

Pet Ownership and Access as Predictors of Self-Reported Health in a National Sample of U.S. Elders

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Background

- Growing research, media, and policy attention explores pets as therapy, companion, and exercise animals for elders.
- The National Institutes of Health calls for more research on human-animal interactions (HAI) with a focus on health and national samples.

Prior Research

- Animal companions are associated with physical, psychological, and emotional benefits.
- Animal companions facilitate a “ripple effect” of social interactions, favor exchanges, and neighborliness.
- Most studies on animal companions and elders’ well-being use institutionalized samples or small convenience-based samples.
- No research distinguishes between ownership versus access to animal companions.
- Very little and largely qualitative research addresses racial/ethnic minorities and animal companions.

Present Study

- Our study explores patterns of pet ownership and access to animal companions across racial/ethnic groups.
- We also examine the effects of pet ownership and access on elders’ self-reported health, controlling for sociodemographic, economic and social capital, religiosity, and physical activity indicators.
- Last, we test how race/ethnicity mediates and moderates the effects of pet ownership and access on elders’ self-reported health.

Data and Sample

- Health and Retirement Study (HRS, University of Michigan, and supported by the National Institute of Aging and Social Security Administration).
- We use the sub-sample from Module 9 on Human-Animal Interaction from the 2012 wave of HRS.
- We select elders age 50 and older for a final effective sample size of 1,658.

Table 1. Pet Owner Status and Current Pet Access by Race (%)				
	Total	White	Black	Hispanic
Currently Own	45.7	50.4	22.3	52.1
Owned, Access	20.7	23.0	14.8	15.5
Owned, No Access	23.8	21.1	39.5	16.5
Never Owned, Access	3.0	1.7	6.2	6.2
Never Owned, No Access	6.9	3.8	17.2	9.8
N=	1658	1173	291	194

Chi-Square=176.983, p < 0.000

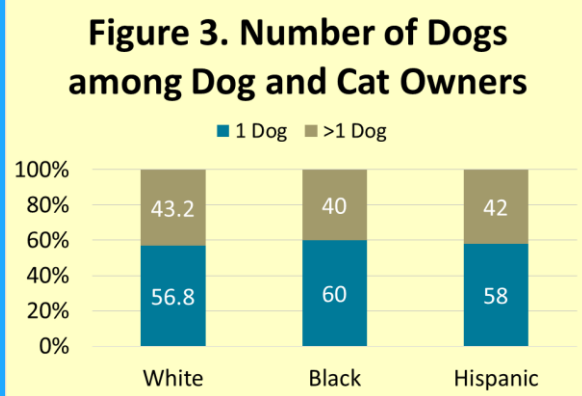
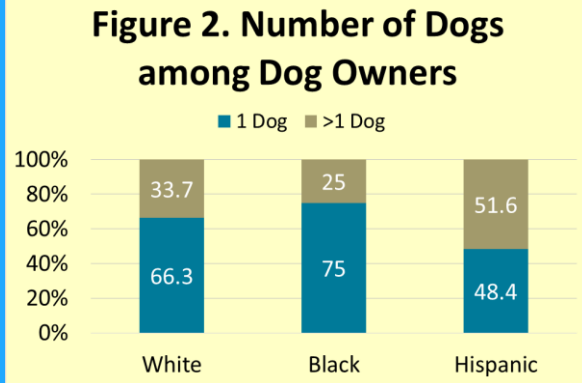
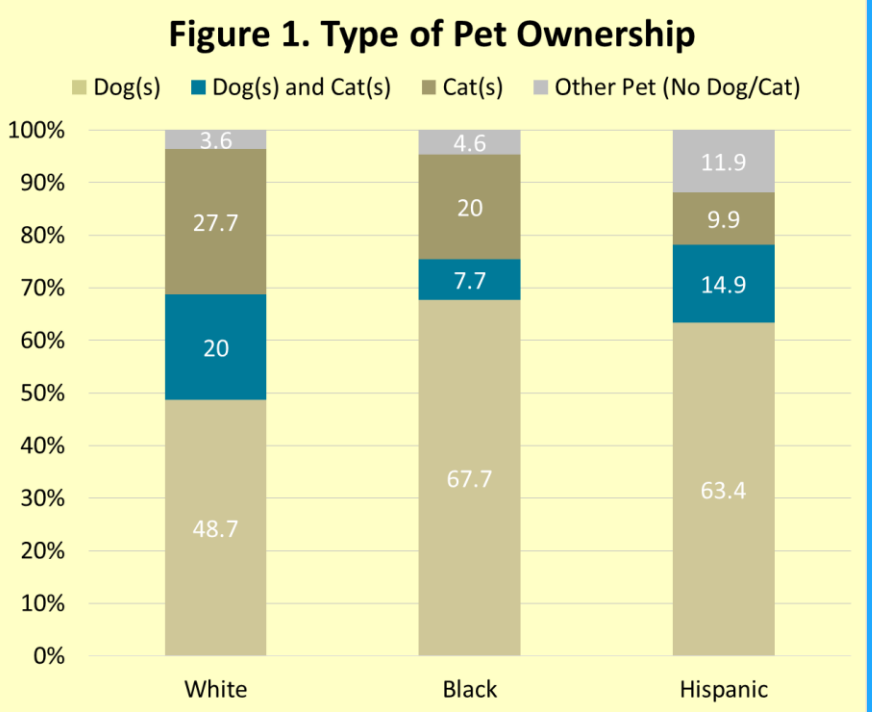


Table 2. Pets Other Than Cats and Dogs by Race				
	Total	White	Black	Hispanic
Any Other Pet**	15.5	14.0	10.8	26.7
Small Mammal	0.8	1.0	0.0	0.0
Bird***	6.5	5.6	1.5	14.9
Fish	5.8	5.1	6.2	9.9
Reptile	0.9	0.8	1.5	1.0
Other	3.4	3.9	1.5	2.0
N=	757	591	65	101

Significant differences between racial/ethnic groups p< 0.01 = **, p< 0.001=***

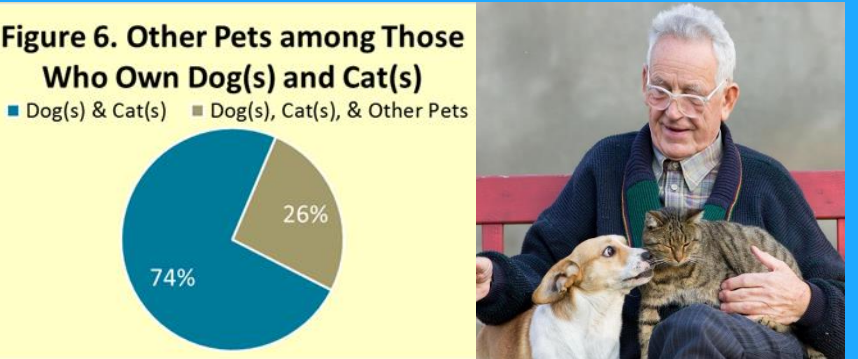
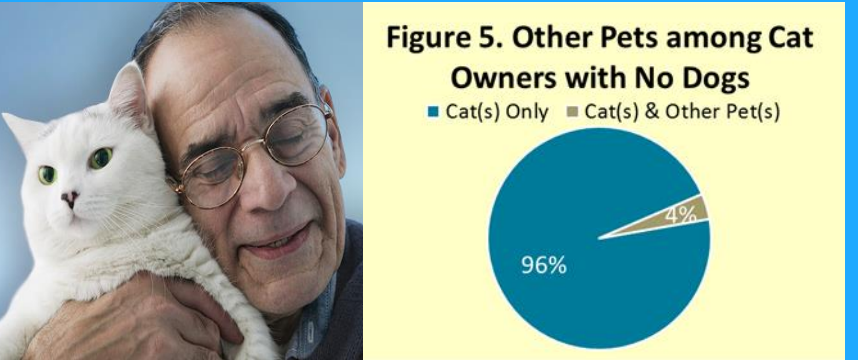
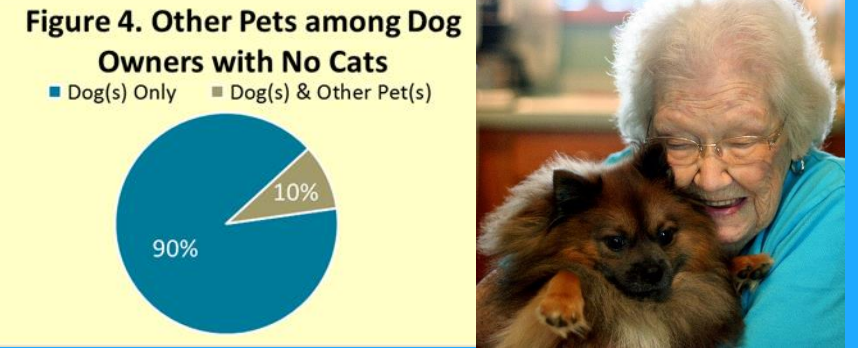


Table 3. Regression Models for Pet Ownership and Access on Self-Rated Health			
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Independent			
Owned, Access ^a	0.133 [†]	0.149 [*]	0.131 [*]
Owned, No Access ^a	-0.093	0.007	0.042
Never Owned, Access ^a	-0.119	0.071	-0.100
Never Owned, No Access ^a	-0.235 [*]	-0.006	0.098
Sociodemographic			
Age	-0.009 ^{**}		0.000
Female ^a	0.103 [*]		0.127 [*]
Race/Ethnicity			
Black, Non-Hispanic ^a	-0.120 [†]		-0.143 [†]
Hispanic ^a	-0.282 ^{***}		-0.330 ^{***}
Total Assets (logged)	0.247 ^{***}		0.170 ^{***}
Union Status			
Cohabiting ^a	-0.198 [†]		-0.134
Separated/Divorced ^a	-0.223 ^{**}		-0.184 [*]
Widowed ^a	-0.047		-0.032
Never Married ^a	-0.014		0.092
Marital Status Missing	-0.016		0.029
Respondent Education			
Less than High School ^a	-0.159 [*]		-0.059
Some College ^a	0.178 [†]		0.142 [†]
College ^a	0.329 ^{***}		0.300 ^{***}
Graduate/Professional ^a	0.392 ^{***}		0.289 ^{***}
Mother's Education			
Less than High School ^a	-0.112 [†]		-0.083
Some College ^a	-0.070		-0.023
College Plus ^a	0.098		0.067
Education Missing	-0.335 ^{***}		-0.268 ^{**}
Parenting			
At Least One Child ^a	0.150		0.112
More than One Child ^a	0.013		-0.027
Unknown # of Children	-0.254		-0.418 [*]
Social Support and Activity			
Extreme Religiosity Index			0.044 [*]
Activity Scale			0.137 ^{***}
Intercept	3.199 ^{***}	0.409	0.058
Adjusted R ²	0.006	0.140	0.235
P<.1 [†] , P<.05 [*] , P<.01 ^{**} , P<.001 ^{***} N=1,658			

^a Reference categories as follows: current owner, male, white, married, high school (respondent), high school (mother), no children

References

McCardle, Peggy, Sandra McCune, James A. Griffin, Layla Esposito, and Lisa S. Freund (Eds.) 2011. *Animals in Our Lives: Human-Animal Interaction in Family, Community, and Therapeutic Settings*. Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brookes Publishing.

Wood, Lisa Jane. 2011. Community benefits of human-animal interactions...the ripple effect. In Peggy McCardle, Sandra McCune, James A. Griffin, and Valerie Maholmes (Eds.) *How Animals Affect Us: Examining the Influence of Human-Animal Interaction on Child Development and Human Health*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

Conclusions

- We find racial/ethnic differences in pet ownership and access.
- Blacks and Hispanics have poorer self-reported health than Whites; Hispanics have worse self-reported health than Blacks.
- Race/ethnicity mediates, but does not moderate, the effects of pet ownership and access.
- **Core Finding: Self-reported health for elders is higher for those who owned pets, but now simply have access to companion animals, as compared to those who currently own and maintain responsibility for pets.**

Limitations

- The HRS HAI module does not include retrospective pet ownership histories for those who are current owners.
- Nor does the module include numbers of pets in the retrospective histories.
- The 2012 HAI module is cross-sectional, so we cannot test causal relationships between pet ownership and access and race/ethnicity on self-reported health.

Future Research

- Explore effects of pet ownership and access on specific medical conditions.
- Design population-based studies on potential reasons why current access, but not currently owning a companion animal facilitates better self-reported health among elders.
- Conduct qualitative research on the contextual reasons for differences found across racial/ethnic groups.