



Profiles of family pet ownership during the COVID-19 pandemic

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The pandemic caused by SARS-CoV-2 (COVID-19) has affected both people and animals globally (Bowen et al., 2020). Research on COVID-19 with both children and adults has indicated negative psychological impacts on mental health outcomes and stress (Odriozola-González et al., 2020; Rothe et al., 2021; Saddik et al., 2021), and significant variation in mental health outcomes by demographic variables (Pierce et al., 2020).

Pets are an underexplored source of emotional support that may foster resilience within families in times of stress (Bowen et al., 2020; Bussolari et al., 2021; Chadwin, 2017). However, research investigating the mental health benefits of pet ownership prior to COVID-19 has produced mixed outcomes (e.g., Powell et al., 2019) and further research is needed to elucidate the potential benefits of companion animals (Gee & Mueller, 2019; Wells, 2019). Human-pet relationships have the potential to be amplified—both positively and negatively—during times of crisis. For example, the effects of unemployment and resource scarcity during the pandemic may intersect significantly with pet ownership. The perception that companion animals may reduce loneliness may be driving increased pet acquisition, and some initial data have suggested that adoption rates increased during the pandemic (Morgan et al., 2020). However, relinquishment of pets may be related to economic stress associated with the pandemic, suggesting a need to explore transitions in pet ownership in the context of psychological well-being.

Existing research on pets and COVID-19 suggests that it is imperative to understand sociodemographic profiles of pet ownership during times of increased societal stress, to better

understand how pets contribute to psychological well-being for diverse families. Therefore, this study aims to extend existing work with convenience samples to explore the role of pets during COVID-19 using a nationally-representative sample of United States families to assess if there are systematic sociodemographic differences between families with and without pets during COVID-19, and explore if these differences are related to acquisition of a pet.

Methods

Participants and Procedure

This study used data from the Adolescent Brain Cognitive Development (ABCD) Study®. We analyzed youth data from the ABCD COVID Rapid Response Research Survey, which was administered electronically three times: May 16–22, June 24–27, and August 4–5, 2020. Parent-reported demographic data are from the ABCD Annual Curated Release 3.0, collected between September 1, 2016 and February 15, 2020.

For this analysis, we used a subsample of 8,158 participants who had data for pet ownership in at least one of the three surveys. Youth reported their age (ranging from 10.6 to 14.8 years) and gender. Parents/guardians reported their child's racial/ethnic identities, which were combined into non-mutually exclusive analytic categories of White, Black/African American, Asian, Indigenous, and Hispanic. See Table 1 for demographic data.

Measures

Household Income

Parents/guardians reported their combined family income for the past 12 months on a 10-point scale (1 = Less than \$5,000; 10 = \$200,000+).

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Table 1 Descriptive statistics/frequencies for demographic/contextual characteristics, stratified by pet ownership status

| | Non-Pet Owners | Pet Owners | Dog Owners | Cat Owners | Other Pet Owners | Pet to No Pet | No Pet to Pet |
|----------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|----------------|----------------|
| | <i>n</i> = 2,099 | <i>n</i> = 5,849 | <i>n</i> = 3,032 | <i>n</i> = 1,705 | <i>n</i> = 301 | <i>n</i> = 106 | <i>n</i> = 191 |
| | <i>M(SD)</i> | <i>M(SD)</i> | <i>M(SD)</i> | <i>M(SD)</i> | <i>M(SD)</i> | <i>M(SD)</i> | <i>M(SD)</i> |
| Household Income | 6.93 (2.51) | 7.87 (1.95) | 7.88 (1.92) | 7.64 (2.04) | 7.62 (2.04) | 7.21 (2.31) | 7.14 (2.38) |
| Sex | <i>n</i> (%) | <i>n</i> (%) | <i>n</i> (%) |
| Female | 1,044 (45.2%) | 2,921 (49.9%) | 1,533 (50.6%) | 896 (52.6%) | 163 (51.3%) | 48 (45.3%) | 105 (55.0%) |
| Male | 1,265 (54.8%) | 2,928 (50.1%) | 1,499 (49.4%) | 809 (47.4%) | 155 (48.7%) | 58 (54.7%) | 86 (45.0%) |
| Race/Ethnicity | | | | | | | |
| White | 1,426 (61.8%) | 5,077 (86.8%) | 2,640 (87.1%) | 1,543 (90.5%) | 279 (87.7%) | 77 (72.6%) | 135 (70.7%) |
| Black | 713 (30.9%) | 618 (10.6%) | 317 (10.5%) | 137 (8.0%) | 40 (12.6%) | 21 (19.8%) | 46 (24.1%) |
| Asian | 218 (9.4%) | 386 (6.6%) | 200 (6.6%) | 103 (6.0%) | 15 (4.7%) | 9 (8.5%) | 15 (7.9%) |
| Indigenous | 52 (2.3%) | 210 (3.6%) | 121 (4.0%) | 64 (3.8%) | 12 (3.8%) | 3 (2.8%) | 7 (3.7%) |
| Other Race | 187 (8.1%) | 325 (5.6%) | 158 (5.2%) | 70 (4.1%) | 15 (4.7%) | 6 (5.7%) | 17 (8.9%) |
| Hispanic | 501 (21.7%) | 958 (16.4%) | 517 (17.1%) | 238 (14.0%) | 50 (15.7%) | 25 (23.6%) | 51 (26.7%) |
| Education | | | | | | | |
| HS or less | 379 (16.4%) | 580 (9.9%) | 309 (10.2%) | 179 (10.5%) | 41 (12.9%) | 12 (11.3%) | 23 (12.0%) |
| Some College | 1,326 (57.4%) | 3,463 (59.2%) | 1,801 (59.4%) | 1,088 (63.8%) | 199 (62.6%) | 64 (60.4%) | 114 (59.7%) |
| Graduate degree + | 601 (26.0%) | 1,799 (30.8%) | 919 (30.3%) | 436 (25.6%) | 78 (24.5%) | 30 (28.3%) | 54 (28.3%) |
| Experienced scarcity | | | | | | | |
| No scarcity | 1,793 (77.7%) | 4,936 (84.4%) | 2,559 (84.4%) | 1,397 (81.9%) | 259 (81.4%) | 88 (83.0%) | 151 (79.1%) |
| Scarcity | 516 (22.3%) | 913 (15.6%) | 473 (15.6%) | 308 (18.1%) | 59 (18.6%) | 18 (17.0%) | 40 (20.9%) |
| Employment | | | | | | | |
| Not employed | 728 (31.5%) | 1,424 (24.3%) | 719 (23.7%) | 436 (25.6%) | 84 (26.4%) | 31 (29.2%) | 51 (26.7%) |
| Employed | 1,547 (67.0%) | 4,299 (73.5%) | 2,242 (73.9%) | 1,219 (71.5%) | 222 (69.8%) | 74 (69.8%) | 135 (70.7%) |

Dog, cat, and pet ownership categories are not mutually exclusive

Parent Education

Parents/guardians reported their highest level of education in 20 categories from never attended/kindergarten through professional/doctoral degree, which was recoded into three categories (see Table 1).

Scarcity

Parents/guardians were asked to report whether they had experienced specific instances of scarcity in the past year: could not afford: food, telephone service, rent/mortgage, utilities, medical care, dental care; were evicted for not paying rent/mortgage. A dichotomous composite variable was created to indicate if families had experienced at least one of these circumstances.

Employment

Parents/guardians reported their current employment status in 12 categories, which was recoded into a dichotomous variable (employed, unemployed).

Pet Ownership

Youth were asked whether they currently have any pets (1 = Yes; 0 = No), and to specify the type/species of pets. Participants were considered an overall pet owner if they consistently had a pet during the three time points (with similar coding by species for dog, cat, and other pet categories). To assess transitions in pet ownership, participants were categorized as 1) consistent pet owners (had a pet at all time points with data), 2) consistent non-pet owners (no pet at any time point), 3) pet to no pet (had a pet at the first and/or second time point but not the second and/or third time point), and 4) no pet to pet (did not have a pet at the first and/or second time point but had a pet at the second and/or third time point).

Data Analysis

Analyses were performed in SPSS 27.0. Logistic regression was used to assess how sociodemographic variables predicted overall pet ownership, pet ownership by species, and pet ownership consistency status. Prior to analysis, variables were tested for the necessary assumptions for regression

Table 2 Logistic regression results for demographic/contextual variables predicting pet ownership by species and transitions in and out of pet ownership during COVID-19

| Sex | Pet Ownership | | | Dog Ownership | | | Cat Ownership | | | Pet to no pet (lost pet) vs. pet consistent | | | No pet to pet (got pet) vs. no pet consistent | | | |
|----------------------|---------------|--------|-----------------|---------------|------|--------|-----------------|---|------|---|-----------------|---|---|-------|-----------------|---|
| | OR | p | 95% C.I. for OR | | OR | p | 95% C.I. for OR | | OR | p | 95% C.I. for OR | | OR | p | 95% C.I. for OR | |
| | | | 95% C.I. for OR | p | | | 95% C.I. for OR | p | | | 95% C.I. for OR | p | | | 95% C.I. for OR | p |
| Female* | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Male | 0.78 | <0.001 | 0.70, 0.87 | | 0.88 | 0.007 | 0.80, 0.97 | | 0.80 | <0.001 | 0.71, 0.90 | | 1.11 | 0.61 | 0.74, 1.67 | |
| Race/Ethnicity** | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| White | 2.43 | <0.001 | 2.03, 2.92 | | 1.75 | <0.001 | 1.44, 2.11 | | 2.19 | <0.001 | 1.70, 2.82 | | 0.33 | 0.003 | 0.16, 0.69 | |
| Black | 0.46 | <0.001 | 0.38, 0.55 | | 0.70 | <0.001 | 0.58, 0.85 | | 0.48 | <0.001 | 0.37, 0.62 | | 0.90 | 0.80 | 0.41, 1.98 | |
| Asian | 0.73 | 0.003 | 0.59, 0.89 | | 0.89 | 0.24 | 0.73, 1.08 | | 0.93 | 0.57 | 0.73, 1.19 | | 0.96 | 0.93 | 0.42, 2.22 | |
| Indigenous | 2.02 | <0.001 | 1.43, 2.85 | | 1.68 | <0.001 | 1.28, 2.20 | | 1.19 | 0.28 | 0.87, 1.64 | | 0.48 | 0.31 | 0.11, 1.97 | |
| Other Race | 1.38 | 0.01 | 1.07, 1.79 | | 0.99 | 0.92 | 0.77, 1.27 | | 0.96 | 0.80 | 0.70, 1.32 | | 0.22 | 0.02 | 0.06, 0.81 | |
| Hispanic | 0.69 | <0.001 | 0.59, 0.80 | | 0.96 | 0.53 | 0.83, 1.10 | | 0.66 | <0.001 | 0.55, 0.79 | | 1.49 | 0.16 | 0.86, 2.59 | |
| Parent Education | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| HS or less* | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Some College | 0.86 | 0.13 | 0.71, 1.04 | | 0.89 | 0.21 | 0.74, 1.07 | | 1.01 | 0.96 | 0.81, 1.25 | | 1.74 | 0.17 | 0.80, 3.79 | |
| Graduate degree | 0.77 | 0.02 | 0.62, 0.97 | | 0.81 | 0.05 | 0.66, 1.00 | | 0.74 | 0.02 | 0.58, 0.95 | | 2.07 | 0.11 | 0.85, 5.04 | |
| Household Income | 1.11 | <0.001 | 1.08, 1.15 | | 1.07 | <0.001 | 1.04, 1.10 | | 0.95 | 0.005 | 0.91, 0.98 | | 0.84 | 0.002 | 0.75, 0.94 | |
| Experienced scarcity | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| No scarcity* | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Scarcity | 1.13 | 0.13 | 0.97, 1.32 | | 1.04 | 0.61 | 0.90, 1.20 | | 1.20 | 0.03 | 1.01, 1.42 | | 0.69 | 0.23 | 0.37, 1.27 | |
| Employment | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Not employed* | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Employed | 1.34 | <0.001 | 1.18, 1.52 | | 1.22 | 0.001 | 1.09, 1.37 | | 1.10 | 0.17 | 0.96, 1.26 | | 1.00 | 0.99 | 0.61, 1.63 | |
| | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |

*indicates reference group category; OR=odds ratio; **no reference group for race/ethnicity; non-mutually exclusive categories

modeling. To interpret significance, we report p-values, odds ratios, and 95% confidence intervals.

Results

Regression analyses indicated that odds of pet ownership differed significantly on several sociodemographic variables. Higher odds of pet ownership were associated with identifying as White or Indigenous, and income was positively associated with pet ownership. Being male, Black, Asian, Hispanic, and having a parent with a graduate degree were all associated with lower odds of pet ownership. There were some differential patterns by species for dog and cat owners regarding race/ethnicity, experiences of scarcity, and employment (see Table 2). Participants whose family transitioned out of pet ownership during the pandemic were less likely to be White and more likely to have reported lower household income compared to consistent pet owners. Male participants were more likely to have acquired a pet compared to female participants. Table 2 includes full regression results.

Discussion

Results indicated that there are significant systematic differences in the experience of pet ownership based on sociodemographic variables. Specifically, the findings related to families transitioning from having a pet to not having a pet during COVID-19 point to potential systemic inequities and economic factors (e.g., access to veterinary care and job loss; Applebaum et al., 2020) driving some relinquishments. These findings are similar to other studies looking at sociodemographic factors in pet ownership from prior to COVID-19 (e.g., Mueller et al., 2021). Additionally, a relatively small number of families changed their pet ownership status, which could indicate the presence of protective factors—such as enhanced unemployment insurance relief—or the importance of pets within the family context.

A limitation of this analysis is that we do not know the reasons why families either lost (through relinquishment, death, or other reasons) or acquired (through a relative or friend, or adoption) pets during COVID-19. This study provides initial evidence that pet ownership is a factor in the lives of many families but there is significant inter-individual variation. Although these findings are within the context of COVID-19, external and internal stressors will continue to affect families going forward, and so the precise role of pets within the family needs further exploration in the context of psychological well-being.

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The ABCD data repository grows and changes over time. The ABCD data used in this report came from the ABCD Annual Curated Release 3.0 (<https://doi.org/10.15154/1519007>) and the COVID Rapid Response Research (RRR) Survey First data release (<https://doi.org/10.15154/1520584>).

Data Availability The datasets generated during and/or analyzed during the current study are available in the ABCD Annual Curated Release 3.0 (<https://doi.org/10.15154/1519007>) and the COVID Rapid Response Research (RRR) Survey First data release (<https://doi.org/10.15154/1520584>).

Code Availability Analyses were performed in SPSS (IBM Corp. Released 2020. IBM SPSS Statistics for Windows, Version 27.0. Armonk, NY: IBM Corp). Analysis code is publicly available via Open Science Framework: https://osf.io/hct46/?view_only=480dd9ff3a9446d5927545a6a583d785.

Declarations

Conflicts of Interest/Competing Interests The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare that are relevant to the content of this article.

Ethics Approval This study was approved by each local ethics committee of the relevant institutions, including but not limited to the University of California, San Diego (ABCD Study Coordinating Center). The procedures used in this study adhere to the tenets of the Declaration of Helsinki.

Consent to Participate All adult participants (parents/guardians) provided written informed consent, and all youth provided written assent along with permission from a parent/guardian.

Consent for Publication Participants signed informed consent regarding publishing their data as part of their participation in the ABCD Study.

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