

# Pets: An Escalating Epidemic

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I cannot recall a time in my life when I did not have a dog as a pet. To this day I have what I consider the wonder dog Roo – a Rhodesian Ridgeback. Roo is mostly an outside dog and now commands our yard in town rather than roaming free while sharing our previous small farm with a companion canine. He now mostly waits patiently to be taken on two walks a day on the required urban leash – exploring the olfactory periphery of the sidewalks. As I coast into my elder years of less intense physical prowess, I am astonished to find how closely my diminished life resembles that of Roo. Like Roo I am more and more confined to my limited urban dwelling, especially following my recent total knee replacement and its recovery which has been complicated by an aggravated old lower back injury. I have to admit I do not like what I see that Roo and I have come to share. I can now see what the life of a great many pets and their owners looks like and how these pets have come to take on a special role in modern American society.

I recognize that I now dwell in the urban environment where pets are common, particularly dogs, and especially little “toy” dogs whose sole reason for being seems to have become barking at anything and everything that moves – unrestrained by their owners who consider this incessantly annoying behavior “cute.” In the last 15 years it seems that toy dogs carried by their owners in over the shoulder pouches/purses are more and more present in virtually all public and commercial spaces, including restaurants and grocery stores. And it is older men as much as women who are the carriers of these cuddled “pets,” not as actual service dogs but as “emotional support animals,” which can now be licensed as such – endowing these pets and their owners with special rights and access privileges in all of our states.

What is going on here?

Let's look at the history. For 99% of human existence, humans lived as hunter-gatherers in bands and tribes with some wild animals preying on humans while humans preyed on other animals. Where neither of these conditions applied, animals and humans have just tended to avoid one another. The domestication of wild animals was a slow process as some smaller, less aggressive wild animals first learned to lead lives on the margins of human communities, then began to be included in human activities, and finally were bred and raised to contribute to the security and well-being of human communities. The evolution of wolves into dogs and wild cats into domestic cats are two of the outstanding

and early examples of this process. Over time, as bands and tribes settled and moved in the direction of agriculture, the young of some less aggressive, larger wild animals were captured, trained and then breed to eventually become larger domestic livestock under a significant degree of human control. Whether large or small the norm was for all domesticated animals to contribute in some substantial way to the viability of human groups as working animals or as sources of more immediately available and reliable food. Under these conditions, domesticated animals led relatively full lives relating as much to their own kind as to humans. Pets as such did not exist.

Domestic animals that do not contribute in some instrumental way to human existence – that is Pets – have arisen mostly in modern civilizations in the last 2,000 years with the breeding of specialty dogs and cats occurring mostly in the last 500 years. So, pets are a new phenomenon in the history of human societies, a luxury of humans who can afford the cost and effort to raise and sustain these animals. To get an idea of the population of pets in America and how it has grown, consider that currently pet dogs and cats in America number 184 million with 68% of all households owning pets – up from 56% in just the last 40 years. And this number does not include the plethora of strays, feral and abandoned dogs and cats that end up in shelters. In 2017, the economic value of the pet industry in America is expected to amount to \$70 billion.

The pet phenomenon in America and much of the developed world has escalated exponentially in the last 100 years. This has occurred as Americans 1) have become less and less settled and more and more mobile, 2) shifted more and more from community oriented, rural, small town conditions to less community oriented urban/suburban settings, 3) have seen the middle class become less and less economically secure due to technological automation and out-sourcing, 4) have moved with air conditioning more and more inside their homes from their front porches where they focus on various forms of electronic communication, 5) have seen the population rise steadily in average age as a result of significant medical advances.

For Americans, all of these evolving conditions have contributed to diminishing community and increasing relative social isolation. I suggest that it is in response to the void created by these collective conditions that the current pet epidemic arises – now supported by officially recognized and licensed “emotional support” animals! This pet epidemic is one symptom of what occurs when modern humans live in conditions where quality social relations are significantly reduced as represented by the loss of extended family, lifetime friends and neighbors, and long term identity tied to a community in its unique physical and ecological setting.

Real Service animals are working animals whose owners are trained to not treat them as pets. By contrast, pets are a luxury, and the current excessive investment in pets to the point of their receiving the status of “emotional support animals” is a symptom of the extent of social loss in modern America. Such official recognition for pets seems to have begun with the early introduction in the 1970s and 80s of dogs and cats into nursing homes to provide needed companionship for the infirm who are often very isolated socially. So, an older woman or man “having” to carry that toy dog in a pouch everywhere he or she goes arises in most cases because modern American life has led to severely reduced meaningful human social contact. Television, the internet, and social media are no substitute for quality face-to-face human interaction. I contend that, pathetically, “emotional support” pets exist in large part to compensate for this pervasive social loss.

And what about the pets themselves. Often they are spoiled to the point where they have assumed the alpha position in the relationship with their “owners.” “Little Cutie” is so important emotionally to his or her owner that the owner is unwilling or unable to discipline his or her pet. In the home these pets assault the front windows and doors at the sign of the most ordinary events, jump all over guests, cruise the tops of the various furnishings, and often are invited into the beds of their owners. In the yard, “Sweetie Pie” patrols the fenced perimeter barking and snapping at any passers-by while the owner may offer at best a soft spoken, “Now Sweetie Pie that isn't nice.” These mostly miniature pet emperors rule – on the hip, in the car, at home, and in the yard! What have emerged in relatively recent times as a major source of emotional support for many Americans – our pets – are now also a source of conflict among neighbors – ironically promoting further social isolation!

We are living in the midst of an escalating pet epidemic which can only be countered if all of us get off the television/internet/news/social media fixated couch, examine how we got to this socially isolated human state, and find ways to create and maintain networks of high quality, face-to-face social relations throughout our lives. As humans, we are inherently social animals. We need to recognize that pets will never provide an adequate substitute for the many positive consequences that result from readily available, high quality social interaction among humans.

I love Roo, but neither Roo nor any canine or feline curled up on my lap can ever be a real answer to the social anomie that defines so much of modern American society.