

Cruelty to animals and family violence

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Abstract

Recent research has demonstrated that people who commit acts of cruelty against animals are also likely to be involved in family violence and other serious criminal behavior. Complaints of animal cruelty should be taken seriously as they often provide an opportunity for early identification and intervention with violent perpetrators.

Introduction

In a dramatic case in Philadelphia, two men entered the home of Edward Atwood, a disabled man, and killed him with a shotgun blast in full view of his wife and two children. A few weeks later, in Mount Airy, Pennsylvania, three young men attacked a half dozen dogs in the community, throwing a mixture of drain cleaner, bleach, and pancake mix over backyard fences and onto the animals. Five dogs, including the pet of a city councilman, were so badly injured that they were eventually euthanized. Analysis of chemical residue from these attacks led to the identification of the three suspects who had purchased the commercial drain cleaner, and their arrest on animal cruelty charges. When photos of the three were shown on television in connection with their arrest, Edward Atwood's wife was watching, and she identified one of the three as having also been one of the two men who killed her husband. A participant in both crimes, 21-year-old Dwayne Wright was eventually convicted of murdering Atwood and given a life sentence. Strangely, Atwood's death was also animal-related: Prosecutors claimed that Wright and his partner were hired to kill Atwood by a neighbor against whom Atwood had filed a complaint for not providing proper care for a dog.

In another recent case in Willoughby, Ohio, police responded to a routine call from neighbors who reported seeing several dead kittens on the front porch of their neighbor's house. When police entered the home, they found more cats living in filthy conditions, a flooded basement with garbage floating in it, and animal feces and trash covering the living areas. Two children, ages 6 and 2, were found locked in an upstairs bedroom, covered in feces and urine. The parents, who had left the children locked in the bedroom while they were at work, were arrested for felony child endangerment and animal cruelty.

For centuries, civilized societies have held the belief that people's treatment of animals is closely associated with their treatment of fellow human beings. The growth of the animal protection movement in the 19th century was part of a larger series of reforms to improve the treatment of women, children, the poor, and the mentally ill. In the United States and England, organizations for the protection of children grew out of animal protection groups. In fact, in 1874 a notorious child abuse case in New York was prosecuted by the American Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA) under existing animal welfare laws (Carson 1972).

Over the last decade, social service and law enforcement agencies have finally begun to examine cruelty to animals as a serious human problem closely linked to domestic violence, child abuse, elder abuse, and other violent crimes. Police departments across the United States and Canada have begun partnering with animal welfare organizations and other anti-violence organizations to develop interagency collaborations aimed at reducing family violence and animal cruelty. Many of the interagency programs utilize cross-reporting, cross-training, and multidisciplinary response teams to assist officers and the courts in identifying and intervening with violent perpetrators (Ponder and Lockwood 2000).

Increased awareness about the connection between animal cruelty and human violence is also reflected in changes in state legislation. Thirty-one states have adopted felony-level animal anti-cruelty laws, and several other states have passed laws mandating that individuals convicted of animal cruelty receive psychological evaluation and counseling.

These efforts to strengthen anti-cruelty laws reflect a growing recognition of the complexity of cruelty to animals and an increased awareness that animal cruelty crimes should not be treated in the same manner as other property crimes. Courts across the United States have responded to the public awareness and legislative shift by handing down longer prison and probation sentences as well as court-ordered counseling in cases involving intentional animal cruelty. Some shocking animal cruelty cases have resulted in prison sentences of 10 years or more.

Several factors have prompted this new concern. First, the FBI's retrospective studies in the 1970s unearthed many dramatic case histories of serial killers and mass murderers that had an early history of abusing animals. Second, social scientists have conducted multiple studies over the past twenty years that demonstrate a strong animal cruelty/family violence connection, and recent publicity in dozens of high profile animal cruelty cases, such as the Pennsylvania and Ohio cases described above, have alerted the public to this link. Third, officers and the courts are recognizing the utility of taking animal cruelty seriously as a way of identifying and intervening with potentially violent perpetrators, particularly in cases involving juveniles. Finally, an increasingly concerned public has drawn greater attention to animal abuse and media that have been critical of mild punishments handed down in animal cruelty cases.

Animal cruelty and adult violence

Early interest in the link between cruelty to animals and criminality was inspired by anecdotal case histories of notorious criminals. There is compelling anecdotal evidence compiled by the FBI and other law enforcement agencies linking serial killers, serial rapists and sexual homicide perpetrators to acts of animal abuse prior to age 25. Many of these case histories, including reports of alleged animal abuse by David Berkowitz and Jeffrey Dahmer, have been widely publicized in the media and raised public awareness about the animal abuse/human violence connection. Nevertheless, single case histories do not provide much insight into the origins of animal abuse and its connection to other forms of violence. For this reason, researchers have recently conducted a number of studies that have examined larger populations of criminals to explore this association.

One survey of psychiatric patients who had reportedly tortured dogs and cats found that all of the subjects had high levels of aggression against people, including one patient who had murdered a boy (Felthous 1980). These abusers shared a common history of brutal parental punishment, bullying, and other antisocial behavior.

One of the most detailed surveys of adult criminals was conducted by Felthous and Kellett (Felthous and Kellett 1986). They looked at animal cruelty among three groups of men including aggressive criminals, nonaggressive criminals, and non-criminals. Ratings of aggressiveness were based on reports of the individuals' behavior in prison, rather than the crimes they had committed. Among the aggressive criminals, 25 percent reported five or more early acts of cruelty to animals, compared to six percent of non-aggressive criminals and none of the sample of non-criminals. Aggressive criminals were also more likely to report fear or dislike of particular animals.

Most recently, the Massachusetts Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (MSPCA) and Northeastern University conducted a study to determine whether animal abusers were more likely to be involved in other types of criminal behavior than nonabusers (Luke et al 1997). Researchers compared 153 individuals who were prosecuted for cases of intentional animal abuse between 1975 and 1996 with a control group of individuals of the same age, gender, socioeconomic group, and geographic location. The study showed that animal abusers were about five times more likely than their counterparts to have been convicted of another violent crime and about three times more likely to have been involved in some other form of serious criminal behavior.

These studies have identified a triad of symptoms involving a close association between physical abuse by one or both parents, cruelty to animals, and violence toward people.

Animal cruelty and domestic violence

In recent years it has become widely accepted that the mistreatment of animals can be an indicator of many forms of family violence and ongoing abuse and neglect, including domestic violence, child abuse and elder abuse. In many cases, as in the Ohio case, officers investigating allegations of animal abuse learn of other forms of family violence during the course of their investigation. Several recent studies have assessed the high frequency with which batterers abuse family pets to silence, coerce, and further intimidate other vulnerable family members.

In 1995, researchers interviewed a small sample of domestic violence victims seeking shelter in Utah and found that 74 percent had pets in the home and 71 percent of pet-owning victims reported that an animal had been threatened, harmed, or killed by their abuser (Ascione 1995). A similar study that year by the Community Coalition Against Violence in Wisconsin confirmed the findings in Utah. The community coalition interviewed domestic violence victims at 12 domestic violence shelters and found 86 percent had pets in the home and 80 percent of pet-owning victims reported their batterers had also been violent with their animals (Quinlisk 1995).

More recent studies have assessed the impact animal abuse can have in preventing domestic violence victims and their children from seeking safety. Abusers will often abuse, or threaten to harm, a favorite pet if victims attempt to leave the relationship and will frequently retaliate against victims after they leave the relationship by killing the family pet. Abusers often recognize the special attachment victims and children have with their pets and effectively use this relationship to intimidate and control their victims. Thus, threats of animal abuse and the killing of favorite pets are powerful tools by which abusers can perpetuate the context of terror for victims and their children even after they have left the relationship.

One of the largest surveys to examine the effect this abuse has in preventing victims from leaving an abusive situation was conducted in 1997 in Utah (Ascione 1997). As in the first Utah study, researchers interviewed victims and their children entering safehouses and found that 72 percent of pet-owning victims reported that their abuser had threatened, harmed, or killed family pets. Researchers also asked victims whether they had delayed leaving their abusive situation out of fear for their pets' safety and found nearly 20 percent had delayed leaving the relationship because of the pet abuse.

These findings were corroborated in the first Canadian study on the animal abuse/domestic violence connection in 2000. The Ontario Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (OSPCA) interviewed over one hundred women at 21 different domestic violence shelters across Ontario. The OSPCA found that 44 percent of the women reported their partner had abused or killed family pets and 43 percent said concern for their pets' welfare prevented them from leaving the relationship sooner.

In response to these studies, animal welfare associations have begun partnering with domestic violence agencies to develop safe haven programs that provide temporary emergency housing for the pets of domestic violence victims. There are currently over a hundred of these programs throughout the United States and Canada. In many of the programs, law enforcement has been an instrumental part of the network of agencies, helping victims retrieve their pets from the home and bring them to the animal shelter.

Animal cruelty and elder abuse

As in domestic violence cases, older adults who are in abusive relationships with spouses, children, or other family members are often re-victimized through abuse of their pets. Although elder abuse is a serious problem in the United States, affecting at least 500,000 elderly persons each year, older adults rarely alert authorities to domestic abuse. In fact, some research estimates that only 1 in 14 domestic elder abuse incidents are reported to authorities (Pillmer and Finkelhor 1988).

Older adults are often particularly attached to their animals who may represent an important link to the past as well as an ongoing source of comfort, humor, affection, and contact with others. For many older adults who have lost their spouses and many of their friends, their pets are their main support system. In cases where companion animals are present in the home, they can be the victims of abuse or neglect. Perpetrators may manipulate this bond to intimidate or threaten victims. Frequently, the perpetrators are the children or grandchildren of the elderly victim and may abuse the elder's pet as a form of retaliation, out of frustration over their caretaking responsibilities or to extract financial assets from the victim.

Elder abuse cases may be brought to the attention of authorities as a result of allegations of animal cruelty. Cases of chained dogs howling in subzero weather, or starving neighborhood cats, are much more likely to be reported by neighbors than cases of elder abuse. Older adults are often physically and socially isolated from the community and this isolation is further compounded if they are in an abusive situation. For example, neighbors may not know enough to be concerned if they do not see the elderly woman next door for several weeks, but they may be alarmed if the neighbor's dog disappears out of the backyard one day. Professionals trained on the animal cruelty/elder abuse connection know to investigate beyond the visible problem of animal abuse to search for other vulnerable and often hidden victims, such as the elderly and young children.

Animal cruelty and child abuse

More than three-fourths of American families with school-age children have pets. Studies show that families with a history of violence have significantly more pets than the average household, yet the majority of pets in these homes are under the age of two. Interviews with family members in abusive settings show a disproportionately high rate of turnover for animals in these homes, with many of the animals being killed or discarded before they ever reach maturity.

Child abusers often abuse animals to exert their power and control over children, animals, and other vulnerable family members. In some cases, abusers will force children to engage in sexual acts with animals or demand that they hurt or kill a favorite pet, to coerce them into keeping the family secret. Often, even the threat of animal abuse will intimidate children into maintaining silence about ongoing family violence or other criminal behavior. A 1983 survey of pet-owning families under treatment by New Jersey's Division of Youth and Family Services because of child abuse revealed that in 88 percent of the families at least one person in the family had abused animals (DeViney et al 1983).

The study found the most common pattern of abuse occurred when an abusive parent or stepparent targeted one or more children, as well as a pet, and used violence against the pets to intimidate or control the child.

Although pets can be an important source of comfort and stability for children in abusive homes, many of these children may themselves become animal abusers, often imitating the violence they have seen or experienced, using the pet as a victim. For example, in the New Jersey study, children were reported to be abusive to animals in more than one-third of the homes in which pet abuse was reported.

Similarly, the 1995 study of domestic violence victims entering shelter in Utah noted that 32 percent of the pet-owning victims reported that one or more of their children had hurt or killed a pet.

Children may begin abusing animals to convince themselves and others that those they love can no longer hurt them. Ironically, many children who abuse their pets actually report loving and close relationships with the animals. However, they may repress their natural compassion for animals because they have been hurt for expressing kindness to loved ones. Furthermore, abusive children are often reenacting the abuse they have experienced or witnessed by repeating the behaviors on other victims who are weaker or more vulnerable than themselves, including younger siblings and family pets. Many have witnessed parents or other adults killing one or more family pets and may believe that these animals' lives are expendable. Others may hurt or kill their pets in an effort to control what they see as an inevitable fate for the animal. All of these children are at high risk for future aggressive or antisocial behavior.

Animal cruelty and juvenile violence

In 1997, 16-year-old Luke Woodham from Pearl, Mississippi, stabbed his mother to death and then went to his high school and killed two classmates and injured seven others. Six months prior to the killings, Woodham wrote in his journal that he and an accomplice beat, burned, and tortured his dog, Sparkle, to death. He described hearing his dog's bones crush under his might as "true beauty."

Unfortunately, Woodham's experimentation with animal abuse prior to his shooting spree is not unusual. Most violent offenders show signs of aggression as juveniles and often their first victims are animals. These animal abusers are almost always male, usually 15 to 25 years of age, with a history of parental neglect, brutality, and rejection. Sometimes they find the company of one or more similarly inclined companions, such as a small group dabbling in Satanism or other occult practices.

Surprisingly, many of these youths report that they like animals. A University of Minnesota study of 507 delinquent and nondelinquent adolescents found that about 90 percent of both groups reported having had a "special pet" at some time in their lives. The delinquent children, however, were three times more likely to report that they sought out their pet during times of trouble and discussed their problems with it. Also, more than one-third of the delinquent youths had lost their special pet through intentional or accidental killing. In many cases an abusive parent had disposed of this beloved animal as a way of attempting to hurt or control the child (Robin et al 1983). One consequence of this can be that the child becomes abusive in an attempt to convince himself and others that he is no longer vulnerable because of his affection for animals.

Educators and other professionals have increasingly recognized the importance of identifying and intervening with juveniles who intentionally abuse animals. In response to public reaction to recent school shootings, such as the one in Pearl, Mississippi, several national agencies have released reports describing warning signs exhibited by violent youths.

The first report, "A Guide to Safe Schools: Early Warning/Timely Response," identified animal cruelty, fire-setting and bullying, as early indicators of youths who may be at risk for future aggressive and antisocial behavior (Dwyer et al 1998). More recently, the International Association of Chiefs of Police developed a "Guide for Preventing and Responding to School Violence" that identified abuse of animals as one of several characteristics exhibited by juveniles who could potentially become violent (Kramer et al 1999).

Both reports emphasize that no single act or event is necessarily predictive of a higher risk of future violent offending. Nevertheless, severe or repeated intentional cruelty to animals should be considered serious enough to initiate a more comprehensive review of other identified risk factors, including the presence of other violent or property offenses, peer and family relations, school attendance and performance, and substance abuse (Hawkins et al 2000).

The role of law enforcement

Although some jurisdictions have humane society agents with law enforcement powers, upholding animal welfare laws is usually the responsibility of local police. Law enforcement officers should be thoroughly familiar with anti-cruelty laws and recognize that reports of slain or injured animals often point to variety of other serious crimes, including domestic violence, child abuse, elder abuse, and other violent crimes. Because cruelty to animals often occurs at an early age and/or at an early stage in the development of antisocial or violent behavior, recognition and response to such actions can provide an opportunity for early intervention and prevention of future violence. For first-time or youthful offenders, the most appropriate response to a charge of cruelty to animals may be referral for psychological evaluation and assessment of other potential problem areas in school, family, or community adjustment. Although there are currently no formal diversion programs specifically targeting juveniles facing cruelty-to-animals charges, many existing youthful offender programs may have components that address the needs of these individuals. In cases involving intentional cruelty committed by juveniles, law enforcement should work with prosecutors and other professionals to ensure a proper course of action or treatment to reduce the chance of future violent acts against animals or people.

In the case of older offenders, cruelty to animals may be the first or most visible offense to be recognized in cases of other family violence, including domestic violence and child abuse, and may be easier to document or prosecute than other coexisting offenses. Officers should contact professionals in other family violence and animal welfare agencies, including domestic violence shelters, child protective services, adult protective services, animal care and control and local veterinarians, to share information, enhance victim services, and improve the criminal justice system's response to violent perpetrators. Interagency programs that link human services and animal welfare agencies and that involve cross-training, cross-reporting, and multidisciplinary family violence response teams, have been shown to reduce significantly the incidence of lethal family violence and animal cruelty (Ponder and Lockwood 2000). Interagency programs should also include efforts to collect data on the animal abuse and family violence connection. This data will be useful in identifying cross-reporting and cross-training needs as well as applying for the funding to support such efforts.

Essential to combating animal cruelty and family violence is an understanding that animal abuse is often one symptom of a dysfunctional or abusive family. Reports of animal cruelty can provide officers with an opportunity to identify and intervene on behalf of other vulnerable victims. In questioning witnesses to violent crimes, it may be useful to obtain information about a suspect's treatment of pets, as witnesses may often be more willing to talk about mistreatment of animals than that of other people.

In addition, documentation of reports of animal cruelty can often be utilized in prosecuting domestic abusers and other violent criminals. Finally, dealing seriously with animal problems can also be good public relations since most people look favorably on those who help animals.

Intervention and prevention

Cruelty to animals is a crime and should be treated as such. It is also a symptom of disturbed individuals and families, and a predictor of other problems in the making. Court actions against those who intentionally abuse animals has become more common, and an increasing number of courts are recognizing that early intervention may be very effective in preventing more serious incidents.

Cases of severe or repeated violence against animals demand criminal punishment as well as psychiatric intervention, with less severe incidents at least resulting in referrals for psychological evaluations and counseling. Ideally, such treatment should reach the entire family, not just the abuser. Since animal abuse is often part of a web of family violence, the most effective treatment in severe cases involving children or adolescents may be the removal of the child from the family.

Cases of chronic pet neglect are less predictive of violence against people, but these cases also require intervention. In such instances, court-ordered community service as well as educational programs emphasizing animal care and humane values can be effective.

Perhaps the most important approach to the problems of animal cruelty is prevention. Much abuse of animals is motivated by fear and ignorance of animals and an inability to empathize with the needs and feelings of others. Law enforcement officers, especially those who work with animals, such as canine or mounted patrol officers, can be an excellent aid to humane educators working to instill the knowledge and values that can help prevent children from starting a destructive path. These efforts cannot undo generations of abuse, but they can be an effective means of breaking the cycle of family violence from one generation to the next.

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This Training Key was prepared by Claire Ponder, First Strike manager, and Randall Lockwood, Ph.D., psychologist and vice president of education and outreach, for the Humane Society of the United States in Washington, D.C. For further information about the First Strike Campaign or the animal abuse/family violence connection, contact Ms. Ponder at (301) 258-3076, cponder@hsus.org, or Randall Lockwood at (301) 258-3030, rlockwood@hsus.org.

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