

Understanding housing policies for people and their pets



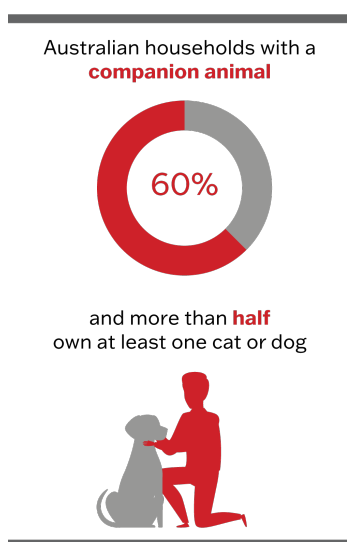
Based on AHURI Final Report No. 350: Housing and housing assistance pathways with companion animals: risks, costs, benefits and opportunities

What this research is about

This research examines the policy and regulatory settings that shape housing options available to households that own companion animals. It considers housing and housing assistance contexts nationally across tenures, sectors (e.g. ownership, private rental housing), emergency/crisis accommodation, residential settings (including public, community housing, retirement villages and residential parks etc.) and for diverse resident population groups receiving income and housing assistance support.

The context of this research

Over 60 per cent of Australian households (5.7 million) include a companion animal (also known as pets), and more than half own at least one cat or dog. However, companion animal ownership poses challenges, risks and potential costs and opportunities for housing owners, managers and households, and the right of households to keep pets varies markedly depending on the housing sector and tenure within which they live.



The key findings

Extensive international evidence and emerging evidence in Australia indicates widespread social, health and economic benefits of companion animal ownership for individuals and communities. Pet ownership is associated with enhanced outcomes for dementia patients and older persons, lower blood pressure and cholesterol levels, faster heart attack recovery, lower mental stress, and reduced asthma risk in children. Health economists have quantified these at national levels, suggesting substantial on average reduction of lifetime personal and service costs.

“Companion animals can be a conduit for residents to engage in neighbourhoods, local green space and nature—practices increasingly central to liveability planning in Australia and internationally.”

Housing costs of pet ownership

The housing-connected costs of pet ownership are diverse and often tenure-specific. For renters, there can be fees associated with keeping pets in rental housing, such as a pet bond at the start of a tenancy or cleaning fees at the end of a tenancy. In some markets, tenants report offering higher rent to encourage landlords to approve pets in an otherwise no-pets property. There is some evidence that pet-friendly rentals cost more than equivalent quality properties that do not allow pets. It is likely that suitable apartments or houses will cost more if the pet requires a large space to roam, backyard, fencing or to be located where noise will not travel to neighbours. It is also likely that these costs pose particular difficulties for low-income households.

Housing instability caused by responses to pets

Already vulnerable populations are at greater risk of housing instability when owning pets. These populations can include the elderly, low-income groups, the homeless and victims of housing crises, natural disasters and domestic violence. Retirement villages, homeless shelters or public housing services that do not allow pets can dissuade potential residents or cause emotional distress to incoming residents who are required to relinquish their pets. This is especially problematic as high-support accommodation is typically most restrictive to pet ownership, even though they service groups that would benefit greatly from pet companionship. Pet relinquishment has been shown to spike at times of housing crisis and in the aftermath of natural disasters, where housing options become more constrained due to pet restrictions in emergency housing.

Alternatively, individuals may remain in unsafe and precarious living situations in order to keep their pets after a natural disaster or in the instance of domestic violence. Victims may choose to remain in violent households if they cannot find safe housing with their pets due to the fear that the violent perpetrator might retaliate on the pet. For domestic violence victims, collaboration with police to understand the links between pets and decision-making of victims to remain in unsafe environments could help persuade victims to move to more suitable housing.

Tensions and conflicts arise where pets do not fit into existing domestic space arrangements and structures, particularly for animals more likely to cause nuisance, such as through damage to furniture or noise. Tensions also sometimes emerge within neighbourhoods, for instance, when dogs bark excessively or when cats and dogs roam.

Having to give up the family pet

Strong connections exist between pet-restrictive tenures/policies and high rates of animal relinquishment: an estimated 15–25 per cent of pet relinquishments are related to rental mobility/access and pet restrictions.

For households that regard their pets as family members, this option can be emotionally distressing and is a poor animal welfare outcome as many of these animals will be euthanised. Research shows that moving house and difficulties securing pet-friendly housing are one of the most significant factors driving the decision to relinquish companion animals, particularly for low-income households and those facing housing uncertainty.

Benefits of pet-friendly properties

Pet-friendly housing policies may bring benefits to housing providers and landlords. Research has found that property damage by households with pets is no more likely than for households without pets. They also found that charging a pet deposit covered most costs, thereby shifting the cost of damages from the landlord to the tenant. Pet-friendly properties also bring economic benefits. Researchers found that pet-friendly housing spent less time on the market than non-pet-friendly housing, meaning more time charging rent.

Openly providing pet-friendly housing also directly addresses issues with illegal pet keeping. When pets are kept illegally, landlords and owners' corporations are less able to regulate or monitor companion animal practices, for example, through requiring bonds or including property cleaning and maintenance requirements in property agreements. An option could be that landlords and property managers could partner with local dog behaviour schools and dog walking and grooming companies to approach pet-owning tenants, thereby reducing nuisance pet behaviour, before starting a tenancy and if necessary before considering terminating a tenancy. Providing dog runs in local areas can foster greater social interaction in the community, and pet-friendly areas make local areas more desirable.

“This is especially problematic as high-support accommodation is typically most restrictive to pet ownership, even though they service groups that would benefit greatly from pet companionship.”

Key pet policies across Australia

Tenants with pets

The NSW, WA and SA legislation gives landlords the right to freely determine whether a property will consider renters with pets or not. There is some evidence that landlords more commonly decide against pets, likely based on evaluations of material risks and economic costs arising from the possibility of property damage. Residential Tenancies Acts in Victoria and the ACT are more strongly geared than other states to support the capacity of tenants to keep companion animals. Provisions in this state and territory require that landlords do not unreasonably refuse tenants' requests to keep a companion animal. They can only refuse requests to keep pets via an application to the relevant Civil and Administrative Tribunal.

Strata titles and pets

Strata title acts across each state empower strata communities to determine whether pets are permitted. Legislation is gradually changing across the country. A recent ruling in Victoria held that pets cannot be unilaterally banned. Changes to the strata title act in NSW in recent years replaced the assumption against pets in the model by-laws with two by-laws that enable the keeping of pets. These changes improve the capacity of households with companion animals to secure housing within strata schemes. However, beyond Victoria there is no clear ruling in favour of pets.

Social housing and pets

Generally, the public housing sector is the most pet-permissive, with much greater diversity in terms of pet-permissiveness in the community housing sector because of the multiple providers and their ability to exercise their own discretion around such policies.

However, the boundaries between the social tenures and between social and private tenures is increasingly blurred, adding to the complexities around pet ownership in these tenures. Head-leasing arrangements, asset-sharing and the use of privately-rented dwellings for crisis accommodation and residential care mean an increasing proportion of households receiving housing and crisis support live in a range of private/quasi-private housing contexts with mixed regulatory regimes.

The ACT is the only jurisdiction that specifically acknowledges the benefit of pets in people's lives in its public housing information, stating that they recognise 'the importance of animals in people's lives in terms of their therapeutic qualities'.

Because community housing is delivered by multiple providers, this means there is greater diversity in pet policies across the sector than in public housing. Individual community housing providers reserve the right to set their own pet-related policies, albeit in concordance with the relevant Residential Tenancies Act and local government Acts (and regulations which apply to the sector).

Specialist homelessness services, crisis and emergency accommodation

Traditionally, homelessness accommodation has not been pet friendly, especially in the shorter-term crisis and emergency accommodation options. The fact that accommodation options for the homeless are often congregate (e.g. rooming or boarding houses) has generally been the justification for broadscale pet-restrictive policies.

However, homelessness services is an area where there has been some significant innovation in pet-friendly practice. One example is Launch Housing's pilot program, which started in 2018, that allows people to bring pets into their crisis accommodation. This helps pet lovers who are experiencing homelessness to remain engaged with the housing support system. In addition, pets entering Launch House accommodation are given a vet check by Lort Smith Animal Hospital, who also fund any health treatment the animals require.

While such examples are limited in scale and scope, these pet-inclusive policies clearly align with recognition of the importance of pets to people with lived experience of homelessness, and can help prevent people remaining in unsafe and precarious living situations in order to keep their pets, such as after a natural disaster or in cases of domestic violence.

"Generally, the public housing sector is the most pet-permissive, with much greater diversity in terms of pet-permissiveness in the community housing sector because of the multiple providers and their ability to exercise their own discretion around such policies."

What this research means for policy makers

Recent policy debate seeks to manage the perceived risks of pet ownership within the private rental sector. In some jurisdictions there has been a suggestion that tenancy reforms could introduce an additional 'pet bond', paid by tenants who have a companion animal.

Broader institutional housing reform opportunities, such as rent fair enactments and the growth of the build-to-rent sector, are also likely to increase the opportunity for progressive companion animal policies and practice. Similarly, urban design that includes the presence of companion animals in densifying cities and in regional area developments will support these measures and aid culture and practice change.

In addition, other mechanisms to support pet ownership include greater use of financial and legal intermediaries already available to housing providers, such as:

- enhanced use of existing insurance industry organisations for property investment insurance
- growing the Australian build-to-rent sector to increase the range of institutional investor actors in Australian property, who are already well-placed to absorb costs from any given property across a larger and long-term portfolio of properties
- financiers and bankers lending in ways that include explicit 'ability to pay for and manage' insurances associated with any property damage related to occupants' companion animal ownership within investment properties
- reframing and education for would-be investors that as they invest in the private rental sector they are entering a relational arrangement in which they are a housing provider (including to households with pets)
- better use of existing urban legislation presents opportunities for consistent and effective responses to potential antisocial behaviours/threats to neighbourhood amenity associated with pets, applicable to all households equally within local areas

- greater recognition of the changing nature of relations between humans and companion animals in high and medium-density areas, and an associated cultural shift in the way open spaces are designed and managed to reduce risks and costs to amenity.

Methodology

This research focused on New South Wales, Victoria, South Australia, Western Australia and the Australian Capital Territory and undertook a literature review; policy and practice review; secondary data analysis of households; and interviews with key stakeholders.

To cite the AHURI research, please refer to:

Stone, W., Power, E.R., Tually, S., James, A., Faulkner, D., Goodall, Z. and Buckle, C. (2021) *Housing and housing assistance pathways with companion animals: risks, costs, benefits and opportunities*, AHURI Final Report No. 350, Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute Limited, Melbourne.

Available from the AHURI website at ahuri.edu.au/research/final-reports/350