

Systematic Review of The Mental Health Considerations of Having an Animal Companion for Low-Income Populations

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Abstract

Objective: To review literature on the impact of companion animals on mental health in low-income populations.

Methods: PubMed and CINAHL were used to identify literature on the relationships between mental health and the presence of a companion animal in low-income populations.

Results: Certain factors, like the cost of animal care or the destruction of property by an animal, were shown to be stressors, but overall, animal companions were found to have a strong positive association with owner's improved mental state. This may be due to increased social interaction and routine formation.

Conclusions: The benefit of pet ownership is suggested by research to have an overall positive impact on the mental state of low-income owners. Support structures providing greater access to food, toys, and veterinary care for impoverished pet owners would provide many with the resources needed to support their animal and in turn, their own mental health.

Introduction

The homeless population in the U.S., comprised of over half a million people in 2019, have increased stress levels and rates of mental health issues when compared to people living in homes due to the stressors of finding shelter, food, and higher rates of drug and alcohol abuse.⁴ Interactions between animals and human populations has been shown to reduce anxiety, depression, loneliness, and increase the general well-being of humans.⁸ In the United States, 87% of pet owners regard their companion animals as a part of their family.⁸ There are a number of barriers that might prevent homeless and low-income populations from accessing proper care for their animal companions.⁴ Some of these include costs and access to services, access to education about important health indicators in animals, and a lack of communication due to culture or language barriers between the client and the vet or other provider.⁴ Despite all of these barriers, there are close to 19 million people living below the poverty line in the United States who have pets.²

Methods

Primary sources were taken from PubMed and CINAHL in February 2021. The search terms used included, low income AND human-animal bond AND mental health. The citations of sources were used to gather three additional articles. Initially, 28 articles were identified, 8 of these were removed due to duplication and 20 were screened for relevance. After initial screening 9 articles remained for assessment and 1 was excluded after a full-text assessment, producing 8 final articles used in this systematic review.

Results

This review looked at eight articles, two of which were cross-sectional studies looking into the relationship between low-income humans and their animal companions^{1,2} and two of which were case studies analyzing this relationship.^{3,4} Two of the articles were cross-sectional studies looking over the attachment of owners to their animal companions,^{5,6} one of the articles examined the knowledge of social workers supporting companions animals in their work with individuals through a cross-sectional study,⁷ and the last one provided background on the relevant history of the human-animal bond.⁸ Overall, five of the articles found that having a pet supported each owner's mental health, especially in low-income populations.¹⁻⁵ All four of the studies analyzing the direct relationship of an impoverished owner and their pet found that having one was associated with a better mental state, improved routines, increased human connection, and overall greater happiness.¹⁻⁴ One article even found a greater association of food security for pet owners (Figure 1).² The articles studying human bonds found that pet owners had strong attachments that did affect the mental state of the owners.^{5,6}



Discussion

In the United States, homeless and low-income populations face a great deal of problems in everyday life. This often leads to an increase in stress and shows an association with a greater rate in the development of mental health issues. Having a pet was shown to have a positive effect on the mental state of their owners, which may be due to the social benefits of having a living being that one may regard as a friend or family member.⁴ This systematic review found mounting evidence that pets are an important factor in the mental health of many populations, especially in the case of low-income peoples. However, this may only be seen due to the smaller size of sample populations, as training in the animal-human bond for mental health professionals is uncommon or at best only touched upon.⁷ Further studies might employ a longitudinal framework to better understand how the mental state of each person might change over time, and how this may be affected by the absence or presence of a pet. The findings of this study may impact public understanding of the support animal companions provide for homeless and low-income populations. Further research should be employed

to better understand this bond, and more support should be provided to those in hard financial situations for the care of an animal companion. Furthermore, clinical professionals should seek training in the importance of pets in the everyday lives of their clients. In conclusion, animal companions play an essential role in the mental health of many low-income populations, and we as a nation must step up to better provide for both animals and humans, for the benefit of humanity as a whole.

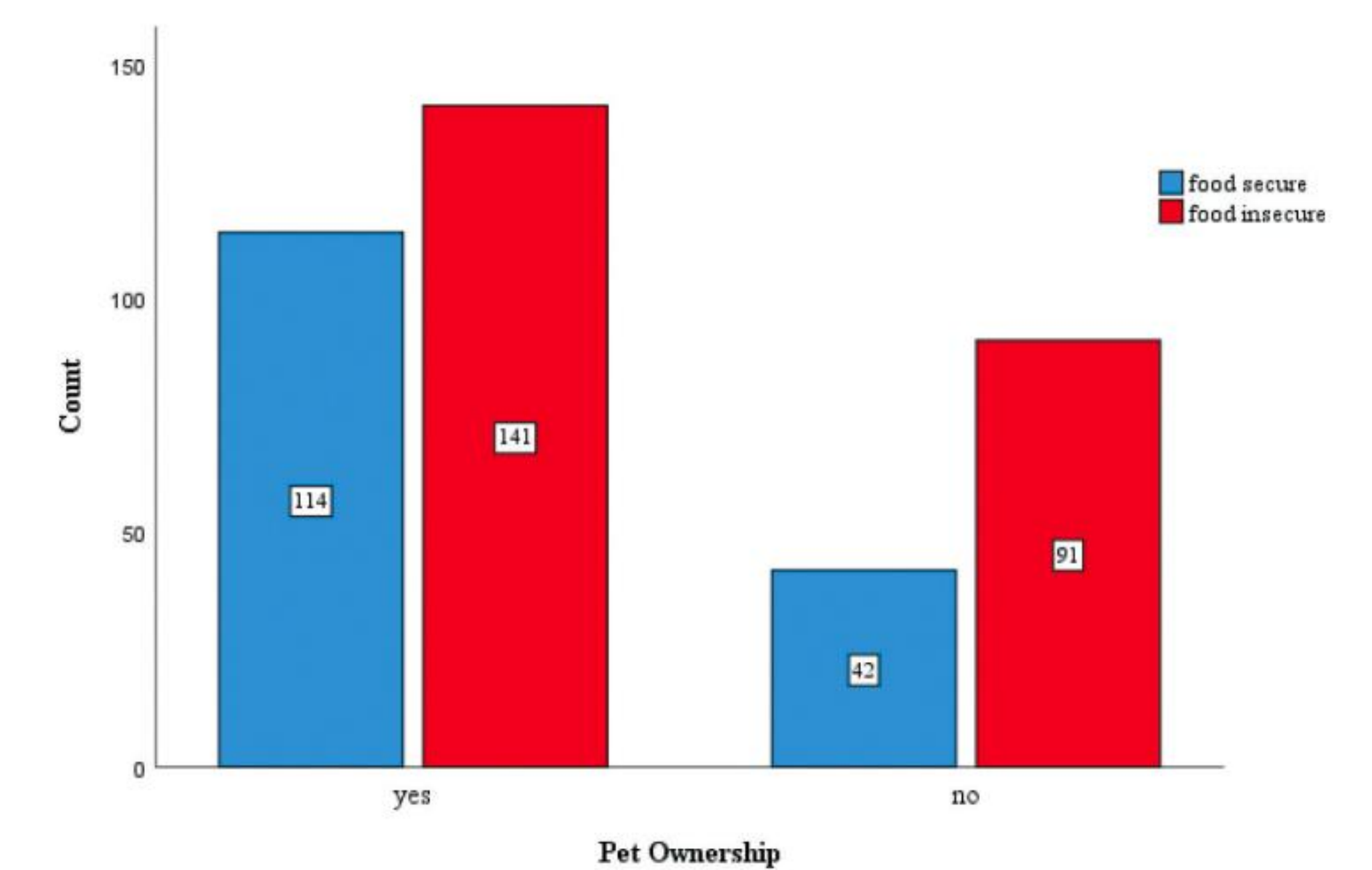


Figure 1. Food Status by Pet Ownership Status. Note. Count of how many people with and without pets report being food secure or insecure. $\chi^2 (1, N = 388) = 6.25, p = .012$

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