Companion animals, poverty and social work

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ABSTRACT

INTRODUCTION: A consequence of poverty is social isolation which can be lessened by having a companion animal. It is noted that people experiencing poverty go without food and other material goods to provide for animals in their care.

METHODS: The findings presented in this article are from a doctoral study in which 23 women and five men were interviewed using a qualitative approach. Applied thematic analysis was utilised to identify themes from the data.

FINDINGS: Companion animals provided participants in this study with a sense of security and friendship. The latter was particularly important as it reduced social isolation for participants. When participants had companion animals, they prioritised food for their animals over food for themselves and went without other material goods to care for the needs of their companion animals.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE: It is important for social workers to recognise the significance of companion animals when working with people living in poverty. Consideration should be given in social work assessments to the role companion animals have in the lives of people living in poverty and to reducing the costs for people in relation to caring for their companion animals.

Keywords: Companion animals, poverty, social work assessments, social isolation

Poverty is a significant issue for social workers in Aotearoa New Zealand and is often the backdrop of social work practice (Morris et al., 2018). Poverty in Aotearoa New Zealand has been intractable this century; however, under the sixth Labour government there were some improvements in the numbers of children living in poverty. Despite recent progress in reducing rates of child poverty there continue to be significant numbers of children and their whānau living in material hardship, prompting advocacy groups who represent the needs of children to write an open letter, in November 2023, to the incoming government to express their concern about the urgency of the problem (Child Poverty Action Group, 2023). In 2022, the Child Poverty Monitor identified that 11% of children in Aotearoa New Zealand were experiencing material deprivation and 16.3% of children live in households with an income under 50% of median income after housing costs (Duncanson et al., 2022). Alongside child poverty there is growing concern about poverty among older people, particularly those who do not own their own homes (James et al., 2022).

The Aotearoa New Zealand Association of Social Workers (ANZASW) *Code of Ethics* recognises that social workers

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"have a particular interest in the needs and empowerment of people who are marginalised, vulnerable, oppressed or living in poverty" (2019, p. 9). The code of ethics also acknowledges that animals are sentient beings and, if as social workers, we engage animals in our practice then they must be protected. The following article, using interview data from a wider study about rural poverty, explores the significance of companion animals in the lives of people experiencing poverty and the implications for social work practice.

Poverty can restrict peoples' social networks and result in social isolation (Topor et al., 2016). A mixed method study in Canada, which explored poverty and social isolation, found that their participants had minimal involvement in their community or in supporting others (Stewart et al., 2009). In Aotearoa New Zealand, the Family 100 research project, a qualitative study with 100 families/whānau living in poverty, noted social isolation among their participants who self-excluded from social, family and cultural events due to poverty (Garden et al., 2014).

Significantly, companion animals can reduce social isolation by creating a sense of friendship and companionship (Scanlon et al., 2021; Slatter et al., 2012). For people who are isolated, a companion animal can provide a significant and stable relationship which can mitigate the effects of loneliness (Ceatha, 2020; Jury et al., 2018; Matsuoka et al., 2020; Schmitz et al., 2023). It has been identified that having a companion animal can also reduce stress, depression and anxiety (Slatter et al., 2012). Companion animals can also increase opportunities to meet and engage with others (Slatter et al., 2012), helping to widen social connections.

The costs of having a companion animal can be high and can include such things as food, equipment, puppy classes and dog training, desexing, the cost of transport to vets and exercise areas, grooming, vaccinations, and veterinary services (Arluke & Rowan, 2020). To meet the costs associated with feeding and caring for their companion animal/s people living in poverty may choose to go without food and other goods and services (Violante, 2019). Having a companion animal, particularly a dog, can restrict access to emergency housing and the rental properties (Jarldorn, 2020; Slatter et al., 2012). It is noted that a 'pet bond' is being introduced by the National Coalition Government as part of their 2023 coalition agreement; however, as the bond is two weeks' rent it is likely to exclude people on lower incomes (Ensor, 2023).

Structural violence, a term first used in 1969 by Galtung and Latin American liberation theologians (Farmer, 2004), is often experienced by people living in poverty. It is a form of violence in which institutions and socioeconomic systems harm certain groups of people. Galtung (1990) defined structural violence as "insults to basic human needs, and more generally to life" (p. 292). Structural violence generally entails power being applied at a distance, therefore those responsible for the oppression of others may lack of awareness of the impact of their actions (Hodgetts et al., 2014). Policies of austerity, such as benefit sanctions, are an aspect of structural violence which result in significant hardship for groups of people, their dependants and companion animals.

Methods

The findings presented in this article are from a wider doctoral study in which 23 women and five men were interviewed, using a qualitative approach, about poverty and the impact it had on their daily lives. The study participants all self-identified as living in poverty and lived in a rural district in the North Island of Aotearoa New Zealand. Most of the interviews were conducted in participants' homes, and in some instances companion animals were present. Of the participants interviewed, nine had companion animals.

The companion animals discussed by participants, or present during interviews, were dogs, cats and birds.

Ethical approval for this study was granted by the Human Ethics Committee of the University of Canterbury on 26 March 2015. As part of the ethics approval process at the University of Canterbury, the research proposal was approved by the Māori Research Advisory Group of the University of Canterbury Human Ethics Committee on January 22, 2015. Pseudonyms were used to protect the identity of participants.

The data were analysed using applied thematic analysis (Guest et al., 2012) and four main themes were identified: 'making ends meet'; 'relationships'; 'rural issues'; and 'oppression and violence'. This article focuses on 'companion animals' which was a sub-theme of the wider 'relationships' theme.

Findings

Participants in this study who had companion animals talked about the sense of security and friendship they experienced by having their companion animal/s. The friendship experienced by participants with their companion animals was particularly important in reducing social isolation. One participant, Nancy, who was in her 70s, talked about the conversations she had with her dog who had died. At the time of the interview, she was thinking about getting another dog for companionship as she lived alone and away from her family.

Five participants talked about the importance of the relationship they had with their dogs. Lisa was one of these participants and she planned her future with her dog in mind.

> **Lisa:** This is my dream future: to save enough money or KiwiSaver and buy a house-bus and retire into a house-bus, just me and my dog.

Participants viewed their companion animals as part of their whānau/families and they were part of their wider "social environment" (Walker et al., 2015, p. 34). Emily talked about the importance of her dogs and the role they had of protecting her son, Lucas.

> **Emily:** I've got two dogs. I've got two pitties cross huntaways'. I like my big dogs. They're so cool. They're really protective over Lucas [son]. Lucas can go outside and I can go inside and if someone turns up they will sit on either side of him until they know who it is.

Dogs can provide a sense of security and protection; this was valued when participants were living in areas where there was a heightened risk of crime. Megan had this to say about the importance of her dog and the security she provided.

> **Megan:** I got her [puppy] to grow up with the kids and for security. Being a solo mum, I want something—I want an animal. Because my kids will just go, "Hi" and they'll let some stranger in my house, so I'd want a dog to at least bark and growl and go, who are you, why are you at my mum's house, kind of thing. I got her just so she can help protect me and the kids.

In a similar vein, Ashley, who lived in a de facto relationship and had been the victim of a burglary, said this about her dog:

> **Ashley:** She's a Rottweiler cross Huntaway. We got her for security, because we were living in flats and they were just a bad place to be living and we got her for security because we got broken into.

The participants who had companion animals prioritised food for their animals over food for themselves and they went without other material goods to care for the health needs of their companion animals. For example, Megan said, "my kids also

include my animals, so they always get fed before I do" and similarly Lisa said, "on my pay days that's the first thing I do is my power, my petrol and my pet food". Food insecurity experienced by participants was evidence of structural violence as the income they received from their benefits was not enough to feed themselves, their children and their companion animals.

Ashley, who had birds as well as a dog, also talked about the cost of feeding their companion animals and was keen for her partner to get a job to help pay for pet food.

> **Ashley:** A course or something to help him get a job cos we've got a dog and two birds as well. The birds aren't too bad though, cos your seed costs $2.80 or something like that and it does them for two weeks. The dog's the expensive one.

Alongside the cost of pet food, the cost of veterinary treatment was a concern to some participants. Megan was aware of which veterinary service was the cheapest in the district and she saved to pay for veterinary services for her dog.

> **Megan:** I always make sure that I try and save money, put money aside to get them vaccinated. I'll make sure she's [puppy] at least got her first lot of vaccinations, and I'll just do what I did with my other bitch that I had—just keep her inside whenever she was on heat or keep her away from other dogs until I can afford to get her spayed.

While Megan could afford to get her puppy vaccinated, she was not in a position at the time of interview to get her puppy spayed, despite wanting to do so.

Implications for practice

It is important for social workers to recognise the significance of companion animals when working with people living in poverty. For participants in this study, their companion animals reduced their sense of isolation and helped them feel secure. For sole parent women, their dogs provided protection for their children. When carrying out social work assessments consideration should be given to the role companion animals have in the lives of people living in poverty. Companion animals should be considered as a part of people's support systems and when ecomaps are drawn consider including companion animals.

The costs of having a companion animal are a factor to be explored in assessments and included in intervention plans. The needs of companion animals should be calculated in household budgets and in requests for food grants and in food parcels supplied. Companion animals are also a factor in relation to housing and the access people have to rental properties and emergency accommodation. Companion animals' needs should also be considered when their owners enter respite or full-time care.

As poverty is a structural issue approaches which recognise its political nature such as anti-oppressive practice and critical social work are useful. These approaches encourage consciousness raising with people, supporting them to understand that poverty is a political issue not an individual failure (Hosken & Goldingay, 2016). Cause advocacy, working with, and through, social and political institutions to create change is a significant role for social workers working with people who are experiencing poverty and have companion animals. There is scope to carry this out with groups who advocate for the rights of animals such as Save Animals from Exploitation (SAFE).

Social workers can also advocate for people to be able to keep their companion animals when they move into private rental accommodation and to advocate for, and support, free or low-cost veterinary services, including vaccinations and desexing (Arluke & Rowan, 2020). The Snip 'n' Chip programme run by the SPCA New Zealand (2024) and the We Love Dogs Charitable Trust (n.d.), which has a desexing campaign providing free spaying or neutering

to applicants who have a community services or gold card, are examples of services social workers can support, advocate for and refer people to.

Companion animals were important to participants in this study for friendship and safety; however, the participants struggled with the costs of caring for their companion animals and went without food and other goods to provide for them. As social workers we can recognise the importance of people's companion animals, the support they provide and seek ways to reduce the costs of caring for a companion animal/s.

Declaration

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