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# Effects of Companion Animal Ownership among Canadian Street-involved Youth: A Qualitative Analysis

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*In Canada, approximately 150,000 youth are homeless on any given night, and many have companion animals. Through a series of semi-structured interviews, this qualitative study explored the issues and effects of companion animal ownership among street-involved youth from the perspective of the youth themselves. "Pet before self" was the substantive theme, with first level sub-themes of "physical" and "emotional" effects. Previously unidentified findings include benefits of having a companion animal, such as creating structure and routine and decreasing use of drugs. Loss of the companion animal was a negative effect. Youth consistently reported making choices to stay with their animal regardless of liabilities for their own health or success. Service providers should understand and support the significant human-animal bond that can exist for these homeless youth.*

**Key words:** *homeless, companion animals, street-involved, youth, young adults*

Approximately 150,000 youth in Canada are homeless on any given night (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2006), and this shows no sign of declining. The number of youth using Toronto shelter services increased by 16.2% between 2006 and 2009 (Toronto Shelter, Support & Housing Administration, 2010). Accurate homeless counts are difficult to achieve, as youth commonly “couch surf” (move from place to place), squat (stay in abandoned or unoccupied buildings), sleep rough outdoors, engage in prostitution or other activities in exchange for shelter, or use other forms of transient or marginal housing.

Many homeless people have companion animals. In a recent study on the transition of homeless individuals to stable housing in Toronto, Ontario, 8% of homeless and 11% of vulnerably housed individuals had companion animals (Stephen Hwang, electronic mail, January 15, 2010). Benefits of companion animal ownership among the homeless include increased social, emotional, and physical health. Liabilities include difficulty finding stable, animal-friendly housing for the human partner (Kidd & Kidd, 1994; Singer, Hart, & Zasloff, 1995). Dog ownership among homeless populations has been linked to decreased access to healthcare services (Taylor, Williams, & Gray, 2004).

Limited research specific to homeless youth and companion animal ownership has shown that companion animals play an important role, helping homeless youth cope with loneliness and depression, and providing a reason for making better life choices, such as avoiding incarceration to prevent separation from their animal (Rew, 2000).

The aim of this study was to explore the effects of companion animal ownership among street-involved youth from the perspective of the youth themselves, including the roles and relationships between the youth and their animals, the general provision of care for the animals, and needs and challenges that exist for homeless owners of companion animals.

## Literature Review

In an early study, Kidd and Kidd (1994) investigated the roles of pets in the lives of the homeless. Of 52 adult homeless pet owners surveyed in San Francisco, 74% of the male

and 48% of the female participants identified their pets as their only source of companionship and love. Themes derived from a qualitative study of homeless women and their companion animals conducted in six urban centers in Canada demonstrated that animals provide companionship, unconditional acceptance, comfort, and a sense of responsibility (Labrecque & Walsh, 2011).

Bukowski & Buetow (2011) found that among homeless women in New Zealand, dog ownership not only provided companionship, but the dogs were commonly described as "family," and participants reported that they would continue to live outdoors if their dogs could not be housed with them. This is consistent with early work by Singer et al. (1995), who surveyed homeless pet owners in Sacramento regarding rehousing. Among the 66 surveyed, 93.3% of male and 96.4% of female respondents reported that they would refuse housing that did not include their animals.

Companion animals help homeless youth to cope with loneliness and depression and provide a positive and giving relationship that some youth have never experienced (Bender, Thompson, McManus, Lantry, & Flynn, 2007; Rew, 2000). Thompson, McManus, Lantry, Windsor, and Flynn (2006) conducted focus groups with 60 homeless youth in Texas. Participants with animals described feeding their animals before themselves and purposely seeking out pet-friendly services. They identified their animals as providing emotional support, love, safety, and motivation to take better care of themselves and "stay out of trouble."

The effects of encounters between homeless individuals who owned companion animals and the public were qualitatively explored by Irvine, Kahl, & Smith (2012). The majority of homeless companion animal owners interviewed were able to successfully "redefine" what constitutes responsible companion animal ownership and refute many of the public's negative comments, creating a positive sense of self-identity. These participants described this "redefining" as their ability to provide constant companionship and a freedom that few domiciled companion animals experience, challenging the social convention that one needs to be housed in order to provide a good quality of life for a companion animal.

Past research paints a clear picture of the benefits associated with companion animal ownership among the homeless. However, personal observations gained as a veterinarian working with homeless youth and their companion animals show that the earlier literature fails to consider the drawbacks associated with ownership of companion animals by the homeless. This study will argue that in order to achieve a more complete understanding of the role that companion animals play in the lives of homeless youth, both the liabilities and benefits of owning an animal must be explored.

## Methods

The study was qualitative in design, exploring the lived experience of homeless youth and their companion animals. Ethical clearance from the University of Guelph Research Ethics Board was obtained. Informed consent either in writing or verbally was obtained from the participants. According to the Ethics Review Board, if participants chose not to sign the consent form but still wished to be part of the study, verbal consent and acknowledgment was sufficient. All interviews were conducted by the first author.

Within this paper, the terms 'homeless' and 'street-involved' are used interchangeably. For the purposes of this study, a youth was defined as between the ages of 16 and 24. In Canada, 'youth' are generally considered to be 16-24 years of age, the legal age in which a youth can leave home without parental consent (16 years) to the age at which individuals are generally required to seek shelter and other support services for adults (25 years).

### *Interviews*

Semi-structured individual interviews were conducted using an interview guide that began with a broad request to the participant to "tell me about yourself and your current situation," followed by "tell me about your pet and the relationship you have with him/her." Further questions elicited data on the role the animal played in the youths' lives, the effects or differences that the companion animal had made in their life, concerns as an animal owner, how they were able to provide for their animal, and the types of services or programs helpful

for youth with companion animals. Names of participants and their animals in this report are pseudonyms assigned by the first author. Hard brackets within quotations either de-identify location or clarify context or meaning of the narrative.

### *Sample*

Purposive sampling was used to obtain participants from three urban drop-in centers, one in Ottawa and two in Toronto, Ontario. Street-involved youth who owned companion animals were recruited by handing out business cards with time and date of possible interview times or by sending cards to drop-in centers, and by direct recruitment by the researcher while at the drop-in center. Youth were made aware of the purpose of the study and told that they would receive \$20 for participation.

This sampling strategy was selected to achieve a better understanding about the role and meaning that companion animals play in the lives of street-involved youth. In keeping with the interpretive social scientific tradition (cf. Weber, 1978), the purpose of this research was not, in a conclusive way, to provide an analysis of the total range of views and experiences street youth have about their companion animals, but to learn more about the impact and meaning that companion animal ownership plays in the lives of homeless youth.

### *Sample Description*

This purposeful sample consisted of 10 street-involved youth (seven male and three female), who owned or previously owned a companion animal while living on the street. Participants were 18 to 24 years of age, with one male 18 years of age, one female 20 years of age, one male 21 years of age, one male and one female 23 years of age, and five males 24 years of age. Eight of the ten participants (6 male; 2 female) currently owned dogs and two (2 male) had owned dogs previously while on the street, but at the time of the study were cat owners.

At the time of the interviews, two male participants were living on the street, one female was couch-surfing, four (all male) were transiently or vulnerably housed (including squatting, staying with friends or family, or couch-surfing), and three (1 male; 2 female) described themselves as in stable housing.

### *Data Analysis*

All interviews were audio-taped and transcribed verbatim. Accuracy of the transcriptions was ensured by listening to the audio-recording while reading the transcript, and errors in transcription were corrected. Both manifest and latent content analyses (Holsti, 1969; Patton, 1990) were used to analyze the data. Manifest content was obtained from the direct answering of questions from the interview guide, while latent content was obtained from deriving interpreted meanings of the responses to these questions. First-level coding of data was initiated by reading the interviews several times to identify trends and patterns. Through an iterative analytical process of repeated readings of the text, substantive themes emerged and themes were assigned key words or phrases to describe the effects of companion animal ownership on street-involved youth through the participant's experiences and perceptions. As analysis progressed, related sub-themes were grouped into broader themes, where the experiences and perceptions were grouped into sub-themes and each was determined to be a benefit or a liability.

### Limitations

Several limitations need to be noted. Given the nature of the sample and its size, generalizations about these findings cannot be made. The population of street-involved youth is heterogeneous in terms of demographic, descriptive, and experience-based factors and transiency. While efforts were made to reduce fear and distrust among the participants, being vulnerable and perhaps having had negative experiences with adults introduced the potential for respondent bias.

The attachment participants had to their animals may have resulted in a social desirability bias. Youth may have feared that negative portrayals of companion animals might suggest that they do not adequately care about their companion animal or that there may be some consequence if they described socially unacceptable or criminal behavior, regardless of the guidelines set forth in the informed consent form. Social desirability bias may also be a factor with sensitive topics such as drug use and criminal activity, and with a possible general distrust by youth of unfamiliar adults (Ulager et al., 2005).

## Results

Results are presented as themes and sub-themes identified from the narratives that constitute the data for this study. The substantive theme that emerged from the data was one of “pet before self,” in which the needs of the animal were placed ahead of the owner’s needs. First and second level sub-themes of “physical” and “emotional” effects, and “benefits” and “liabilities” respectively, were then further developed.

*Pet before self.* “Pet before self” was the overarching theme and manifested itself in many ways. First, youth described foregoing opportunities for their own health and success that did not include their companion animal. This effect was seen prominently in the physical sub-themes of housing or shelter, employment, and income. Second, the participants appeared to accept the added responsibilities, challenges, and stressors that came with having a companion animal, as demonstrated in the emotional effects of companion animal ownership, despite the often negative impact on their already difficult lives. Finally, youth who described having a companion animal as a willing responsibility accepted the limitations on their freedom or activities as necessary, as something they “have to do” for their companion animal.

### *Physical Effects*

These findings include the physical effects that companion animal ownership have on homeless youth seeking, finding, or maintaining shelter or housing; income generation; effects on their freedom and activities; and use of drugs and number of arrests.

*Housing.* The physical effect of having companion animals on shelter and housing emerged in various ways. Three male participants described sleeping on the street to be with their animal. The decision to not seek shelter services was multifactorial. Often it was because of a “no pet” shelter policy, but other considerations included a general dislike of shelters (e.g., lack of personal space or privacy) and a preference to be outside. Youth may elect to sleep outside regardless of companion animal ownership. However, two youth described how it was harder for both them and their animals during times of inclement weather when they would have sought



“pet-friendly” shelter if available, and reported that their health has been affected by having to sleep outside, as Sam related:

I was stuck sleeping outside with Mackenzie [dog]. I didn't mind it. I prefer that than living in the shelters here in this city, but on days like this where it's horrible out and I've come down with this chronic cough, all that garbage from sleeping outside in this weather, but other than that it was good 'cause it kept Mackenzie happy cause of the breed he was. The Husky/Wolf that he is, he loved it outside. He didn't care.

Similarly, three males described how having a dog made it more difficult to find stable housing. Michael identified the breed of the dog he owned as decreasing his ability to find housing because legislation in Ontario has singled out particular breeds as dangerous: “It made it very difficult [finding housing with a dog] 'cause it was a pit bull ... I definitely stayed in the streets because of my dog.”

Another male described how he, his mother, and brother, all unemployed and homeless, were forced to leave his grandmother's apartment because of their dog. Relinquishment of the family dog, who, he explained “had helped him through some horrible things,” was never considered, even though it would have been easier for his family to find housing.

In contrast, the reason and motivation described by Jeff (housed at the time of interview) for finding stable housing was for his dog, not himself: “I love him and I get a place for him. Really, like, if it wasn't for him, I'd be on the streets.” Additionally, two young women, one who was couch-surfing and one who was housed at the time of interview, reported that they tried to remain sheltered or housed for their dogs. Furthermore, if they themselves had to stay on the streets, they described how they would not allow their companion animal to do so: “If I had to stay on the street, I would definitely give my dogs to somebody else who could take care of them. I wouldn't want to do that. I wouldn't want to put my dogs in those situations.”

*Income.* Five male participants reported that having a companion animal impaired their ability to find and maintain

stable employment. With no housing where they could leave their companion animal or reliable and safe animal care, their ability to find and/or maintain employment was restricted. Sean explained:

When you have a dog and you're living on the street, you can't go to work because you have to look after the dog. ... Trying to find a friend that's actually constant to look after your dog while you're at work, I mean, when you're living on the streets you can't find anybody that's actually reliable. ... I found one guy that lasted a week and then he just disappeared and I was never able to find him for my next shift. I ended up losing my job...

Almost half of the participants (3 female; 1 male) perceived that the use of companion animals for panhandling was exploitation of the animal. However, two male participants, who engage in panhandling for income generation, acknowledged that companion animals often improved earnings, particularly when their animal was younger. Brian shared:

I use my dog because he's my dog. He goes everywhere I go. So if I'm panhandling and sitting there ... he's sitting there too ... while he was between 16 weeks and 6 months old I could almost guarantee \$100 day every day ... I'd normally have 2 or 3 panhandlers before me and I could still make a \$100 every day.

*Drug use & arrests.* When the youth were asked an open-ended question on whether having a companion animal made any difference or created change in their lives, four of seven male youth reported that their use of drugs decreased with dog ownership. They reported either reducing the amount of drugs or alcohol consumed and level of intoxication experienced, or a shift in the type of drugs consumed (e.g., away from "hard" drugs). Two of these youth also reported that they have avoided arrest and incarceration since having a companion animal. Sam explained:

Before, when I wasn't a pet owner, my life was one of like, try to make myself more liking the city, meaning

the drugs, alcohol, all the bad things, the crime. Like I was in and out of court, I was in and out of jail, like life didn't matter to me. Once I got Mackenzie I settled down and my life actually had meaning to it. Like I actually quit the drugs for a while, I haven't gone back to jail yet. Like it's been at least 2 years since I've actually gone to jail. I don't do heavy drugs anymore; I still smoke weed, but like, I don't do heavy drugs anymore.

Two males described their own experiences of having their dogs removed from them, one during his arrest and the other due to his incarceration. With no social support to help retrieve and care for the dogs, both dogs were euthanized at the municipal animal shelter. Two other youth described similar experiences happening to peers and their pets. These risks of removal and/or euthanasia of the companion animal were described by these youth as being reasons to avoid arrest and incarceration and/or to have support of friends or family who can take care of the companion animal if those situations arise.

Two other males had been involved with gangs while on the street with their companion animals, and while they discussed their involvement with the dealing of drugs, they didn't describe personal drug use. They reported no difference in their participation in illegal activities, such as drug dealing, because of having a companion animal. The female youths did not discuss drug use or involvement in illegal activity.

*Activities.* Another physical effect of having companion animals included the impact on their freedom to participate in activities. Two males reported that having a companion animal restricted them from participating in activities that were not "pet-friendly," such as visiting entertainment venues or other establishments.

Three participants (2 male; 1 female) described how they were more likely to return to the same place where they were sleeping or living than before they had a companion animal. They also return more regularly to take the dog out to eliminate, feed, or perform some other aspect of care for the companion animal. Jeff explained, "There are things I gotta do ... I gotta take care of my dog. I love him ... I don't sleep out and never come back to the place I originally lived."

### *Emotional Effects*

The emotional effects of having companion animals included added stressors arising from such ownership, the experiences of a human–animal relationship, and the roles that companion animals played in their lives.

*Stressors.* Seven of the ten youth interviewed described their concerns as companion animal owners, expressing worry about maintaining the health of their animal and their ability to provide food and veterinary care if their companion animal became ill or injured. Lack of affordable veterinary care and worry about losing their companion animal were the primary stressors. Karen shared:

It's really hard taking care of them because I can't always get them food ... I'm worried that something might happen to them. They might be taken away from me, which would probably be the worst thing that ever happened and it's hard ... [what would be helpful is] having anywhere I can stay with my pets and they can help provide food, water, and health care for my pets.

Seven youth related that experiencing the loss of a companion animal or worry about the loss of their companion animal had a significant effect on their lives. An actual loss or fear of loss could be in the form of death or an animal stolen or lost, as well as the animal being removed by police or animal control officers or as a result of their own arrest or incarceration. Depression and change in behavior were described by two youth following the death of their companion animals, demonstrating the effect that such a loss can have on the emotional health of these youth. Michael shared:

I had a dog on the street in [city name] ... he got ran over by a car while I was sleeping ... I didn't get any more dogs after that ... I missed him a lot ... he was a good dog ... I didn't want to have that loss again because it was so hard ... I got depressed after.

Another stressor identified by one male was the negative perception that the general public had about being homeless with a companion animal. He reported that individuals passing by while he was panhandling with his dog made

comments suggesting he could not adequately care for his dog or that he shouldn't have a dog if he couldn't even take care of himself.

*Relationship and role.* All the participating youth described their companion animals as a source of comfort and as non-judgmental, consistent companions in whom they could confide. For example, Sam explained:

My relationship with Mackenzie ... is the best I ever had ... having my dog around I find it more comforting than having my girlfriend around ... 'cause he always knows when I'm feeling bad ... I don't always have to sit around explaining to him what I mean cause he already seems to know ... having Mackenzie is easy 'cause I can talk about my problems to him and he doesn't judge me.

Half of the youth interviewed used the word "love" when they described their relationship with their companion animal. In David's words, "I love her. She's the best pet ever ... She is the best thing I have and I hope that she stays healthy forever."

Companion animals also played diverse roles. Six of the ten youth interviewed described the relationship with their companion animal as child-like. For Sam, his dog "was my kid ... I treated him like he was my kid ... he was a big part of the family I was developing."

Six also described their companion animal as their "best friend," and "always there." Ryan eloquently expressed that one of the many roles of his dog was a means of allowing people to see his "good side:"

He was my best friend. Loyal. Companion, when no one else was there. He was my shadow. Always there ... that was my way of displaying my good side, you know? By having that dog around me, people could see a better side of me than they usually would.

"Interdependence" emerged as important for two youth (1 male; 1 female) who described their relationship with their animal as reliant on one another to meet each other's needs. This relationship was seen as a positive effect, in that they felt

needed and depended upon, and the companion animal was also always there for them. Sam described this: "It was sort of I needed him there at all times or he needed me there at all times ... because we lived so long together, our connection was beyond what any other pet-owner's connection with their pets would be." Nonetheless, Sam also described how this interdependence impaired his ability to find employment, as his dog became anxious when left with anyone else.

## Discussion

These findings support previous studies demonstrating the emotional and social support having a companion animal provides for the homeless (Kidd & Kidd, 1994; Labrecque & Walsh, 2011; Rew, 2000). Themes generated on the physical effect on housing for youth with animals, and their decision to forego housing or shelter in order to stay with their animals, are consistent with those of Bukowski & Buetow (2011) and Singer et al. (1995). Companion animals appear to serve as a vehicle for youth to learn about unconditional love, trust, and constancy in a relationship. With such strength of attachment, it is not surprising that youth consistently chose to forego opportunities for shelter, housing, and employment in order to be with their companion animals. Although these choices may be to the detriment of their own health and success in getting off the street, for some youth this "Pet before self" theme may be a driver for reducing their use of drugs and hence number of arrests, as well as beneficially affect their daily activities by creating structure and routine. Other research examining the strengths of homeless youth supported these findings that companion animals provide a source of stability, responsibility, and pride (Bender et al., 2007).

Most commonly recognized are the effects of having companion animals on sheltering, housing, and employment. The findings of this study show that indirect benefits may include motivation to seek and/or maintain housing, a finding that has not appeared in the previous research literature. However, having a companion animal may be a liability and barrier to short- or long-term housing when animals are not allowed (Singer et al., 1995). As most shelters in Canada have a "no

pet" policy, youth have few alternatives except to sleep rough in the street or couch surf to stay with their companion animal. (An internet search conducted on October 4, 2011, using key words: homeless, shelter, pet-friendly, pets, welcome, Canada resulted in 6 hits, some of which accept small pets only or seasonally accept pets.) Consideration of "pet-friendly" sheltering services is needed.

Due to a lack of affordable housing in urban centers, many cities, including New York City and Toronto, are adopting the "housing first" model (Power, 2008), whereby housing the individual is the first priority, followed by provision of additional services, such as mental health support or addictions counseling. However, for programs to be successful in the population of companion animal owners, this study suggests that housing must accept companion animals, including large dogs.

Despite the limited sample size, gender differences appeared to be a factor in this study in the approach to housing. Our findings support previous reports indicating that homeless males outnumber females by two to one, with females more likely to seek shelter or housing due to their vulnerability on the street (Hagan & McCarthy, 1997; O'Grady & Gaetz, 2009).

The homeless youth population, in general, is largely excluded from earning income in the formal economy. In order to survive, homeless youth are left to make money via short-term or odd jobs, panhandling, prostitution, petty crime, and drug dealing (Gaetz & O'Grady, 2002). In addition, less than 15% of homeless youth receive social assistance (Gaetz & O'Grady, 2002). This study suggests that within the formal economy, paid employment is even more challenging to find and maintain for homeless youth who have companion animals. Panhandling may be one of the few methods of income generation that allows youth to be with their animals. However, if the goal of society is for youth to enter the more formal economic arena, then an understanding and acceptance of the relationships that many of these youth have with their companion animals is required, and support in the form of consistent animal care may be necessary.

Regardless of the liabilities of companion animal ownership for street-involved youth, youth participants described

placing the needs of their companion animals before themselves. These effects of the human–animal bond support findings that allowing space for companion animals can improve service engagement by homeless youth (Rew, 2000). Programs could consider allowing well-behaved companion animals into services with their owners, or providing accommodation in a safe place while their owners access services. Agencies could consider a kennel or companion animal boarding area in the design plans for new facilities. Incorporating animals into shelter services can provide significant benefits to the residents (Labrecque & Walsh, 2011). Phillips (2012) founded and developed the Sheltering Animals and Families Together (SAF-T)<sup>TM</sup> program that provides a start-up guide for organizations wishing to create this service. Developed for women’s shelters, this resource is being actualized in an increasing number of domestic shelters providing housing for pets with their families, and could be broadly used across a range of other services. Ideally, companion animal day-boarding or “dog daycare” could be provided while their owners attend job interviews, school, or employment opportunities. Other ways to support youth include provision of pet food and supplies, and accessible veterinary care. There are a few community programs scattered across Canada that help provide veterinary care for companion animals belonging to homeless youth, including a program run by faculty and students from the University of Montreal’s Faculty of Veterinary Medicine, and Community Veterinary Outreach, a veterinary-based registered charity that provides pro bono preventive veterinary care, education, food and supplies for animals of those who are homeless, vulnerably-housed, and street-involved, including youth, in several communities in Ontario. Specific areas of education for youth should include an understanding of the rights of tenants, specifically referring to companion animals; specific breed legislation (if applicable); and consequences of removal of a companion animal by local animal control or by-law services in the event of charges of animal neglect or owner arrest.

In this study, decreased drug use was a consistent finding among the male youth who owned companion animals. This finding is significant in that the majority of criminal offences by street-involved youth are addiction driven (Pernanen,



Cousineau, Brochu, & Sun, 2002; Public Health Agency of Canada, 2006). With crimes monetarily supporting addiction, it is no surprise that a reduction in arrests follows the decrease in drug use. Insights on drug use among animal owners in the homeless population have been inconsistent. Baker (2001) found that more non-dog-owners took drugs than did owners, while a study conducted by Taylor et al. (2004) found no statistical difference in drug use between owners and non-owners.

Another significant finding is the negative impact on the emotional health of youth who lose a companion animal. A study of adolescent animal-bonding and bereavement demonstrated that highly bonded adolescents experienced more intense grief after losing a companion animal than did those less bonded to their companion animals, and that the degree of bonding and intensity of bereavement is greater for girls than for boys (Brown, 1996). Our findings support a need for counselling for bereavement of companion animals. Among highly attached companion animal owners, complicated grief has been found to occur in 20-30% of the population with loss of their animals (Adams, Bonnett, & Meek, 2000; Adrian, Deliramich, & Frueh, 2009). Homeless youth who lose animals and who often lack differentiated coping strategies and support (Kidd & Carroll, 2007; Unger, Kipke, Simon, & Johnson, 1998) may be at higher risk of experiencing significant grief and/or depression. Crisis intervention may be required. In addition, the loss of their companion animal may mean loss of the structure and responsibilities that may have been keeping them from self-destructive activities.

While companion animal ownership among the street-involved presents obvious issues with ability to obtain needs such as shelter and food for themselves, the youth in this study described making choices to keep and stay with their companion animals, despite the added stresses entailed. The findings of this study imply that companion animals may have, at some level, a protective role against the two leading causes of death among street-involved youth in Canada, i.e., suicide and illicit drug intoxication (Roy et al., 2004; Unger et al., 1998). It is worthwhile to consider how support of the human-animal relationship could reduce deaths in this population.

### *Future Research*

The protective effect of companion animals against suicide has been described in women in abusive situations (Fitzgerald, 2007). The possibility of similar protective effects in other socially marginalized populations, such as the homeless, warrants further investigation. Additionally, since data saturation may not have been achieved in this study, in that consistent repetition of data from female and gang-involved youth was not achieved, need for further study is indicated. The two male gang-related youth interviewed did not discuss personal use of drugs, but were open regarding their activity in dealing drugs. Gang culture may demonstrate unique effects of companion animal ownership, providing more peer social support and improving their ability to care for the companion animal. Alternatively, gang dogs may be used for fighting, particularly dogs bred for that purpose, and the choice in dog breeds may be associated with status and/or function, such as for intimidation and protection. The two previously gang-involved youth interviewed had both owned pit-bulls, a breed now banned by Ontario provincial legislation. Therefore, the role(s) of the companion animal and the relationship with it may be quite different in gang-involved and other homeless youth. Further investigation is warranted in this unique population.

Information on drug use or criminal activity was not elicited from the three female participants. The reason for this may be multi-factorial. Females use fewer substances and are significantly less likely to be involved in drug dealing than males (Kirst, Erickson, & Strike, 2009). Additionally, homeless female youth purposely self-censor information provided to health care workers, as well as showing sensitivity to other areas of discussion, such as prostitution (Ensign & Panke, 2002). Further investigation into companion animal ownership among female street-involved youth is also warranted.

### Conclusion

While the liabilities for street-involved youth having companion animals are clear, previously unrecognized benefits, i.e., decreasing drug use and number of arrests, were notable among the youth interviewed. To engage in the structure and

responsibility of taking care of a living being other than themselves is purposeful to moving forward and leading a healthier lifestyle. Homeless youth, who may experience lower levels of self-worth (Votta & Farrell, 2009), may seek out shelter and subsistence for their animal, leading to an improved view of self and healthier lifestyle for themselves. To assist these youth, services and programs may need to accept companion animals and understand the strength of these human-animal relationships and the benefits companion animal ownership can offer.

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