

The Links Between Animal Abuse and Family Violence, as Reported by

Women Entering Shelters in Calgary Communities.

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## ABSTRACT

Links between animal abuse and family violence were investigated regarding women and children entering two Calgary women's shelters. The incidence and impact of animal abuse perpetrated by the perpetrator and/ or the victims of family violence, including children, is explored. Results confirm prior research (Ascione, 2000) indicating that animal abuse and other forms of family violence frequently co-exist and that many women delay seeking safety due to concerns for their pets. Further, results indicate that children who witness animal abuse are likely to be impacted and may become abusive, towards animals and people, themselves.

## Introduction

Recent research (Ascione, 1996, 2000; Daniell, 2001) has indicated that animal abuse and other forms of family violence often co-occur. Further, a child's violence towards animals is an indicator of potential future violence towards people (Felthous, 1987). Given these links, human and animal welfare organizations are beginning to work together to better detect and prevent violence towards both animals and people (Adams, 1994; Boat, 1995; Davies, 1998). In some parts of the U.S. these initiatives have been incorporated into the legal framework. For example, veterinarians in Colorado are legally required to report cases of suspected child abuse (Arkow, 1996); child protection service workers in San Diego are legally required to report cases of animal abuse (Arkow, 1995); and, in California, state law requires humane treatment of animals be taught in the classroom (Bernstein, 1995). However, there is significant opportunity and need to further investigate and explore the nature of the links between animal abuse and family violence (Felthous 1987; Ascione 1996).

In Canada, in 1997, the Ontario SPCA initiated a violence prevention initiative, performing some initial research in 1998. Their mission is to work together with human service

agencies to “make Canada a kind and compassionate country for people and animals” (Earle, 1997, p14). In Calgary, many organisations have been intuitively aware of the links between animal abuse and family violence for some time. However, no local data was available to determine the nature and extent of these connections, and organisations lacked effective processes and resources to work together on these issues (Thomas, personal communication, June 30, 1999). A survey of Calgarians revealed that they are becoming more concerned about family violence in their communities (Dawson, 1999), at a time when local police statistics indicated an increase in the number of cases of family violence in Calgary (Toneguzzi, 1999). Animal and human welfare organisations in Calgary recognized that with increased understanding and local data, they could work together more effectively in prevention, education and treatment activities, to enhance the well being of both humans and animals (Thomas, personal communication, June 30, 1999).

A review of the literature shows that various issues and implications of the human animal bond have been recognised for centuries. The movement against animal abuse has an extensive history, which has intertwined with child protection and other human service movements. The bible contains many injunctions extolling us to show kindness towards animals, many of which liken animal abuse to violence towards people. For example, Isaiah 66:3 states “He who slaughters a goat is as if he slew a man”. The Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals was established in the United Kingdom in 1824, looking at the alleviation of the lives of the poor and abolition of slavery, as well as animal cruelty. The first case of child abuse prosecuted in the US, the case of a little girl – Mary Ellen – who was beaten by her stepmother, was done under the animal protection statute. This case resulted in the establishment of a society for the prevention of cruelty to children in 1876 (Baenninger, 1991; Bernstein,

1995). More recently Mahatma Gandhi said, “The greatness of a nation and its moral progress can be judged by the way its animals are treated” (Davies, 1998).

Animals are an important part of the family in many homes, and “many of us have significant relationships with animals” (Adams 1994, p.74). This is particularly so for children, as has been reflected over generations in a wide range of literature, portraying children and companion animals (MacDonald, 1979). Many researchers have shown the positive effect that contact with animals can have on a person’s physical health (Serpell, 1993; Voelker, 1995; Janssen, 1998). This human animal bond can also enhance our emotional and mental health (Covert, Whiren, Keith, & Nelson, 1985). However the human animal bond is not always positive. The first formal reference in psychological literature to the links between animal abuse and violence towards people appears to have been made by Margaret Mead who, in 1964, noted “torture of animals by children was a precursor to adult violence” (Baenninger, 1991). Numerous serial killers started off their patterns of violence with animals. For example Jeffery Dahmer, who admitted killing 17 people, first stripped the skin off animals with acid (Perrett, 1997; Anderssen, 1999). The FBI recognises the links between animal abuse and violence towards humans in their investigations, and advises that “people shouldn’t discount animal abuse as a childish prank” (Lockwood & Church, 1996, p30). The FBI educates their investigators about the links between animal abuse and violence against people and “we are trying to do the same for mental health professionals” (p. 29).

Animal cruelty is cited in DSM IV (American Psychiatric Association, 1994) as a diagnostic criterion for conduct disorder. The reasons why children abuse animals are varied and complex. These may include peer pressure and reinforcement to impress or shock, and a lack of modeling of appropriate behaviour (Arkow, 1997). Children who are being physically and/ or

sexually abused are more likely to be cruel to animals (Ascione, 2001). Whatever the reason, it seems clear that “injury to animals is one way that a child signals that something is wrong” (Adams, 1994, p. 69). This is not a new concept. As far back as 1905, Freud advised that clinicians pay attention to “children who are distinguished for evincing especial cruelty to animals” (Ascione, 1993). However, despite this research, a child’s abuse of animals frequently does not receive sufficient attention as a warning sign to help identify individuals at risk for perpetrating interpersonal violence and those who may be victims of violence themselves (Ascione, 2001).

The links between animal abuse and other forms of family violence are many, varied and complex. Macdonald notes that “cruelty to animals is often associated with cruelty to other members of the family (and is) related to the concept of dominance” (1979, pp. 356-357). When abuse happens in a home it invariably involves the whole family, including any animals in the family; animal abuse is “part of a constellation of dysfunctional family patterns” (Arkow, 1997). Being threatened with, or witnessing, the abuse of their animals compounds the direct abuse of women and children in abusive homes, and in some cases prevents them from leaving the abusive situation (Ascione, 1996). “When a husband destroys a pet he may be destroying the woman’s only source of comfort and affection” (Adams, 1994, p. 67). Many abusers use the family pet to intimidate, threaten, coerce, violate or control children or spouses, and this often includes the use of threats or actions towards the animals to obtain the victim’s silence (Arkow, 1997; Adams, 1994). Adams notes that “testimony of survivors of child sexual abuse reveals that threats and abuse of their pets were often used to establish control over them, while also ensuring their silence, by forcing them to decide between their victimization or the pet’s death” (1994, p. 67).

In a 1996 study in northern Utah, Ascione found that “a significant proportion of a sample of women seeking safety at a shelter for battered partners have experienced their partners’ threatened or actual maltreatment of pets”. Ascione recommends that future studies ask whether battered women understand the implications of such abuse upon their children’s mental health. In 2000, Ascione replicated this research with a more extensive study of 101 women who had entered a crisis shelter (shelter group), and a control group of 120 women who reported that they had not experienced family violence (non-shelter group). Seventy-two percent of women in the shelter group reported their partner had threatened or actually hurt or killed a pet, compared to 14.5% of those in the non-shelter group. Sixty-two percent of women with children in the shelter group reported their children had witnessed animal abuse in their homes, compared to three percent of those in the non-shelter group. Ascione notes that despite these findings, less than 30% of family violence shelters in the US ask their clients about animal abuse during intake interviews (Ascione, 2000; 1996).

Canadian (Ontario) statistics collected by the Ontario SPCA in 2000 indicate that of the 111 women leaving abusive situations who were surveyed, 42% had pets threatened by their abuser, 44% had pets abused or killed by their partner, and 43% reported that they delayed leaving the abusive situation due to fear for the safety of their pet (Daniell, 2001).

These studies provide a foundation, which was both replicated and built upon in the present study. This study incorporates prior researcher’s recommendations for future research, and expands upon the existing research, by exploring the prevalence of childhood animal abuse in the histories of the perpetrators of family violence, and by exploring the extent to which women understand the impact of animal abuse upon their children.

The objective of this study was to elicit information to suggest direction in response to the following research questions:

1. What is the prevalence, severity and nature of threatened and actual animal abuse in families facing family violence in Calgary?
2. What is the prevalence, severity and nature of childhood animal abuse in the histories of the perpetrators of family violence in Calgary?
3. What percentage of pet owning women seeking shelter in Calgary from family violence delayed their decisions to seek shelter from an abusive situation due to concerns about their pet's safety?
4. What is the awareness and perception, within families experiencing family violence in Calgary, of the impact of animal abuse upon the children in the family?

## METHOD

### *Participants*

The available sample population for this study was women seeking safety from family violence in two Calgary shelters: the YWCA Family Violence Prevention Centre and Sheriff King Home (“Sheriff King”) and the Brenda Strafford Centre for the Prevention of Family Violence (“Brenda Strafford”).

### *Instrumentation*

Data was collected by way of a written survey comprising both structured and open-ended questions. To the extent possible these built on instrumentation used in prior studies, including the Battered Partners Shelter Survey used by Ascione in 1996, and upon existing shelter intake forms.

### *Sample Selection*

One hundred women, of whom 65 reported owning pets within the past twelve months, participated in the study. Some survey questions were applicable to all participants, some were applicable only to those 65 who reported pet ownership. Given the limited number of potential participants available, a random sampling technique was considered not to be feasible. This is recognised as a limitation to the study.

#### *Data Collection and Recording*

Surveys were administered by counsellors at each shelter. Survey completion time ranged between ten and forty five minutes. Responses were recorded by participants in writing upon pre-printed response sheets. Potential participants without adequate language or literacy skills to complete the survey in this manner were not asked to participate. This is recognised as a limitation of the study, however the limitations upon resources, the confidentiality requirements and the need to obtain unbiased responses precluded the option of collecting data from such individuals in an interview format. Participants were asked not to write their names or any other identifying data on their survey documentation. Upon completion of the survey, participants were instructed to place and seal their completed survey documentation in unmarked plain envelopes, which were forwarded directly to the researcher with no details of the individual from whom the response originated.

#### *Data Processing and Analysis*

The quantitative data pertaining to the research questions were analysed, and percentage results to the structured questions tabulated. The qualitative data collected in this survey was reviewed, summarised and reported to add depth and clarity to the quantitative results, to identify possible hypotheses for future research, to identify themes and to provide examples as appropriate.



## RESULTS

The key findings, summarized in Table One, are discussed in relation to each research question.

Participants were asked a number of questions about the prevalence, severity and nature of threatened and actual animal abuse in their homes and families. Fifty six percent of participants who owned pets stated that their abuser threatened to hurt or kill and/or actually hurt or killed the participant's pet(s). Specifically, 39.4% reported their abuser threatened to hurt or kill their pet, and 47% reported their abuser actually hurt or killed their pet. One participant reported, "he said cats have 9 lives and he wondered if they will use all 9 lives". Another commented that her partner shot the family dog in plain view of his four year-old son; the impact this appears to have had upon that child is discussed later. One participant noted, "He killed a cat, he told me it was like an electric charge going through his body and tingly. He would tease them to the point of frustration I would tell him to stop and he wouldn't until he was satisfied". Another participant simply stated, "He fed my one cat to a dog".

Of those participants with both children and pets, 23.3% reported being concerned that their children may have been overly rough with an animal, and 16.4% were concerned that their child may have actually hurt or killed an animal. One participant stated that her son killed 3 guinea pigs. Two participants linked their partner's and their children's treatment of animals: one stated that her children are rough with animals "because of what they see on a normal basis" and another stated that her children "hurt animals when they are angry, because they think this is normal, because they don't realize it can be different".

The second research question explored the prevalence and nature of animal abuse in the childhood of the perpetrators of family violence in Calgary. Of the 97 participants who responded to this question, 20.6% stated that they knew their abuser had abused animals as a

child or as a teenager, 28.9% knew he/she had not, and 50.5% did not know. Thus, of those who knew, approximately 40% stated that their partner did have a childhood history of animal abuse. Examples included setting birds alight with lighter fluid, clubbing a rabbit to death, strangling a cat, kicking a pregnant cat, lighting a firecracker in a cat, and crazy gluing a cat to a board. One participant noted that “(my partner as a child) teased the family dog, the dog attacked him, and his father shot the dog to death”.

Thirdly, pet owning participants were asked if they delayed their decisions to seek shelter from an abusive situation due to concerns about their pet’s safety. Of the participants who reported owning pets, 25.4% stated that they did delay entering a shelter because of concerns for the safety of their pet(s). One participant stated that once she entered the shelter her cat disappeared and that she has since been sent pictures in which the cat looks dead. Another noted that when his first wife left him, her partner “killed 2 dogs, cats and a hobby farm full of animals”; he then told his children that their mother had killed all the animals.

The final research question explored the participants’ awareness and perception of the impact of animal abuse upon their children. Of participants who reported having both children and pets, who also reported that their partner threatened or actually hurt or killed a pet, 64.5% stated that their children were aware that the threats/ abuse took place and that they did think this had impacted their children. While 59.3% stated they had talked with their children about their pets being hurt or threatened, only 19.4% of participants said that they had discussed this with someone else. Participants noted a wide range of impacts including the following: “My daughter cries when Dad won’t let the cat in”; “They would feel bad because she was trying to protect me”; “My daughter feels if the pets have been hurt she has been hurt”; “They wonder where their cats are”; and “Whenever my oldest got a dog it never seemed to last long. He has a hard time

forgiving my ex for that”. Two participants noted a link between their children witnessing animal abuse, and demonstrating abusive behaviour themselves. One wrote, “(my son is) more hurtful to others, withdraw(n), emotional” and another noted that her son, who when aged four witnessed his father shoot his dog, is now showing similar traits and has “total disregard towards life, even humans”. Only two participants indicated that a counsellor had previously enquired about or discussed any of these facts or impacts with her.

## DISCUSSION

This study confirms the findings of prior research (Ascione, 2000; 1996; Daniell, 2001), which indicates that animal abuse and other forms of family violence often co-exist (see Table Two). These results indicate that the link between animal abuse and family violence is not just a US or ‘back east’ problem, it is also a relevant issue in Calgary. When an animal is threatened, hurt or killed it is very possible that a child or partner in that home is also the victim of violence and abuse, and vice versa. The prevalence of animal abuse reported in this study is slightly lower than that found in prior studies (see Table Two). This may be due to the survey, rather than interview, approach taken in the present study, and resulting lack of opportunity to clarify responses. Further, while the survey did not use the term ‘abuse’ but asked whether an animal had been threatened, hurt or killed, participants’ own tolerance for and perception of abuse may have caused false negative responses. A number of participants who recorded a negative or ‘don’t know’ response to a question about animal abuse, went on to provide examples such as the following: “he would be very rough with her”; and “he ...refused to change the litter when I was pregnant, wouldn’t feed him, threw him off furniture ... (and) dropped my cat off to me at work in a taped up beer box”. One participant who stated that she was not sure if her partner had hurt her pet noted that a week after she left she was told her cat was gone and her guinea pig was

dead. Other respondents recording negative responses reported that another person (for example, a parent, sibling, or friend of the abuser) had hurt or killed an animal, or that their abuser had hurt or killed other people's (such as an ex-partner's) animals. Thus, the present study's results in this area may be understated.

Also broadly consistent with prior research (see Table Two), the present study indicates that many women and children remain in violent homes, due to fears for the safety of their pets; and many of those who seek shelter, lose their pet as a result. This confirms that threatening or hurting a cherished pet is a powerful tool, used effectively by many perpetrators of family violence to manipulate and obtain the silence and obedience of their victims. This conclusion is supported by one participant's observation that "I think he is nicer to the animals when we are not around" and another who reports that her partner hit her pet bird and then told her that she is "crazy" because what he is doing is "not that bad". It appears that many pet owning women choose to stay longer in violent homes, keeping themselves, their children and their pets at continued risk of harm, because they believe they have no other choice. One participant stated that she "tried to find homes for (her) pets but was unable to". One participant's response indicates that she put herself at increased risk in the home to protect her pet from her partner: "Hurt yes, killed no for I step in the way". Another respondent indicated that her children took on the role of protector: "Whenever their Dad is home, they try to keep (their dog) away from his room".

The results have implications for counsellors who are working with individuals, particularly children and adolescents, who report that someone in the home is abusive towards animals. It may mean that a person in the home, possibly the child, is being abused. A child may find it easier to report that their animal is being hurt than themselves. Further, the child may be

putting him/ herself in increased danger by trying to protect their pet. Thus when a child reports any such abuse to a counsellor, teacher or other adult, that person needs to be aware of the potential significance and implications of this information. Further exploration of a child's disclosure of animal abuse could lead to disclosures of family violence and child abuse.

The results also have implications for counsellors working with children who have abused animals. The results confirm prior research (Ascione, 2001; Boat, 1995) indicating that a child who abuses animals may be being abused him/ herself. Further, without appropriate and early intervention, this child may become violent towards people. The present study expands upon prior research (Baenninger 1991; Macdonald, 1979) to indicate that a child who abuses animals may, without intervention, become an adult perpetrator of family violence.

The results of the current study indicate that very few women discuss the fact and significance of their animals being abused, or the impact of this upon their children, with a counsellor. This confirms concerns raised by past researchers that animal abuse receives insufficient attention. Awareness of this study's results will hopefully start to address these concerns as counsellors working with children or adolescents who have abused animals have an increased level of understanding of the seriousness and potential implications of these actions.

#### *Suggestions for Future Research*

It is hoped that the results of the present study will provide a foundation for further investigation into the nature of the relationships between the variables explored, with more sophisticated data scales. Future studies might also explore the relative timing of abuse perpetrated by/ towards family members, including animals. Finally, future researchers might consider interviewing children in family violence situations with regards their knowledge and understanding of the abuse of animals in their home.

### *Limitations*

As noted above, it was determined not to be feasible to randomise the sampling procedures in the present study. As such, the findings of this study should not be generalised to other populations. Secondly, given the self-report nature of this study there is a risk of social desirability bias. Participants may not have been forthcoming in detailing cases of animal abuse, particularly where their children are the perpetrators. Further, participants may be in denial regarding the occurrence and severity of many forms of abuse including animal abuse. Thus this study may report a lower level of animal abuse than has actually arisen. This study relies on the sole reports of the women, upon the actions of their partners and children. Researchers have indicated that partners in family violence situations may disagree upon the nature and severity of violence perpetrated (Ascione, 1996). Data was not gathered from those women who lacked the language or literacy skills to complete the written survey. Thus the study's sample is skewed in that it represents only those women who have a firm grasp of the written English language. Finally, the study's sample is skewed in that it represents only those family violence situations where the woman has sought refuge from the violence in a shelter. The results of this study should not be generalised to families where the woman has not sought this refuge.

### *Next Steps*

A key purpose for performing this study was to guide and focus initiatives to prevent and detect violence in Calgary communities. The study results are specifically guiding a collaborative effort through the 'No Excuse for Abuse' campaign, coordinated through a joint 'linking committee', comprising the researcher and representatives of the Calgary Humane Society and the Sheriff King Home. The overall aim is to increase public awareness of the link between animal abuse and family violence, and to encourage everyone to take animal cruelty

seriously. The *'No Excuse For Abuse'* campaign has a number of components including various public awareness, education and training initiatives with human service providers, law enforcers, educators, veterinarians and the public. The objectives of these initiatives are as follows: (1) To provide individuals who might delay the decision to seek shelter from family violence with a safer choice, by refining and publicising the Calgary Humane Society's 'Pet Safe Keeping' program. This program provides survivors of family violence a safe place for their animals when they enter a shelter. (2) To explore different ways to address the longer-term issue of the many landlords and housing associations that do not allow animals. (3) To develop cross training and reporting between animal and human welfare organizations in Calgary communities to help identify all forms of violence and abuse, and to ensure this abuse is appropriately reported. (4) To support proposed changes to the law to increase penalties for animal cruelty. (5) To raise awareness of the potential implications, and encourage early intervention, when a child hurts an animal or indicates that an animal is being hurt at home.

#### SUMMARY

The present study confirms prior research that indicates that animal abuse and other forms of family violence often co-exist, and that this often leads to women delaying the decision to seek shelter, for themselves, their children, and their animals, from this violence. The research expands upon existing research to indicate a number of ways in which children may be impacted by animal abuse in their homes, one of which may be for the children to continue the cycle of violence. Whatever the reasons for a child's violence towards an animal, the results of the present study confirm prior researchers' conclusions (Adams, 1994) that a child's reports of, or own, violence towards an animal is a clear signal that something is wrong, and warrants being taken seriously. Awareness of the results of this study will hopefully increase the awareness, of counsellors working with children and adolescents, of the potential implications and dynamics of

animal abuse, causing them to take any such reports seriously, and to further explore the circumstances within which the abuse has arisen.



Table One: Survey Results

<b>Question Focus</b>	<b>Percentage *</b>
Participants who own pets (within past twelve months)	<b>65.0% (n = 100)</b>
Pet owning participants who delayed decision to come to a shelter due to concern for their pet's safety	<b>25.4% (n = 63)</b>
Pet owning participants who report that their abuser either threatened to and/or actually hurt or killed their pet	<b>56.1% (n = 66)</b>
Pet owning participants who report that their abuser threatened to hurt or kill their pet	<b>39.4% (n = 66)</b>
Pet owning participants who report that their abuser actually hurt or killed their pet	<b>47.0% (n = 66)</b>
Participants who report that their children were aware that their pets had been hurt or killed	<b>64.5% (n = 31)</b>
Participants who had discussed with their children that their pets had been hurt or killed	<b>59.3% (n = 27)</b>
Participants who believe that their children were impacted by the fact that their pets had been hurt or killed	<b>64.5% (n = 31)</b>
Participants who report that anyone ever discussed the impact that animal abuse may have upon their children	<b>19.4% (n = 31)</b>
Participants who are aware that their abuser hurt or killed animals as a child or adolescent	<b>20.6% (n = 97)</b>
Participants who are concerned that their children may have been overly rough with a pet	<b>23.3% (n = 60)</b>
Participants who are concerned that their children may have hurt or killed a pet	<b>16.4% (n = 61)</b>

The percentages are based upon the total number of participants who answered that particular question (n). Not all questions were applicable to all participants, e.g. some were only applicable to participants with pets, some to those with both children and pets.

Table Two: *Key Survey Results Compared to Prior Research Findings*

<b><i>Question Focus</i></b>	<b><i>McIntosh et al 2001</i></b>	<b><i>Ascione 2000</i></b>	<b><i>OSPCA 2000 (Daniell, 2001)</i></b>
Number of pet owning participants	65	101	111
Participants reporting that their abuser threatened and/or actually hurt or killed a family pet	56.1%	72%	Not Reported
Participants reporting that their abuser hurt or killed a family pet	47%	54%	44%
Participants reporting that their abuser threatened to hurt or kill a family pet	39.4%	Not Reported	42%
Participants who delayed their decision to enter a shelter due to concern for the safety of their pet	25.4%	25%	43%

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