

WellBeing International

WBI Studies Repository

11-7-2019

Do Pet Owners Have Lower Suicide Rates?

Harold Herzog

Western Carolina University

Follow this and additional works at: https://www.wellbeingintlstudiesrepository.org/sc_herzog_comphealth

Recommended Citation

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/intl/blog/animals-and-us/201911/do-pet-owners-have-lower-suicide-rates>

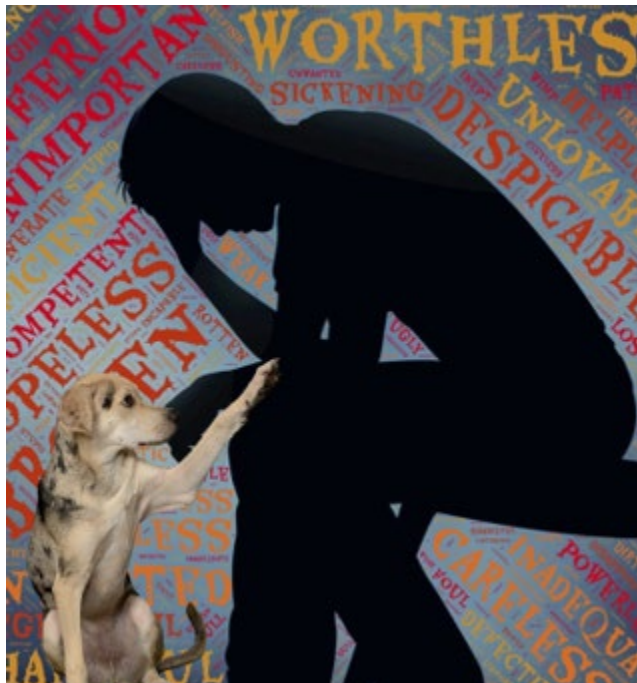
This material is brought to you for free and open access by WellBeing International. It has been accepted for inclusion by an authorized administrator of the WBI Studies Repository. For more information, please contact wbisr-info@wellbeingintl.org.



Do Pet Owners Have Lower Suicide Rates?

What the research shows about the role of pets in preventing suicide.

Posted November 7, 2019 | Reviewed by Lybi Ma



Source: Photo by Johnhain/Pixabay

In 2017, 47,173 Americans killed themselves. That's more individuals than those who have died in automobile accidents (37,133) and nearly three times the number of people who were murdered (17,284). Suicide rates are on the rise. They increased by 33 percent between 1999 and 2016.

My colleague David McCord, a clinical psychologist, recently became interested in suicide when he heard a talk by suicide researcher Thomas Joiner. Joiner believes that suicides are usually the

result of the confluence of two psychological processes. The first he calls *perceived burdensomeness*. It is the belief that you have become a burden to others. The other is *thwarted belongingness*, Joiner's term for social isolation.

After reading one of [Joiner's articles](#), David began to wonder if having pets might help prevent suicides. I had never considered this idea, but it makes perfect sense.

Some [studies](#) have found that pets provide social support for their owners and stave off feelings of loneliness. As David wrote to me in an e-mail:

The concept of "thwarted belongingness" refers to feelings of not belonging, not being connected to others, being alone, and also a lack of reciprocal caring and helping (no one turns to me for help when needed, and I have no one to turn to when I need help). I think of the deep, high-priority connections that so many people have with their dog (or cat). I know there is much research about emotional support associated with companion

animals and therapy animals. It seems to me that for many, many people I know, their relationship with their pet directly addresses the "belongingness" need that Joiner places centrally in his theory.

He asked me: "Have you come across any high-quality, credible, good research on pet-keeping and suicidal behavior?"

David is right about the degree that people connect with their pets and he has raised a great question. For example, it is often claimed that pets (particularly, dogs) provide their owners with "unconditional love." If this is the case, pet owners should be less likely to suffer from thwarted belongingness and hence have lower suicide rates.

Intrigued, I looked for published studies on the relationship between pet ownership and suicide rates. When I could not come up with much, I posted McCord's question about empirical studies on the impact of pets on suicide to a Facebook anthrozoology group. The responses were fascinating. For example, several people correctly pointed out that there is an epidemic of suicide among veterinarians even though nearly all veterinarians have pets. A mental health nurse responded that in her profession, pets are considered protective factors against suicide. Another person suggested that grief caused by the death of a beloved pet might tip some people over the edge.

The Research on Pets and Suicide

After a lot of digging, I located three published studies that addressed the issue of whether pets help prevent suicide. Two of the papers were written by researchers from Johns Hopkins University. They were both based on data collected as part of a series of health censuses conducted in rural Washington County, Maryland, in the 1960s and 1970s.

The first study was a 1985 article that appeared in the [American Journal of Public Health](#). It was written by Knud Helsing and Mary Monk at the Department of Epidemiology at Johns Hopkins. They compared pet ownership among 48 individuals who killed themselves between 1975 and 1985 with a group of living people matched on the basis of age, race, and sex. Helsing and Monk found no difference in pet ownership

rates among the two groups. Indeed, 56 percent of the suicides had lived with a pet as did exactly 56 percent of individuals in the matched control group. Further, this pattern was found among both cat and dog owners.

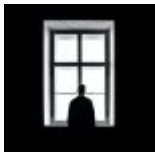
THE BASICS

- [Suicide Risk Factors and Signs](#)
- [Find counselling near me](#)

A [similar study](#) was published in 1995 by Guohua Li, also of Johns Hopkins. He analyzed factors associated with suicide among Washington County residents who died between 1963 and 1975. In this group, 30 people had killed themselves. Suicides were more common among males and widowers. However, as with the earlier Johns Hopkins study, there was not a significant effect of owning a pet on suicide frequency.

The best and most recent research on suicide rates among pet owners was described in [a 2018 paper](#) in the journal *Epidemiology*. David Batty of University College London and Steven Bell of Cambridge University examined the frequency of suicide among 67,441 adults who participated in the Health Survey for England between 1995 and 2004. During this period, 47 deaths were attributed to suicide. Batty and Bell found that being a male, having more [education](#), [smoking](#) cigarettes, having mental health problems, and living alone did increase your chance of suicide. Owning a pet did not: 22 of the suicide victims lived with a companion animal compared with 25 who did not.

SUICIDE ESSENTIAL READS



[Most People Don't Disclose Their Suicidal Thoughts](#)



[The Fundamental Unpredictability of Suicide](#)

Why Studying Suicide Is Difficult

There you have it. There does not seem to be any empirical scientific evidence that pet ownership protects against suicide. But keep a couple of things in mind. As the epidemiologist Robert Gibbons [wrote](#), “Suicide is one of the most difficult adverse events to study.” One reason is that, from an epidemiological perspective, suicide is a rare event. For example, in 2017 in the United States, there were 14 suicides per 100,000 people. The number of suicides in the three studies I located was small—fewer than 50 in each one. The small Ns mean that comparisons between pet ownership in people who kill themselves and people who don’t are a bit dodgy.

A big problem is that there is no way to accurately assess the number of potential suicide victims who *don't kill themselves* because of their commitment to pets. It is possible that many individuals elect not to take their own life because their dogs or cats help them get through a tough stretch or because they feel the need to stay alive so they can take care of their pets. Indeed, this was the case of one of my Facebook correspondents who wrote that it was her companion animals who kept her alive in the wake of her son’s death.

One thing is for certain. The pet-suicide connection is an important topic that warrants more [attention](#) from researchers.

References

Helsing, K. J., & Monk, M. (1985). Dog and cat ownership among suicides and matched controls. *American journal of public health*, 75(10), 1223-1224.

Li, G. (1995). The interaction effect of bereavement and sex on the risk of suicide in the elderly: an historical cohort study. *Social Science & Medicine*, 40(6), 825-828.

Batty, G. D., & Bell, S. (2018). Animal companionship and risk of suicide. *Epidemiology*, 29(4), e25-e26.

McConnell, A. R., Paige Lloyd, E., & Humphrey, B. T. (2019). We are family: Viewing pets as family members improves wellbeing. *Anthrozoös*, 32(4), 459-470.