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Everybody needs good neighbours and pets can be the way to build stronger communities

The social benefits of having pets are far wider than just who you meet when out walking the dog, writes **Lisa Wood**

Talk to any pet owner and you are bound to invoke stories about the joy and companionship of having a pet. But evidence is mounting that the effect of pets extends beyond their owners and can help strengthen the social fabric of local neighbourhoods. Now a cross-national study involving Perth and three US cities has lent weight to the observation that pets help build social capital.

This is not a frivolous notion, given the erosion of sense of community is often lamented.

As social researcher Hugh Mackay recently observed, not knowing our neighbours has become a sad cliché of contemporary urban life. I stumbled into pet-related research some 15 years ago when undertaking a PhD on neighbourhoods and sense of community. I was curious about the elements of a

neighbourhood that might help people connect to one another, so I threw some in some survey questions about pets.

In what has become my most-cited academic paper, we found that pet owners were more likely to have higher social capital. This is a concept that captures trust between people (including those we don't know personally), networks of social support, the exchange of favours with neighbours and civic engagement.

Fast-forward a decade to a much bigger study to look at the relationship between pets and social capital. Pet owners and non-owners were randomly surveyed in four cities (Perth, San Diego, Portland and

Nashville — cities reasonably comparable in size, urban density and climate).

In all four cities, we found owning a pet was significantly associated with higher social capital compared with not owning a pet. This held true after adjusting for a raft of demographic factors that might influence people's connections in their neighbourhood.

It is often assumed that the social benefits of pets are confined to social interactions that occur when people are out walking their dogs. Lots of dog owner anecdotes support this. In this big sample study, however, levels of social capital were higher among pet owners across the board.

We did nonetheless find that social capital was higher among dog owners and those who walked their dogs in particular. Dog owners were five times more likely to have got to know people in their neighbourhood.

This makes sense, as dogs are the most likely to get us outside the home.

Yet our survey data and qualitative responses show that a variety of pets can act as a social lubricant. Pets are a great leveller in society, owned and loved by people across social, age and racial strata.

Perhaps it is having something in common with other people that strikes a chord, regardless of the type of pet.

That pets can help build social capital is not just a social nicety or quirky sociological observation. Hundreds of studies internationally show that social capital is a positive predictor for a raft of important social indicators, including mental health, education, crime deterrence, and community safety.

Given pets are entrenched in the lives and homes of many Australians, it makes sense to tap into this as a way to strengthen the social fabric of local communities.

Not everyone can or wants to own a pet. But two-thirds of the population does, so our cities and neighbourhoods need to be "pet friendly".

Australian suburbs are generally pretty good for walkable parks and streets. In this study, we also found that having dog walkers out and about contributes to perceptions of community safety. However, in Australia, pets have traditionally belonged to people living in detached housing with backyards. Many rental properties, apartment complexes, and retirement villages still default to a no-pets policy. Other countries, where renting and higher-density living is more the norm, seem

more accepting of pets across the housing spectrum.



Given ageing populations, housing affordability and the need to curb urban sprawl are critical social trends in many countries, maybe we need to recalibrate our notions of who can own a pet and where they can live. This is not to say that pets have to be allowed everywhere, but the default to “no pets allowed” is questionable. My father-in-law in his 80s, for example, couldn’t downsize to a retirement complex because his extremely docile rescue greyhound exceeded the “10kg pet” rule. He couldn’t bear to part with Moby, a faithful companion through whom he met many local residents daily at the park nearby.

A lot of my current research is around homelessness. Chatting recently with a man who was homeless with his dog on the streets of Melbourne, he told me how his dog gets him up in the morning, keeps him safe at night, and gets them both walking daily.

His dog was one of the few stable things in his life, so he needed a public housing option that would allow pets.

People who are homeless also need crisis accommodation options that accept their pets. Hence it is great to see places such as Tom Fisher House in

Perth, opening its doors to rough sleepers with pets needing a safe place to sleep.

Beyond the practical implications for pet-friendly cities, the potential for pets to enrich the social fabric of communities has strong appeal in an era of global uncertainty, frenetic “busyness” and technology-driven communications. As cultural analyst Sherry Turkle has said, the ways people interact and forge relationships have undergone massive change and we can end up “connected, but alone”.

By contrast, humans have been drawn to companion animals since early civilisation. In many people’s lives, they remain a tangible constant that can yield enduring social capital benefits.

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Lisa Wood with her dog Nala.