



## A Cat Is a Cat: Attachment to Community Cats Transcends Ownership Status

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# about Sue

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Co-founder, Veterinary Care Accessibility Project

Faculty appointments

- Department of Political Science, Arkansas State University

Education

- Doctor of Public Administration
- Master of Science in Geography
- Masters Certificate in Geographic Information Systems
- Master of Public Administration
- Currently completing Masters of Public Health: Veterinary Public Health & Epidemiology

Research Interests

- Community Cats
- Access to Veterinary Care



problem statement



# Problem Statement

## knowledge gap

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We know very little about the attachment between caregivers and community cats

Human-animal bond and other attachment surveys rely on behaviors not shared by all animals (e.g., lap sitting) or ask questions central to the home environment

- This means most are not appropriate for measuring attachment to community cats



research focus



# Research Focus

## research question

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How attached are community cat caregivers to the cats in their care?

How many cats do they care for

What is their experience in caring for the cats



research methods



# Research Methods

## online survey

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Hosted via Qualtrics

Distributed by e-mail

Five-point Likert scale

We revised an existing survey

- Our revisions simply changed reference from owned cats to community cats

Some additional questions

- Basic demographics
- Plus questions about the level of interaction with the cats, length of time caregiving, and the number of cats they provide care for



# Research Methods

## Comfort from Companion Animal Scale (1996)

1. My pet provides me with companionship.
2. Having a pet gives me something to care for.
3. My pet provides me with pleasurable activity.
4. My pet is a source of constancy in my life.
5. My pet makes me feel needed.
- ~~6. My pet makes me feel safe.~~
7. My pet makes me play and laugh.
8. Having a pet gives me something to love.
- ~~9. I get more exercise because of my pet.~~
10. I get comfort from touching my pet.
11. I enjoy watching my pet.
12. My pet makes me feel loved.
13. My pet makes me feel trusted.



# Research Methods

## CCAS-Mod (2023)

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1. The cats I care for provide me with companionship.
2. Providing for community cats gives me something to care for.
3. Being a caregiver to community cats provides me with a pleasurable activity.
4. The cats I care for make me play and laugh.
5. Providing for community cats gives me something to love.
6. I get comfort from caring for community cats.
7. Being a caregiver to community cats is a source of constancy in my life.
8. I enjoy watching the community cats I care for.
9. The community cats I care for make me feel loved.
10. The community cats I care for make me feel trusted.
11. Being a caregiver to community cats makes me feel needed.



# Research Methods

## additional questions (2023)

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1. If I'm unable to provide care to the cats any longer, there is someone else who can provide care to the cats.
2. If a community cat I care for doesn't show up as expected, I become worried.
3. I have postponed or canceled a vacation in order to care for the community cats.
4. When going out of town, there is someone who can cover for me as caretaker.
5. I have gone without purchasing something for myself because I needed the money to provide care for community cats.
6. I go outside when the weather is poor to provide for community cats.



# Research Methods

## participant recruitment

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Alley Cat Advocates (Louisville, KY)

- Do you provide food, water, or shelter for one or more community cats or have you done so in the recent past?
- 290 responses



key findings



# Key Findings

## attachment

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Levels of caregiver attachment to the cats in their care are virtually identical to those previously reported by cat owners

- Pets: mean 39.6, SD 4.8
- Community cats: mean 39.6, SD 5.9

The fact that these cats are not owned in any legal sense in no way diminishes the human-animal bond



# Key Findings

## expenditures

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- Caregivers indicated that they spend about \$100 each month to feed community cats
- Roughly twice what cat owners spend on food each month



# Key Findings

## concern for cat welfare

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More than 92% of caregivers worry when cats don't show up as expected



# Key Findings

## number of cats

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In general, caregivers look after just three community cats—typically on their own property

- These findings challenge the assumption that community cats congregate in large “colonies” on public property



policy implications



# Policy Implications

## return-to-field (RTF) programs

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RTF programs are relatively common

- But “returning friendlies” remains controversial topic (for some)

Our findings validate the practice of returning cats—regardless of their perceived level of sociability—in at least three important ways

1. Just because a cat might be sociable doesn’t mean they’re owned
2. Community cats very likely have at least one caregiver who would mourn their disappearance
3. Removing cats from more “vulnerable” communities raises some important questions about equity
  - Would we do the same if we thought of community cats as *pets*?



[more information](#)



# Online, Open access

## paper available online

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Journal of Shelter Medicine & Community Animal Health

- <https://jsmcah.org/index.php/jasv/article/view/62/60>



questions? comments?