



Pet Ownership May Act as the Glue That Holds Neighborhoods Together

September 14, 2017 • 1,716 views

Story at-a-glance

- Pet ownership was found to be significantly associated with higher levels of social capital, or the “glue” that holds society together
- Dog owners were five times more likely to get to know others in their neighborhood than other pet owners
- Among non-dog pet owners, 27 percent said their pets helped them to get to know their neighbors better



[Precious Kitten and Lovable Dog, Both Golden](#)

By Dr. Becker

In 2005, a random survey of more than 300 Australian adults revealed that [owning a pet](#) increased social contact and interaction, as well as boosted perceptions of neighborhood friendliness.¹ It's not surprising, since you may come across more neighbors when you're outside walking your dog than you would if you were cooped up inside. Plus, if your neighbor also shares his home with a pet, the animal gives you an instant common bond.

More than a decade later, one of the original study authors and colleagues from The University of Western Australia and Harvard School of Public Health took the 2005 study a step further, surveying nearly 2,700 people from four cities (Perth, San Diego, Portland and Nashville).²

Across the board, pet ownership was found to be significantly associated with higher levels of social capital, that is, the relationships among people who live and work together that allow the society to function effectively and realize productive benefits.

“Most simply,” the researchers stated, “social capital has been described as the ‘glue’ that holds society together or the raw material of civil society that is created from everyday interactions between people.” This may be gained from volunteering, getting involved in community events, helping locals in need and, it turns out, from owning a pet.

Pets Are a Conduit for Building Social Capital

Social support systems are essential for physical health and mental and emotional well-being. However, such systems are lacking in many modern-day communities. Owning a pet is an under-recognized conduit for building social capital, according to the study, as pet ownership was found to be significantly associated with higher social capital compared to non-ownership. Further, it wasn’t only dog owners who benefited — owning any pet was positively linked to social capital. According to the study:³

“This is not just a social nicety or quirky sociological observation, as social capital is predictive of a raft of important social indicators, including those pertaining to mental health, mortality, child development, crime and safety and economic resilience.

Factors that erode social capital tend to be more readily identified in public policy and popular discourse, so there is novel appeal in tapping into the high rates of pet ownership that exist already in many countries as a conduit for strengthening the social fabric of local communities.”

While dog owners, and particularly dog owners who said they walked their dog, experienced the highest average social capital levels (being five times more likely to get to know others in their neighborhood than other pet owners), other pets were also shown to promote interactions among neighbors. In fact, among non-dog pet owners, 27 percent said their pets helped them to get to know their neighbors better, acting as a topic of conversation or a way for children to get to know one another via the novel pet.

How Pets Make It Easier to Get to Know Your Neighbors

It’s likely that pet ownership facilitates relationships and a sense of cohesiveness in a number of ways, including via perceptions of trust. “Some observational studies have found that the presence of a companion animal enhances perceptions of the trustworthiness of other people,” the researchers wrote.

They also hypothesized that [rises in oxytocin](#), the “love” hormone, may be enhanced among pet owners, as it’s known that mutual gazes between a dog and its owner trigger releases of the feel-good hormone.

“We might hypothesize that pet-owners experience a rise in oxytocin regardless of the type of pet (i.e., that cat owners might benefit as much from a boost in oxytocin as dog owners) and that this may contribute to enhanced feelings of trust and higher levels of social capital observed among all pet owners,” researchers noted.⁴ **Pets are also known as “social lubricators” or ice-breakers,** acting as safe conversation starters among people who would otherwise be strangers.

Pets can serve as catalysts for a variety of new relationships, from casual acquaintances who wave hello on walks to the formation of new friendships. In a study published in PLOS One, 40 percent of pet owners said they received one or more of the following types of social support from people they met through their pet:⁵

- Emotional (defined as receiving empathy, affection or encouragement)
- Informational (receiving useful information)
- Appraisal (receiving advice or an opinion)
- Instrumental (receiving practical help or a favor)

Pet-Friendly Cities Could Benefit Society

Given the potential for pets to rescue people from social isolation and boost physical and mental health via the formation of new relationships — not to mention the societal benefits — the featured study authors highlighted the importance of making [cities pet-friendly](#).

In Australia, for instance, many apartment complexes and retirement communities have a “no pets” policy. In the latter case, pet ownership can offer many [benefits to the elderly](#), who may be most at risk of suffering from social isolation and loneliness.

In the U.S., an increasing number of senior centers and retirement communities are even open to residents moving in with pets. Many animal shelters also allow seniors to [adopt pets](#) at a reduced cost, and some also have “seniors for seniors” programs that specialize in matching older animals with older humans. **Other simple changes, such as offering open spaces and parks in which to spend time with pets, were also mentioned as ways to facilitate increased pet ownership and, thereby, social capital.**

On a grander scale, the way humans interact socially has changed significantly in recent years, with the advent of social media and most people’s 24/7 on-the-go lifestyles. Owning and relating to companion animals, on the other hand, is something that has remained largely unchanged, which may be yet another reason why so many people are drawn to it. The featured study authors added:⁶

*“[H]umans have been drawn to **companion animals** since early civilization, and they **remain a relative constant in many people’s lives; a tangible constant that our findings suggest can yield positive social capital benefits of an enduring kind.**”*