

**MEDIA RELEASE | September 2016**

## ***Study shows the value of having a pet to young people but also how it can create barriers***

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McCreary Centre Society has today released an in-depth report about the health of youth with pets.

This is the first report to consider the relationship between BC youth and their companion animals, and supports findings from international studies showing the benefits associated with pet ownership including a link to positive health, such as greater involvement in physical activity, greater connection to community, increased feelings of safety, and lower rates of substance use.

However, it also appears that the benefits associated with having a pet can be negated by the barriers that come with this responsibility, as youth with a pet were more likely to miss school, forego needed health care, and miss out on affordable housing and access to services such as food kitchens and shelters.

The report is based on data from the 2013 BC Adolescent Health Survey completed by 30,000 young people aged 12-19, and the 2014 Homeless and Street Involved Youth Survey, completed by almost 700 homeless and precariously housed 12-19 year olds.

Annie Smith, Executive Director of McCreary Centre Society and a co-author of the report, said: *“Data from both surveys seems to show that some of the province’s most vulnerable young people are turning to animals for companionship and comfort, but in doing so they often face additional barriers and exacerbate some of the challenges they already face.”*

The study found that despite the changing housing market and other challenges youth with a pet may face, the rate of pet ownership among homeless youth remained stable between 2006 and 2014, with over half of homeless youth having a companion animal.

Kathy Powelson Executive Director of Paws for Hope Animal Foundation, the report funder commented *“I think the findings around homeless youth and their pets really support the need for more pet-friendly spaces. As an animal welfare organization we regularly witness the strength of the relationship between a vulnerable young person and their pet. This report confirms the need for us to work with service providers to identify ways we can break down some of those barriers young people experience.”*



McCreary Centre Society is a non-government, non-profit organization committed to improving the health of BC youth through research and community-based projects. Founded in 1977, the Society sponsors and promotes a wide range of activities and research to address unmet health needs of young people.

Contact:  
Annie Smith  
Executive Director  
3552 E. Hastings St.  
Vancouver, B.C.  
V5K 2A7  
Tel: 604-291-1996  
ext 225  
Cell: 604-728-9494  
annie@mcs.bc.ca  
www.mcs.bc.ca

## **BACKGROUNDER**

Having a pet has been shown to have positive health and social benefits for a variety of populations, yet to date there has been little research on the relation between pets and adolescent health. This report is the first to look at the role that pets play in the lives of British Columbia's young people.

## **A SELECTION OF KEY FINDINGS**

More than half of youth aged 12–19 who completed the 2013 BC Adolescent Health Survey (BC AHS) and 2014 Homeless and Street-Involved Youth Survey (HSIYS) had a pet.

Among youth who completed the HSIYS, the younger youth were when they first became homeless or street-involved, the more likely they were to have a pet. For example, among youth aged 16–19, 57% of those who became street-involved at 12 years old or younger had a pet, compared to 44% who became street-involved after their 15<sup>th</sup> birthday.

Among students who completed the BC AHS, youth with a debilitating health condition or disability, those living in poverty, sexual minority youth, and those who had been bullied or abused were all more likely to have a pet.

Socially isolated youth were less likely to have a pet, most notably those without close friends or a supportive adult to turn to.

The lack of affordable pet-friendly accommodations in BC may explain why homeless youth who lived alone and those who moved from house to house in the past year were less likely to have a pet. Also, homeless youth who had a dog were less likely than those without a dog to think they would have a home of their own in five years.

Having a pet appeared to reduce the chances that homeless youth would be able to access emergency housing or services. For example, those with a pet were almost half as likely to be in a safe house or shelter as those without a pet (8% vs. 15%), and youth with a pet were less likely to access safe or affordable housing services or soup kitchens than their peers without a pet.

However, pet ownership among those who were more stably housed was linked to positive future aspirations. Youth with a pet who completed the BC AHS were more likely to see themselves in a job or career in five years' time (66% vs. 62% without a pet), with a home of their own (29% vs. 22%), and having a family (particularly females: 16% vs. 12% of females without a pet).

Taking care of pets and other animals was associated with engagement in physical activities among youth who completed the BC AHS, even those who were typically at risk of not exercising, such as those with a limiting health condition. For example, youth with a pet were more likely to engage in an hour of moderate or vigorous exercise on at least five days in the past week (45% vs. 38% without a pet).

However, in addition to the health benefits of pet ownership, having a pet may be a barrier to accessing care for those who need it. Youth who completed the BC AHS who took care of a pet were more likely to have foregone needed medical care (10% vs. 7%) as well as needed mental health services (13% vs. 10%) in the past year, compared to those without this caretaking responsibility.

Having a pet was particularly valuable to homeless youth who were dealing with additional challenges in their lives. For example, among youth with a sensory disability, those who had a dog were more likely to often or always feel safe at night and were half as likely to have considered suicide in the past year (33% considered suicide vs. 71% without a dog).

Homeless youth with a pet were more likely to be attending school and attending regularly than their homeless peers without a pet.

Having a pet appeared to be linked to increased social connections, including homeless youth being more likely to have non-homeless friends.

Having a pet was associated with positive mental health for some youth. For example, homeless youth who identified as lesbian, gay, or bisexual who had a dog were more likely to report excellent mental health than their peers without a dog.

Among homeless youth currently staying in the most precarious housing situations, those with a pet were more likely to feel safe where they slept (75% vs. 54% without a pet).

Homeless youth with a pet who lived in the Fraser region were around twice as likely to have accessed a vet as those who lived in other parts of BC. Across the province, 15% of homeless youth with a pet felt that more veterinarian services were needed in their community.

The report will be launched at 6pm on Thursday September 29<sup>th</sup> at 2016, at Paws for Hope AGM, McCreary Centre Society, 3552 East Hastings St, Vancouver, V5K 2A7.

Webinar presentations are scheduled for 10am on September 30<sup>th</sup>, 9am and 3pm on October 3<sup>rd</sup>, noon on October 4<sup>th</sup>, and 10am and 2pm on October 7<sup>th</sup>. Webinar details are available at: [www.mcs.bc.ca/upcoming\\_webinars](http://www.mcs.bc.ca/upcoming_webinars).

A copy of *Connections and Companionship: The health of BC youth with pets* can be downloaded at [www.mcs.bc.ca](http://www.mcs.bc.ca).

Other reports using BC Adolescent Health Survey data are available at [www.mcs.bc.ca](http://www.mcs.bc.ca).