

Are Homeless Pet Owners Reliable? by Cameron Chyun



Pets are pillars of emotional health and life affirmation, especially for those who desperately need companionship and joy. The correlation between alleviating mental illness and pets is well acknowledged, with animal-assisted therapy being a well-known treatment for psychological and developmental disorders. Knowing this, it is not surprising that 6–24% of homeless Americans are pet owners who report feeling less isolated than those who aren't.

However, pet ownership among the homeless is a contentious issue. Sometimes this comes with extreme concerns that the homeless and their environment aren't qualified to care for individuals with their own health and sensitivities. The common consensus among the middle class is that they are where they are because they lack the motivation to sustain themselves or have unruly personalities that make them unfit to raise a pet. Under that logic, a passerby would ask, "Why should homeless people have pets if they can't even take care of themselves?"

This is a massive generalization of homeless pet owners. In a study observing the differences between homed and homeless dogs, the lack of proper medical resources from vaccinations, check-ups, neutering, teeth/fur cleaning, and medications did indeed lead to parasitic infections, fleas, poor organ function, skin conditions, and untreated injuries. And, while caring for a pet can be therapeutic for their illnesses, impaired or mentally ill owners have significantly more difficulty meeting their companion's every need. However, the same study concludes that the physical abnormalities, behavioral issues, and health problems compared between homed and

homeless dogs were minor. Homeless dogs were often strays with shorter life expectancies to develop degenerative changes and had plenty of exercise, good diets, and socialization. Meanwhile, homed dogs are purposely bred and purchased with overly sheltered lifestyles that lessen exercise, develop anti-social behaviors, cause allergies, and develop complex internal conditions due to their longer lifespans.

There are many dark truths to the culture of pet ownership. Every year, up to a million pets are created with specific visual traits that also make them weaker and more susceptible to developmental problems. Many breeders lack regulations, and many more pets don't find homes. 6.3 million pets enter an animal shelter nationwide, abandoned for a range of reasons such as financial strains, health problems, old age, etc. Pet treatment is only becoming more expensive by the year, and the sheer number of pets sent to a shelter either through abandonment or animal-rights activism means that a large quantity of pets is euthanized to maintain a sustainable population and budget. This number can extend up to 1.5 million shelter euthanizations a year.

Homeless owners are the most likely to take in unwanted strays or adopt. Just as much as the homeless need companionship for life affirmation against a system and passersby's that see them as undesirable, so do the many pets that end up with them. Another cruel reality is that even homeless shelters are not equipped to care for or admit pets, resulting in homeless owners either abandoning their pets or remaining on the streets with their animal companions. Pet ownership is also a bane to housing opportunities, job-finding services are strained without a place to leave a pet, and more importantly, they are a second mouth to feed when it is already so difficult for one. Yet 6-24% of homeless Americans hold onto them anyway.

It would be just as much of a generalization to say that all homeless owners are kinder owners solely because of this kinship, especially when there are various, complex reasons to why the homeless have pets. But it is an absurdly cruel sentiment to demand that these pets be involuntarily taken away from them. Perhaps there are many homeless people who have abused their pets or aren't providing for their common needs. But there are just as many homed pet owners, especially among the affluent, who abuse theirs through selective breeding, competitions, and negligence.

Homelessness is not an automatic signifier for the worthiness or unworthiness of an owner. Bad owners and people exist everywhere. In this scenario, it is merely a label with differences in living conditions. Pets shouldn't have to endure the suffering of living in the streets, but neither should humans. And if both must lose a home because of institutional failures, why should regulations rob them of companionship too?

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