

## Too fast and too slow: Being a student in a One Welfare world

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To date, much of my education and research has focused within the sphere of [One Welfare](#)—the intersection between animal welfare, human wellbeing, and the environment. One Welfare is a relatively new idea, having only been introduced formally within the past 10 years. Across all sectors of animal use, from farm to laboratory to companion animals, the framework guides transdisciplinary collaboration to improve the lives of animals and humans. Learning about One Welfare was pivotal in my education. I remember feeling inspired by how forward-thinking this framework was, while at the same time, it was like someone was pointing out the obvious. *Of course*, how could I think that the world of animal welfare existed in a vacuum? Nonetheless, this concept is one that shaped my entire academic experience. While I am at the early stages of my research career, I will share two ideas that will follow me through the rest of my career. First, researchers and educators have a responsibility to stay involved with the current innovations and attitudes of industry stakeholders and community members. In my own research, animal sheltering professionals have guided my most impactful research. Second, in connecting with our communities, we begin to link our field to others in a One Welfare system, which can advance change in a way that isolated research in animal welfare may not always be able to do on its own.

Initially, when I learned about One Welfare in my undergraduate classes, many of the examples focused on areas of direct care for animals. For example, researchers have found that improving job satisfaction and reducing occupational stress for farm workers correlates to [more positive interactions with animals](#), which can improve the health and welfare of the animals in their care. As another example, in animal sheltering, One Welfare exists through the “[violence link](#)”, which recognizes the common relationship between interpersonal abuse with humans and animal cruelty.

Carrying the concepts of One Welfare into graduate school, I wanted to focus my research on the human-animal bond. When I spoke to animal shelter professionals about their services and communities,

they often discussed owner-related issues, not animal ones, when talking about surrenders and adoptions. This piqued my curiosity—it was a One Welfare issue I had not learned about in my undergrad. I wanted to explore more about how communities impacted and were impacted by their communities. To do this, I decided to look at animal shelter data, which, as I have learned now, is not always so simple.

Historically, the model of animal shelters was one of control, which was reflected in the (lack of) data collection. Initially, animal shelters were designed for impounding stray animals, where those who were unclaimed were killed. This meant little use for data and research. In response to the historically uncaring treatment of stray animals, animal protection laws that embraced kindness to animals were created, both internationally and here in North America. Simultaneously, organizations began to focus on the health of animals that lived alongside humans in the growing cities. Later, some decided that killing of animals in good health should be avoided, and thus, the idea of placing animals into a new home became more common. At the time, basic data collection, such as the number of animals entering and leaving a facility, became of interest to researchers.

In 2004, animal shelter leaders met and developed a standard categorization to report the health of animals that entered shelters and rescues. When animals enter shelters, they would be marked under a category based on their health and their ability to be treated. By clarifying these definitions, professionals hoped for a unifying understanding of animal care and further opportunity for coalition among shelters. Attendees also agreed upon calculating and reporting a “live release rate”, which indicates the proportion of animals that exit the shelter through live outcomes (i.e., adoption, transfer, or return to their guardian). This statistic was meant to encourage lifesaving for animals, but also to increase transparency of shelter practices. Indeed, at the time, these ideas were reflective of animal shelters’ shift in their models from one of protection and control to one of care. This new standard, called the [Asilomar Accords](#), is believed to be the first step in collecting and reporting consistent data for shelter animals. The Asilomar Accords also marked a change in the use of animal shelter data to reflect the growing interest in the health and welfare of individual animals in shelters.

Today, the research I have conducted using animal shelter data still includes the Asilomar Accords. However, by connecting the animal shelter data to human demographic data, I was able to use information that was initially created to understand animal health to now understand the One Welfare relationship between shelter animals and the broader community. My first studies focused on the relationship between community vulnerability and animal shelter services. The results showed that [more vulnerable communities surrender a disproportionate number of animals to shelters](#). As well, I found that types of vulnerabilities, including communities with higher housing insecurity, communities with higher proportions of racialized populations, and communities with higher proportions of economically dependent individuals, were [more likely to surrender animals that were considered unhealthy and untreatable in the Asilomar Accords](#). Indeed, communities that were experiencing vulnerabilities were unfortunately prone to surrendering animals with increased health and welfare issues—a palpable One Welfare issue.

By doing research at the One Welfare junction, I felt that I could connect more directly with individuals who care for animals. Although, in doing so, I was faced with the complexities of translating research into practice, and vice versa, the complexities of investigating real world operations. When I started working with organizations, I realized that I will always feel like the field is moving too fast and too slow at the same time. While it can feel like all possible research in the field has been said and done before by researchers years ago, there are also constant developments to react to the ever-changing issues that arise in shelters. To paint the picture, while I am analyzing animal shelter data, shelter and rescue workers are tirelessly creating new strategies to help families and their pets. Research in the 2010s showed that [animals are often surrendered for owner-related issues](#), such as lack of pet-friendly housing or being unable to afford pet care costs. Now, using their own animal shelter data, organizations can identify their community's common reasons for animal surrender and find or create support services to help alleviate these issues. For example, accessible and lower-cost veterinary care can help communities who may be at risk of surrendering animals due to animal health issues. Some organizations may provide

behavioural support for owners who do not have the resources to learn about animal behaviour. Others may provide low-cost or free veterinary care to help pets remain with their families. Rather than focusing their efforts inward, when animals have entered their facilities, animal shelters are turning to their community to provide services more directly to people and pets in need.

With animal shelters' new role as a community service, animal shelter data is also adapting, and thus my own research adapts with it. There are now dozens of animal shelter software dedicated to collecting population and animal-level data. In the U.S., an organization called [Shelter Animals Count](#) collects data from over 700 organizations, which is a massive feat for data collection and standardization.

Organizations even report community services data, including over 20,000 different programs and services that aim to help pet owners with problems including veterinary assistance, training, licensing, and housing. Twenty years ago, many of these programs would not exist—and the data on them would not have been collected. I believe this newly emerging era marks a change in the use of animal shelter data to reflect the recognition of One Welfare in animal sheltering.

As the symbiotic relationship between animal shelter services and research continues to develop, there is still work to be done with animal shelter data. Shelter Animals Count, while championing the animal shelter data movement, does not receive data from at least 80% of U.S. shelter and rescue groups. As well, the organization is hoping to expand from collecting intake and outcome data to collecting all types of animal-level data (e.g., ages of animals, reasons for surrender, health of animals upon intake). However, because of the wide variety in the services provided by animal shelters, their communities' needs, and available resources, there is concern for whether organizations can truly come together to collect and analyze data in a way that works for everyone. I recently had the opportunity to conduct an experiment looking at the consistency of animal shelter data, which is part of a larger, ongoing effort to standardize data across organizations. The support I have received from animal shelter professionals and academics alike makes me hopeful that this field will continue to use evidence-driven methods to improve the relationship between pet owners, animals, and shelters. Learning about and working with animal

shelters will always make me feel like I am moving both too fast and too slow, but to me, the future of education in animal welfare rests on our ability to react as the industry does. To grow, we must understand the humans who care for these animals and create an environment that protects the wellbeing of people and animals.

When I think of my own role as a student and as a researcher, it is not only to use data to support and evaluate the progress in the field, but also to adapt to the communities that animal shelters serve. In the face of global adversities like climate change, social inequities, and political unrest, it is certain that the role of animal shelters is changing and will continue to change. Simultaneously, research and curriculums in higher education cannot stay stagnant. I experienced a defining moment when I learned about One Welfare; this guided my passion for research and hope for the future of animal welfare. As the sphere of animal welfare continues to expand, I hope that all students can experience a similar moment that inspires them to work at the forefront of our field.