including Petsmart Charities and the Canadian Animal Assistance Team. But this will not be enough to expand services across Ontario. There needs to be change at the level of government. Municipalities need to value the care of people and animals in their community. They need to know that increasing spay/neuter services reduces the number of feral and 'nuisance cats' in the neighbourhood. They need to know the spay/neuters reduces the number of animals needing homes which ultimately lowers the costs for animal care and control and city run shelters. They need to know that providing low cost vaccinations can protect human health and wildlife (e.g. in the cases of rabies and distemper). They need to know that microchips increase the number of lost animals being reunited with families, which also reduces the number of animals in need of homes at city animal shelters. They need to know that pets can literally save the lives of people experiencing poverty, precarity and mental illnesses and when people and pets can stay together, the people need less (fewer) health interventions, which reduces the strain on social service agencies and law enforcement. Cities need to understand the value of helping people and pets as a unit.

Veterinary clinics also need to understand the value of assisting people and pets as a unit. Providing discounts to people who receive government assistance increases the

impact of human and animal health and can also provide a better client experience. Good client experiences are what businesses rely on for reviews, and word of mouth recommendations to friends. Many respondents in this study said that if their local veterinarian would provide discounts and compassionate care they would use their services exclusively, they would tell all their friends, they would be loyal to that clinic's services. There are a lot of factors that go into a business deciding to offer discounts to particular groups of qualifying people, but for many businesses it could be a great way to increase clients.

A second step would be partnering with the Ontario Veterinary College (OVC) in Guelph, the Ontario Veterinary Medical Association (OVMA) and the Canadian Veterinary Medical Association (CVMA). They can promote programs for people experiencing poverty and precarity, offer education to veterinarians on the topic, and also consider other means of making veterinary care accessible. Currently veterinarians can charge whatever they want for their services and the prices can vary by hundreds of dollars for the same service between clinics in the same city. While people can phone in and ask what prices they offer, vet clinics do not post their prices online, nor are they encouraged to do so by the veterinary associations. Prices at most businesses are not regulated but their prices are easily viewed and accessible which makes competition for pricing available. It means that businesses do not charge exorbitant prices because people would never support them. Vet clinics may have different business costs depending on the community they live in (rent, cost of supplies, availability of professional staff, size of community and seasonal nature of some communities), yet the extreme difference in costs may be hurting the veterinary profession and hurting the animals and people they are pledged to serve. Consideration of

the OVMA suggesting fees, individual clinics posting veterinary fees, or even regulating veterinary fees may make veterinary care more accessible. At the very least the CVMA and OVMA should provide additional information on their website about managing the significant costs of veterinary care when experiencing low income, poverty or precarity. They could list all of the available programs across the province, talk about approaching veterinarians regarding payment plans and acknowledge the real and heartbreaking struggle pet guardians can face when making financial decisions about their pet's health.

There is one province-wide initiative overseen by the OVMA to assist with emergency medical care for people receiving government assistance, a person entering a domestic violence shelter or are a pet living at a senior care facility. While the Farley Foundation is a needed program and definitely does a lot of good work, it has several limitations; the first and foremost being that it cannot meet the demand. Each veterinary clinic in Ontario can select only one client to apply for a Farley fund grant each year and that grant is only up to a certain amount (which rarely covers all of the costs of emergency care). Beyond this, some vets either don't know about the program or choose not to participate. The program only covers emergency care which means that routine but necessary and expensive care such as dental cleanings do not qualify. The Ontario Veterinary Medical Association (OVMA) website states that people who have a preexisting relationship with their veterinarian can also be eligible, but The Farley Foundation website does not include this under their list of people who qualify (Ontario Veterinary Medical Association, n.d. & The Farley Foundation, n.d.). There are many other small initiatives that provide assistance within their city limits. They may help with routine care like spay/neuters, vaccinations or city licenses. Or they may only help with emergency care. Yet

these small programs can only help so many people, usually have strict qualifying measures and only help within their city. Many communities simply do not have any routine veterinary assistance program available to them.

Some veterinary clinics provide low cost medical care or discounts to those who qualify but these clinics do not advertise this, nor are there very many that offer these discounts. Some vet clinics will offer payment plans but they may not advertise this and it is unlikely to be offered to every client. If the needs for financial assistance for veterinary care cannot be met with current community programs or payment plans, what type of program is left? Some participants suggested regulated fees for veterinarians. Others said that all vets should offer discounts for people who qualify. While others said that veterinary care should be like human medical care in Canada and built into our taxes.

Ways Veterinary Clinics Can Make Supporting Low-Income Clients Feasible.

If veterinary clinics see the benefit in supporting their clients who are experiencing poverty/precarity, they may wish to investigate how they can provide services.

Fundraising is one way in which a clinic could independently raise funds to provide low cost care or payment plans in their clinic. There are many fundraisers that are relatively easy to set up including bake sales, yard sales, auctions, metal and electronic recycling and giving clients the choice to round up their bill to the nearest dollar. Prices of all services could even be increased by a small amount (fifty cents? A dollar?) with that amount going into a fund to subsidize the cost for low income clients. Any funds raised could either go directly to subsidize the cost of care for pets when their guardians are experiencing poverty/precarity/receiving government assistance, or the fund could act as a buffer for

vets reluctant to offer payment plans. If a client asks to pay through a payment plan, and for whatever reason the client does not pay back what they owe, the fund could offset this lost amount.

Providing support and reduced costs does not necessarily mean a veterinary clinic has to diminish their profits. Many veterinary clinics already fundraise yearly in support of The Farley Foundation and clients are supportive of these efforts. Offering other ways to support animals and community members may even enhance client satisfaction and approval of a veterinary clinic. Providing clients who receive support an invitation to review the veterinary clinic online could be a way to boost the number of new clients.

Veterinary clinics should also make clients aware of other payment plan options such as veterinary financing credit cards, which allows people to pay off expenses over time. However, clinics should also be aware that not everyone has a credit card or will qualify for one, which only makes it a viable option for some. Having a list of up to date local and provincial programs is also crucial to providing support to clients experiencing poverty. Clinics should provide a print out of current information to staff members so that they can easily assist or refer clients to additional social and financial services if necessary.

All social service agencies should have a list of resources to support pet guardians whether the organization supports pets or not. Providing assistance to pet owners and pets as a unit (called 'one-health'), has been shown to improve overall health and well-being of clients and their pets (Hunt & Stein, 2007, p175, & Rauktis et al, 2017, & Rhoades, Winetrobe & Rice, 2015). Second Hope Circle has a list of pet related nonprofit organizations that operate in Ontario, please refer to Appendix E. This list is free and available online 24/7 and is updated every 6-12 months. Making staff aware of this

resource could help them make appropriate referrals to additional services. However, it's important that staff ensure the service they are referring their client to is currently operating and accepting new clients. From this study, many people said that they had been referred or passed from organization to organization, none of whom were able or willing to help them. This made respondents feel as if organizations were trying to pass off responsibility instead of having to deal with their need.

Many people reading this may feel these suggestions are unreasonable or unattainable. Some of these ideas will certainly take some time, staff involvement and space. Yet ensuring that animals are cared for, healthy and happy is what veterinarians pledge to do (Canadian Veterinary Medical Association, 2004, *Veterinarian's Oath*). Making health care for pets, exclusive to middle and upper-class community members means many animals get left behind even though their guardians want exactly the same care for their pets. Second Hope Circle is willing to assist veterinary clinics and other social service agencies interested in developing programs to assist people experiencing poverty/precarity with pets. We can provide clinics with template posters, social media posts and other advertising opportunities for your fundraiser. We can share our list of community organizations. We can share and promote a clinic's efforts with our supporters. Second Hope Circle wants to support businesses and nonprofits committed to supporting all community members regardless of socioeconomic status, because we can't help animals without helping the people who love them.

Sensitivity training

Training, especially for animal welfare professionals (veterinarians, animal shelter staff, animal control, rescues, and other social service agencies), was a high priority for the respondents in this study. While some didn't know what sensitivity training might look like, and a few were skeptical it would make a difference, many others believed that people working in the animal caring fields needed training and education about people experiencing poverty and precarity. Many of the experiences related by respondents were upsetting and heartbreaking. Some experienced rudeness and callous remarks, others experienced outright refusal of services or unprofessional care, while others were simply passed from organization to organization.

Why would training about compassion for people experiencing poverty be important? Studies have indicated that one bad service experience with a veterinarian may mean that an individual will not seek social services for themselves (Leblanc, Lem, & Rainbow, April, 2017). When service is refused, or people experience rude comments, the animals in their care may be in jeopardy. An animal that needs medical care could be turned away or an animal could be taken from a loving family even though temporary foster care is all that's needed.

Unkindness and lack of awareness to the experiences that people living on an extremely limited budget face, does not help people experiencing poverty or their pets. Even when social service programs are unable to help an individual, a compassionate and empathetic approach can make all the difference. The participants in this research said that being told they shouldn't have a pet, or that there was nothing anyone could do, or that they should simply surrender their pet made them feel worthless, hopeless, distraught, and

had serious implication for their mental wellbeing and health. Some respondents even contemplated suicide after hearing negative remarks about them continuing to care for their pet.

A dichotomy has been revealed where animal service professionals (veterinarians, animal shelter and control, rescues and social service agencies) tell people they should not have a pet because they cannot afford them or provide the very best for them, yet an organization may also malign those who surrender their pets as 'bad pet owners' for rehoming their pet (Irvine, 2003). Many guardians feel that they have no options and that they are condemned as 'bad' either way. If the guardian considers the real and imagined threat of negative remarks from shelter staff, it can create an environment that encourages the guardian to leave their pets and get out of a shelter as quickly as possible (Irvine, 2003). In fact, animals are often left outside shelters in the middle of the night (Irvine, 2003). This troubling information shows that helping pets requires compassion towards pet owners.

Pets are companions, family members and even children to their owners, but may be even more closely bonded to people experiencing poverty and precarity. Many of the people who responded stated that their pets literally kept them alive, were "their everything", they "could not live without them". Pets were also described as "children", and "family". The knowledge that pets can keep someone alive should not be underestimated. In a review titled "*The power of support from companion animals for people living with mental health problems,*" pets were found to assist people with emotional support during times of mental illness symptoms, provide unconditional love which assisted with stress, and helped people cope with difficult life events. It was also highlighted that, "Pets could

contribute to a sense of preparedness to take self-management action [for mental illness] through increasing people's positivity and self-efficacy (Brooks, Rushton, Lovell, Bee, Walker, Grant, & Rogers, 2018, 5-7)". Considering a person and their pet as a unit is critical to providing the best services for both. When social service organizations and animal welfare professionals consider only the person or only the animal as deserving of consideration they are missing a critical component of health.

In addition to training and information provided for poverty, one-health, empathy and program solutions, compassion fatigue information should also be included within sensitivity training for animal welfare professionals. Veterinarians are considered an at-risk group for suicide, as are many other caring fields including social services, animal rescues/shelter workers and medical providers (Holcombe et. al., 2016). If the sensitivity training asks people to open themselves up and feel what others are feeling, there is a risk of individuals experiencing burnout and fatigue. The point of the training is not to increase the stress and challenges faced by those in caring professions, but provide them with the tools to assist all community members and pets more effectively.

Respondents related stories of both positive and negative experiences, often to highlight why the negative experience was so damaging. Many people recounted their struggles affording veterinary care while the veterinarian did not seem to understand, and continued to recommend testing and services they could not afford. Other service professionals made rude comments about not being able to afford a pet, and when participants sought to rehome pets. Participants in this study believed that the animal welfare professionals must not understand what it's like to live with poverty, to make decisions about whether they were going to eat, provide medical care for their pet, and

even how much their pet means to them as a member of their family. A sensitivity training program could be helpful in addressing the gap between what service professionals are already providing and what clients wish they were providing.

Food Banks

Many people utilizing food banks are receiving government assistance, which does not adequately provide for their needs, and by extension their pet's needs. The amount allocated for rent is not enough in even the cheapest rental city in Ontario, and many people use their food budget to maintain their housing situation (Ontario Association of Food Banks, 2017, p11). In fact, 45% of people accessing food banks have less than \$100 available at the end of each month. Affordable housing in Ontario is not readily available and there are long wait lists for subsidized housing. Four percent of Ontario's population is utilizing food banks and in some cities this percentage is over 10% (Ontario Association of Food Banks, 2017, p11).

Food banks were mentioned during the survey, and interviewees were specifically asked whether having pet food available at food banks would be valuable to them (81% said yes). When asked in the interview to talk about their dream community program that would support their needs, 31% mentioned pet food availability. When asked to provide a response to "What are some of the biggest challenges you face as a pet owner/guardian?" in the survey, 26% of respondents mentioned food for themselves, their pets or both. When asked "What would you say is the biggest impact of having pet(s) while also experiencing poverty or a precarious situation?" 12% mentioned the cost of food. Many people wrote about how they did without so their pet could eat;

“The biggest impact is probably more on my health. I would always prioritize their health over mine. For example, a special diet helps control the symptoms of my disease, however, it is expensive to eat like that and if they need vet care... or food... I will go for cheaper options of food for myself to address their needs first. This in turn can lead to a flare up of my diseases, meaning more time out of class and work.”

Similar findings were found by Rauktis, Rose, Chen, Martone, & Martello, (2017) in a study titled “*“Their Pets are loved members of the family”: Animal ownership, food insecurity, and the value of having pet food available in food banks.*”

“Based upon the observations of food bank workers and volunteers, pet food in the food bank was greatly appreciated and needed, and when they did not have pet food, clients were believed to be likely to share human food with their pets. This suggests that one way to address the relationship between human and animal food insecurity is to meet both sets of needs, rather than prioritizing one over the other.”
(P. 590)

There are a few pet food banks operating in Ontario. These organizations sometimes run as a project of a food bank, or operate independently and deliver food to their clients. During my time running Second Hope Circle, I have seen more than one pet food bank start up and then disappear after only a year or two because they could not get enough support to meet the demand. Incorporating pet food banks into existing food banks is an option that provides a physical location for people to go to, has the benefit of being a ‘one stop shop’, and provides an opportunity for ‘one-health’ models of care that consider the person and pet as a unit.

Partnering with pet food companies and local pet stores would be a solution for ensuring a constant supply of pet food. Challenges some food banks may face include finding a place to store pet food, additional staff responsibilities and securing pet food donations. Beyond the availability of pet food, the respondents of this study also related concerns over (1) accessibility of food banks (not wheelchair friendly), (2) location (not public transit friendly), (3) having expired food (sometimes more than two years past it's best before), (4) not having healthy food (boxed pasta and cereal), (5) providing the food in a defeating way (must be receiving government assistance, food is picked out for them etc.), (6) providing too little food (only a small bag, not enough times per month) and (7) decentralization of services for accessibility to all community members. Clearly pet food is not the only concern when it comes to accessing food in Ontario.

While this study received information predominantly from people who had housing, some individuals stated they had been homeless or almost homeless in the past. Several studies have considered homeless people who care for pets. Some stated they did not have trouble getting food for their pets because people donated it to them or they could get some from different social service organizations (Irvine, Nahl, & Smith, 2012). These studies were conducted in large cities however, so the results are not necessarily the same for people living in smaller communities or communities without good public transit, and easily accessible food banks, shelters and SPCA's. Having pets can be a barrier to receiving some services like medical care or staying in a shelter, because most of these facilities do not allow pets (Rhoades, Winetrobe, & Rice, 2015). In an effort to find out how many homeless people live in Ottawa, social service workers walked the streets interviewing people. They shared that "There was a couple who didn't want to go to a shelter because it

would mean leaving their dog behind, and who desperately needed food for their pet.” The workers managed to find the couple some dog food, sleeping bags and socks. They hoped their efforts had helped with an immediate need, but also fostered a relationship that might lead to increased social service use (Osman, 2018). Pets have not only been found to provide support, companionship and love to homeless pet guardians, but also facilitate friendships and create positive personal identities (Irvine, Nahl, & Smith, 2012, p39). Increasing the availability of pet food for people experiencing poverty/precarity would allow owners to feed both themselves and their pets, increasing the health outcomes for both.

Pet Friendly Public Transit

Public transit is utilized by people experiencing poverty and precarity and in this study, 12% of respondents said they used public transit when they needed to take their pet somewhere. Nine percent said they would take a taxi, 17% said they would walk, 25% said they would ask a friend/family member/neighbour, and 36% said they would use their own car. During the interviews, participants were asked whether their city had pet friendly public transit and 44% said it did not. Of the people who said it was pet friendly, four respondents said only animals who could fit in a small carrier on your lap were allowed. One respondent mentioned that the humane society in their city, which offers spay/neuter clinics, is not on a public transit route.

A few respondents related stories of exceptional bus drivers who broke rules for them to let their pets on the bus. While many other people shared stories of the difficulty of accessing public transit when they need to take their pet to a veterinarian, groomer or low-

cost clinic program. In fact, many communities in Ontario have no pet friendly transit at all, and others only have pet friendly transit for small animals that can stay in a carrier on your lap, and only allow them at particular times of day. Taxis which are expensive and not always accessible to people experiencing poverty in the first place, sometimes stated they were pet friendly, but it was up to the discretion of the taxi driver whether they took an animal. One interviewee related a story where she was denied transportation 5 times in a row, even though she had said on the phone she had a large dog and to please send a pet friendly driver and vehicle. Some respondents mentioned using a “pet taxi” company but that it cost much more than city taxis.

Ottawa recently increased the pet friendliness of their city by allowing pets on city buses. The Ottawa Humane Society pushed for this change hoping that it would improve access to veterinary care, increase adoptions and allow people to safely rehome animals with them (*Small pets can now ride on OC Transpo*, 2018, *CBC News*). It’s definitely a step in the right direction and could hopefully encourage other cities to get on board. However as with other pet friendly transit communities, only small animals secured in carriers are allowed. During the interviews, several people said they had dogs who would not fit in a lap sized carrier and they could not access low cost clinics or veterinarians without public transit. These people either had to hope to find a pet friendly taxi or get a friend or family member to drive them.

While many communities struggle to come up with fair access between humans and animals; pet owners and non-pet owners, there seem to be many communities which simply deny access to any animals at all (except certified service animals). Allergies, safety and space may all be concerns that cities have in allowing animals on transit. Toronto

allows all dogs as long as they are leashed, and 'non-exotic' pets, but this is up to the discretion of the driver and only during non-peak times (TTC, n.d., Service Information).

The only way to move forward in making public transit accessible to pet guardians is through advocates pushing for city intervention. Beyond the information and insights provided by this study, it's unlikely Second Hope Circle will be able to do anything directly in terms of programming. However, we would be happy to provide information and support to individual community members and initiatives that hope to make public transit pet friendly.

Community Working Group

In addition to the proposed programs, the survey asked participants if they would be interested in joining a community group of pet guardians interested in creating positive change for people and pets in their area. Fifty-six percent of participants said yes and an additional 13% said it would depend on how the group was set up. Anyone who expressed interest in joining the proposed community group has been contacted. I want to encourage the involvement of participants in creating a safe and inviting space. I have asked if anyone would be interested in volunteering as an admin of the group. Those interested will develop the guidelines of the group to ensure a safe space for community members. Once the guidelines have been drafted, Facebook will be used as an easy and free group set up. The group will be closed so that only those within the group can see content in order to protect the privacy of members. Admins and additional volunteers will develop themes and topics of discussion. This will give participants the chance to share their opinions, develop action plans and even have the opportunity to see and create those plans for community

programs. Second Hope Circle is committed to hearing program proposals and assisting interested persons in developing their ideas into reality. If community members are in agreement, we may even be able to pull in other organizations to support community members in developing their projects. Programs that are created, developed, and run by affected community members can be more successful than those run by outside agencies (Cornwall, & Jewkes, 1995). Potential difficulties that may arise are time constraints in monitoring group content (moderation of language, hate speech, and bullying for example) and engaging participation. Some community members may not have Facebook or regular access to a computer/smartphone. Finding funding and support to develop program ideas further may be challenging or not feasible. However, providing participation in the research process will allow community members many benefits including an opportunity to have their voices heard, recommend and develop programs and then make those programs a reality.

Additional Program Ideas

There were many other programs proposed by both survey and interview respondents. Second Hope Circle will be focusing on veterinary care, sensitivity training and pet food as the main programs over the next few years. The other programs and services mentioned were interesting, diverse and likely needed in their communities. I have listed them in Appendix D with hope that other service agencies looking to create or improve their programming will consider these ideas during development.

Limitations

This study had several limitations. As an introductory study, it is a first glance at an issue that has very little supporting research. Additional research needs to expand on the initial data shown here and see if results differ between communities. As a person who has not experienced poverty/precarity myself, there is the possibility that I have interpreted the results in such a way that is not how a person who has experienced those challenges would interpret the results. My privilege may have affected the interpretation of the data. The survey was predominantly available online and advertised through Facebook. People who do not have access or do not use the Internet or Facebook would have been excluded from participating. Some participants may be unable or uncomfortable speaking on the phone and did not pursue the interview portion of the study. Future research would need to include ways to distribute the survey without technology so that it is accessible to everyone. Consideration of language, literacy and access to technology might assist in distribution of future studies.

Conclusion

This study's findings highlight the need for community programs that assist people experiencing poverty/precarity and their pets. What participants wanted most was accessible low cost veterinary care, and sensitivity training for social service and animal welfare professionals. Pets were found to provide companionship, emotional support, and family. One of the most important discoveries is that in some cases, pets kept participants alive by encouraging them to seek assistance for mental illness, and discourage them from thoughts and plans of suicide. Pets were also found to bring stress to their owners, and this

finding highlights the need to mitigate potential pet related stresses, and consider them in program development. This introductory participatory research study will continue through an online group, inviting participants to continue in suggesting, developing and implementing community programs. Considering pets as important in the lives of people experiencing poverty/precarity is crucial to improving this group's health. This study has shown that you cannot help animals without helping the people who love them.

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Appendix A

The first part of this section includes quotes from guardians who have sought Second Hope Circle's assistance. These are direct quotes recorded in email communication. Names and identifying remarks have been changed. They may not be reproduced or shared without Second Hope Circle's consent. After these quotes, additional excerpts have been included from *Policies of Exclusion, Poverty and Health* by Crystal Ocean (2005). I have included quotes from participants that referenced the animals in their lives. Names had been changed for the publication of the book. This section has been included to highlight the experiences of people living in precarity with pets and the effects of pets on their everyday lives.

Second Hope Circle Clients

Pet Guardian 1 "I have been given an order from the humane society to have my pets treated for fleas. I have told them I am on Disability and can not afford to have two cats and two dogs treated. I don't want to relinquish ownership of my pets due to non compliance, but I am not financially able to pay for visit and treatment. I have no vehicle to get around, but I do take good care of my pets minus the external parasites. Please help me before 4 more pets end up in need of homes. Thank you for any help in advance. I am beside myself trying to get this done and not leave myself destitute. I dont want to give any of them up. I have had the one cat for 14 years."

Pet Guardian 2 "I have 2 cats that i've been trying to rehome but can't. I would keep them but can't afford to get them fixed. There males. Any help or suggestions would be great. They really are good boys."

Pet Guardian 3 "I am depressed, disabled, alone and she is my everything! I can't afford to take her to the vet again so soon and I certainly cannot afford the needed test. I don't want to lose my baby! Please help I love my girl more than anything! I have like \$200 right now and that's it but i cant even physically get her to a vet."

Pet Guardian 4 "Can you help me?! I have been searching for anywhere such as pet food banks or any charities that could support me. Since the death of my little daughter I have been suffering with clinical depression and all that goes with it. I have been unable to work and live on benefit. I am completely alone and isolated and my 7 cats have become my family. but I am struggling to feed them. Im so worried and dont know what to do."

Pet Guardian 5 "[My dog] has a mass growing beside his bladder, he has major weight loss and has trouble walking and seems disoriented [the] vet basically said to spend a lot of

quality time with him. Right now I don't think its time for him but when it does come is their any help I can receive with his euthanasia. if needed to be put down now I would not have the means to do it...if you can direct me or give me some direction it would be very much appreciated."

Excerpts from Policies of Exclusion, Poverty and Health

Brooke "I used to have pets, but not now because I need to be settled. I had Cooper, an orange male cat. I got him as a baby. I miss him." (Ocean, 2005, P23)

Jade "I have a cat, which is a wonderful relationship. I guess they feel some compassion, the disability people. They actually add a little extra for cat food, a pet allowance. But it's not much for dogs. It basically only feeds cats. My darling cat and I live independent lives, but we come together whenever we want to. She'll sleep around my head at night. She's so cute. Wake up and there's this nice warm head. And fur. She's just a great cat." (Ocean, 2005, P63)

Kaelyn "My cat is the apple of my eye. I've had him for five years now. He actually flew with my from Ontario. He's lived in a school bus on the side of a mountain with me. He's lived everywhere. He's just my companion and he's wonderful and he's spoiled rotten. I adore him. He's mostly an outdoor cat, so wherever I live he's usually only home for a few hours a night. I don't have any human really attached to me anymore, so he is my significant other at the moment – as in, 'family'. I'm going to run into problems for him when I go and rent a place." (Ocean, 2005, P70)

Rayna "With respect to housing, pets are a big thing, especially for those of us who are single with no families. I have two guinea pigs and two cats. One cat I've had for 14 years. I call her my AL-ANON cat, because she's been through everything. One time she was in a kennel for three months while I was in the hospital. I still have her; she's still here. My pets keep me alive a lot of times when I would just rather no do it anymore. My landlord is not the nicest person, but just the thought of moving – because of my animals and being able to find a place that will take animals -, it's hard. I remember talking to an acquaintance. She had no idea about the cycle of poverty. I bounced a cheque. She went on about honesty. It's not about honesty! It's about robbing Peter to pay Paul. I said something to the effect: 'If the animals are hungry, you're going to feed the animals'. Her response was, 'Well, don't have animals then'. She just didn't get it." (Ocean, 2005, P102-103)

Waneta "We moved into an apartment for about eight months. We really needed our own home because we had our two dogs. That was our downfall when we were looking for rental places; they wouldn't accept the dogs. We gave one dog to friends in another town. We had the other at a friend's in town; that didn't work out and we had to give him up. The dogs were like our babies. We'd raised them since they were 6 weeks old and we carried them everywhere with us. It was heartbreaking to take one to the SPCA. He was my dog. I couldn't believe that I'd actually got rid of him." (Ocean, 2005, P126-127)

APPENDIX B

Survey Results

APPENDIX C

Interview Questions

Could tell me briefly about you and your pet?

1. Based on the overall survey results, there were 9 major themes that arose which could be the starting point for a community program. Could you tell me if any of the following services be valuable to you, and if yes which ones?

1. Sensitivity training for professionals
2. Veterinary subsidy or payment plan program
3. Pet food banks incorporated into food banks for people?
4. Vaccination/microchip/flea/tick low cost clinics?
5. Pet friendly housing
6. End of life care for pets (euthanasia and palliative care)
7. Dental care for people
8. Education on managing allergies to pets
9. Pet friendly buses / taxis

2. Are the buses/taxis pet friendly in your city?

3. Are there any community services that you currently use? What is helpful about them, and what could be improved?

4. If you could snap your fingers and create the perfect community program for your needs, what would it include? Please describe it.

5. If the service you desire were to become available, what would it include in terms of transportation, accessibility, social life, food or anything else you can think of.

6. Where should the community service or event be advertised in your city?

7.a. Based on the survey, many people mentioned they had challenging interactions with veterinarians and other service professionals. What would you like service professionals to know about you and about your pet?

7.b. What kind of training might help service professionals be more helpful for you?

8. Do you have any additional comments or anything you'd still like to share?

APPENDIX D

Need	Who Could Assist
Dental care for people	Government, dental care providers
More pet friendly spaces including businesses and dog parks	Businesses, municipalities
Community health centre for pets including training classes, specialists and space to hang out with pets	Government, social service agencies
Temporary foster care and pet friendly social service agencies	Social service agencies, women in crisis centres, hospitals, and shelters
Pet friendly housing	Ontario Landlords Association, Government
Drug addiction and harm reduction services	Social service agencies
Mental health services	Social service agencies
Stricter rules and penalties for animal abusers	Advocates, lawyers, Government
Information on budgeting for pet expenses	Social service and animal welfare agencies
Pet ride share program	Tech developer
Job program	Social service agencies, Government
Program helping people find pet friendly renters and roommates	Tech developer, Ontario Landlords Association
OHIP for companion animals	Government, Canadian Veterinary Medical Association
Low cost or free access to travelling, entertainment, physical exercise, art programs and exhibits	Social service agencies, municipalities
Improved infrastructure including sidewalks, parks, and public transit	Municipalities, Government
Behavioural training classes for dogs	Animal Welfare Agencies, businesses
Free DNA testing for accused 'pit bull' type dogs	Animal Welfare Agencies, businesses
LGBT and POC safe spaces	Everyone
Businesses improving knowledge of current service animal laws	Animal Welfare Agencies, businesses
Making service animals more accessible and affordable	Animal Welfare Agencies, businesses
Subsidized city pet licenses or not charging for city licenses	Municipalities
Transportation/delivery of food, litter and other items home when someone is struggling with a disability and no car	Businesses, Social service agencies

APPENDIX E

Second Hope Circle's list of Ontario animal organizations. This list is updated every 6-12 months and includes information on animal rescues, shelter and sanctuaries; wildlife organizations; and social service organizations that help pets. It is free to use and is presented in Google Sheets.

<https://secondhopecircle.org/need-help/onanimalorganizations/>