INPLASY

"When My Whole World Was Gone": A Systematic Review of the Human Experience and Mutual Impacts of Service-Animal Partnership Dissolution

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ADMINISTRATIVE INFORMATION

Review Stage at time of this submission - Data extraction.

Conflicts of interest - None declared.

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Amendments - This protocol was registered with the International Platform of Registered Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis Protocols (INPLASY) on 3 July 2025 and was last updated on 3 July 2025.

INTRODUCTION

*R*eview question / Objective What are the characteristics, psychosocial impacts, and research gaps in studies examining dissolution of handler–service-animal partnerships?

Rationale Service animals facilitate their handlers' autonomy, safety, and psychosocial well-being. When partnerships end, because handlers recover, relocate, or die, or because animals retire, become ill, or die, both parties experience a profound life disruption. Despite growing recognition of animal-assisted interventions, the end-of-partnership phase remains poorly understood and is seldom integrated into programme planning or policy. This review addresses that gap by evaluating existing evidence and identifying priorities for future research and practice.

Condition being studied The review focuses on the psychosocial, functional, and physiological outcomes arising from the dissolution of handler–service-animal partnerships. Outcomes of interest include grief, identity changes, daily-living adaptations, animal welfare indicators, and support-service utilisation.

METHODS

Search strategy A comprehensive search combined terms for service animals (e.g., "service animal", "assistance dog"*), dissolution events (e.g., retire, death, end, breakup), relationship constructs (e.g., bond, interaction), and exclusions (e.g., emotional support animal). Five databases were searched from inception to 30 June 2025.

Participant or population The review targets two interrelated populations:

Human handlers: Individuals of any age, gender, or disability status who currently or formerly partnered with formally task-trained service animals (e.g., guide, hearing, mobility, medical-alert, or psychiatric service dogs; trained

miniature horses). No geographic, cultural, or national restrictions were applied beyond the English-language publication criterion.

Service animals: Task-trained animals working in a dedicated one-to-one partnership with a human handler. Although most identified studies focused on dogs, other legally recognised service species (e.g., miniature horses) were eligible.

Intervention N/A.

Comparator N/A.

Study designs to be included Eligible studies employed qualitative, quantitative, or mixed-methods designs to investigate outcomes associated with the dissolution of handler–service-animal partnerships. Acceptable methodologies included in-depth interviews, focus groups, surveys, and physiological measures. Both cross-sectional and longitudinal approaches were eligible, provided the study focused on the impacts of partnership termination. Case studies and programme evaluations were also included if they met inclusion criteria.

Eligibility criteria N/A.

Information sources Web of Science, EBSCOhost, PsycINFO, PubMed, VetMed.

Main outcome(s)
1) Some articles misused both terms, service animal and emotional support animal. Both terms might be interchangeable in some context but not in the legal domains.
2) The majority of the current research focused on the impacts from the handlers' perspectives only. Although the evaluation of these impacts from the service animal's feature tremendous challenges, future research could consider about this research direction by examining the service animals' behavioural changes.

Quality assessment / Risk of bias analysis The CASP checklist (qualitative) and adapted CASP tools (quantitative) rated methodological rigour. Scores were transformed to percentages; studies ≥55 % were retained. WOE criteria (relevance, design appropriateness, trustworthiness, overall contribution) further informed synthesis.

Strategy of data synthesis An iterative thematic synthesis combined open, axial, and selective coding, using constant comparison to integrate handler and animal perspectives. Heterogeneity precluded meta-analysis.

Subgroup analysis N/A.

Sensitivity analysis N/A.

Language restriction English.

Country(ies) involved Canada.

Keywords service animal, assistance dog, human–animal bond, loss, grief.

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