

My Dog Always Eats First: Homeless People and Their Animals

Leslie Irvine

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Readers' perceptions about the homeless population and pet ownership may change after reading *My Dog Always Eats First: Homeless People and Their Animals*, a sociological study conducted by sociology professor Leslie Irvine, who interviewed seventy-five homeless pet owners in California, Florida, and Colorado.

The author presents her findings in a format that is both analytical and anecdotal, making her book appealing to both academics and the layperson. It will likely be of most interest, however, to those who can sift through statistics and citations to other psychological and sociological studies on the issues underlying homelessness.

Irvine admittedly had no experience with the homeless, and though it was a challenge at times to reach this marginalized population, she ultimately interviewed forty women, thirty-four men, and one transgender person, all of whom she categorized according to their living situations.

Although homeless pet owners are often chastised as being incapable of caring for a pet, since they are seemingly unable to take care of themselves, as evidenced by their homeless state, Irvine found that virtually all of her interviewees have taken exceptional care of their animals, often putting their pets' needs before their own. Thanks to low- or no-cost veterinary clinics, indigent animal owners are able to keep their pets healthy, and several reported that they never lacked for dog food, accepting a continual flow of donated supplies.

According to those interviewed, pet ownership among the homeless provides a sense of purpose and of unconditional love, stability, security, a sense of self, and hopefulness for the future. Many people reported turning down low-cost housing because pets were prohibited; others said that their pets were like their children and that they would sacrifice anything for them. Some relayed how their pets protected them from certain harm, how their pet gave them the ultimate motivation to kick a drug habit, or how it helped facilitate social interaction with the nonhomeless population, making them feel less invisible.

There is Ree, who lives in a van and reports that her dogs were both her best friends and her children. She also had a cat that traveled with her to forty-six states. Then there's Mike, a former addict on parole, who says that the responsibility of dog ownership is helping him to turn his life around. And Valerie credits her dog for saving her life on more than one occasion, as he warned off potential rapists while his owner slept on the streets.

Irvine tells the stories of her interview subjects with compassion (but through an objective researcher's lens) and successfully humanizes the homeless/pet ownership issue in our country. While she is not advocating pet ownership among the homeless, in her study, Irvine seeks to understand the societal effects of this phenomenon, including transformation, redemption, and the formulation of identity.

HILARY DANINHIRSCH (Spring 2013)

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