

U.S. and Canadian veterinarians' attitudes toward and experiences with social housing of dairy calves

W.A. Knauer,¹ VMD, PhD; S.M. Godden,¹ DVM, DVSc; B.A Ventura,² MS, PhD

¹Department of Veterinary Population Medicine, University of Minnesota, St. Paul, MN 55108

²Department of Life Sciences, University of Lincoln, Lincoln LN6 7DL, UK

Introduction

While most dairy calves are housed individually during the pre-weaning period in the United States and Canada, there is increased interest in various forms of social housing. As veterinarians are trusted advisors in the decision making of a dairy operation, we sought to use an online mixed method survey to describe practicing veterinarians' attitudes and experiences with dairy calf social housing.

Materials and methods

A mixed method survey, hosted on the Qualtrics platform, was open from June to October, 2023. Practicing dairy veterinarians (defined as dairy-exclusive or mixed-practice with at least 25% of their time working with dairy cattle) based in the U.S. and Canada were purposively recruited through professional bovine organization newsletters, listserves, social media accounts and personal invitation. The survey addressed the following items: 1) demographics; 2) attitudes toward dairy calf housing; 3) perceptions toward societal expectations; 4) experiences with farms using pre-weaned social housing; and 5) experiences with farms that had tried social housing, but had since reverted to individual housing. Demographic and categorical data were summarized descriptively and qualitative responses were processed using content analysis.

Results

A total of 157 respondents completed the survey and spent at least 25% of their time working on dairy farms. Most participants were between the ages of 25-35 (30.6%) or 36-45 (26.5%), with approximately half each women (48.4%) and men (49.0%) and 0.6% non-binary. Overall, most of the sample was women below the age of 35 (52.6%) or men over the age of 36 (ages 36-75, 87%), with 73.2% of participants practicing in the U.S. and 26.7% in Canada. Most (82.8%) participants reported working with farms that practiced social housing for pre-weaned calves. Of these, respondents worked with all housing types including pair (PR; 64.4%), small group (SG; 70.8%), large group (LG; 73.1%), nurse cows (NC; 16.2%) and cow-calf pairs (CC; 10%), and considered the transition to social housing at least somewhat (49.7%), if not extremely, feasible (17.4%). Nearly half (44.6%) indicated they did work with "reverter" farms (54.1% reported that they did not work with any "reverter" farms; 1.3% did not answer). Participants reported that these farms had most commonly tried LG (56.5%), followed by SG (34.8%), PR (24.6%) and CCs (2.9%).

Overall, participants rated individual (IND), PR and SG as the most ideal and acceptable pre-weaning housing (compared to LG, CC and NC). While many noted that "ideal" was often contingent on farms' management and infrastructure, those who favored IND often focused on health and disease control (84.5% of participants giving reasons for IND). Those preferring PR or SG favored options providing balance between provision of socialization and learning opportunities (61.4%) and control of disease/promotion of health and growth (63.6%). In contrast, CC was by far viewed as the most publicly acceptable option (71.3%), with IND most frequently deemed as least acceptable to the public (81.5%). When looking 20 years to the future, participants thought that some sort of social housing would be the most common form of pre-weaned calf housing (63%), though nearly a third (27.9%) thought the majority of calves would still be individually housed.

Significance

The results of our survey suggest that while many participants considered individual housing as both an ideal and acceptable approach to housing pre-weaned dairy calves, participants had experience with a variety of pre-weaned social housing, and generally considered the transition to social housing as feasible. Ongoing analysis will understand participants' experiences with each of these systems, which may reveal potential supports needed to implement socially sustainable calf housing systems that best support the needs of calves and those who rear them.

