



Why do people want dogs? A mixed-methods study of motivations for dog acquisition in the United Kingdom

Lead researcher(s): Katrina Holland and Rebecca Mead

Line manager(s): Rob Christley

- **Purpose:** To understand why UK dog owners decide to get a dog.
- **Key finding(s):** Participants often reported several reasons, factors and influences involved in their decision to get a dog. Companionship for themselves was the most common reason for owners wanting to get a dog, reported by 79.4% and 87.8% of current and potential owners, respectively. To encourage exercise was another common reason, reported by 48.2% and 69.7% of current and potential owners, respectively. Many participants also said that their decision to get a dog had been motivated by a desire to help a dog in need (51.1% and 82.3% of current and potential owners, respectively). Previous ownership experience reportedly influenced the decision-making of 70.3% and 77.0% of current and potential owners, respectively.
- **Significance:** We collected data from a large number of dog owners: our survey had 10,934 respondents. We used both quantitative (numerical data) and qualitative (non-numerical data, from interviews and free-text comments) analyses, which complement one another and deepen our understanding of the findings.
- **Applicability:** Ensuring potential owners' expectations of ownership are realistic is important to optimise both dog and human welfare. These findings could be used to develop interventions to support potential owners' decision-making. The results might also be useful to those working within animal rescue organisations to help increase their appeal to potential owners.

Summary

Despite the popularity of dogs in the UK, there is a lack of published evidence exploring owners' motivations for acquiring dogs. We wanted to address this gap. To investigate this, we collected data in two ways:

1. Dog owners (8,050 current and 2,884 potential) completed a survey (conducted in 2019);
2. Dog owners (166 current and 10 potential) took part in semi-structured interviews.

Both methods focused on various aspects of the acquisition process, including motivations for acquisition. Our findings are summarised below, around three broad themes that were identified from the qualitative analysis.

Self-Related Motivation

Participants highlighted various ways in which they perceived dogs – or aspects of dog ownership – to benefit owners and enrich their lives. Many participants referred to valued aspects of human–dog relationships and interactions, including companionship or friendship. Quantitative findings provided

further evidence for the importance of companionship for the owner as a motivation for acquisition, with 79.4% and 87.8% of current and potential owners, respectively, reporting this as a reason for getting a dog. Benefits to human health and wellbeing were also widely associated with a desire for dog ownership. The survey's quantitative findings highlighted that facilitating exercise was a reason for dog acquisition for more than half of respondents (48.2% and 69.7% of current and potential owners, respectively), whilst the qualitative data indicated anticipated benefits for owner's mental health or wellbeing.

Social-Based Motivation

Some reported reasons for getting a dog could be categorised as being influenced by others – either human or dog. In some cases, these social-based motivations reflected a desire to benefit others. In both the quantitative and qualitative data, many participants reported that they wanted to help a dog in need (51.1% and 82.3% of current and potential owners, respectively, within the quantitative data). Another way in which owners' motivation to get a dog was influenced by a desire to help a dog, was to provide companionship for another owned dog, as reported by one quarter (24.7%) of current owners. Beyond benefits for dogs, some participants sought a dog to benefit another person, often children in the household. This motivation was associated, by some, with a belief that dogs have a positive influence on children's development.

Dog-Related Positive Affect-Based Motivation

Many participants expressed positive feelings towards dogs, either in general or towards particular breeds. Commonly mentioned dog qualities included their "loving" and "loyal" nature. Some participants distinguished dog's roles and qualities from other animals, typically cats, highlighting how dogs may be perceived as unique from other human-animal relationships, often due to the distinct kind of companionship they offer. These perceptions of dogs were often described with reference to dogs owned or known, and this study's quantitative data confirms the potentially important role of previous experiences of owning or meeting dogs in motivating the decision to acquire one. Prior ownership was a reported influence for 70.3% and 76.9% of current and potential owners, respectively, whilst prior experiences of meeting dogs was reportedly important in the decision-making of 27.5% and 45.8% of current and potential owners, respectively.