

THE CO-OCCURRENCE OF HUMAN VIOLENCE AND ANIMAL ABUSE: POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND INTERVENTIONS

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Increasing awareness of the co-occurrence of animal abuse and other forms of violence has resulted in important changes in policy and practice in the United States. This article reviews the empirical evidence of the relationship between animal abuse and antisocial behavior, describes the policies that have been implemented in response to these findings, and discusses the importance of identifying and intervening with people who abuse animals. AniCare, the only published intervention for people who display animal abuse behavior, is described along with other interventions that may be warranted based on the severity and circumstances of the animal abuse issue.

Keywords: animal cruelty, antisocial behavior, human-animal interaction

1. The Evidence

The last two decades have provided a substantial body of empirical evidence supporting the co-occurrence of animal abuse and various forms of violence toward humans and other antisocial and criminal behaviors. Although the relationship is not a simple causal one, the correlation is reliable enough to suggest the importance of early intervention.

One of the early studies of this relationship was made by the Massachusetts Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals and found that people who had abused animals were 5 times more likely to commit violent crimes against people, 4 times more likely to commit property crimes, and 3 times more likely to have a record for drug or disorderly conduct offenses (Luke, Arluke & Levin, 1997). Almost a decade later, a study made in Chicago revealed similar findings. Of 332 people arrested for cruelty to animals or dog fighting, 70 percent had also been arrested for non-animal-related felonies;

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86 percent had two or more crimes in their history; 65 percent had also been arrested for all types of battery; and 59 percent were confirmed gang members (Degenhardt, 2005). In a nationally representative sample of 43,093 adults in the U.S., cruelty to animals was significantly associated with all assessed antisocial behavior (Vaughn et al., 2009).

A number of studies have focused on animal abuse in the context of family violence. For example, two studies (Ascione et al., 2007; Volant, Jones, Gullone, & Coleman, 2008) compared samples of women who were living temporarily in a domestic violence shelter with comparison groups of women who had not experienced domestic violence. More than 50 percent of women in the domestic violence samples reported that their partner had hurt or killed pets, compared to less than 5 percent of women in the comparison groups. Batterers who also abuse pets have been found to use more forms of violence, more controlling behavior, and be more dangerous than batterers who do not abuse pets (Simmons & Lehmann, 2007). A study that included 427 women who had experienced intimate partner violence and a randomly-selected control group that had not experienced such violence found that perpetrators of intimate partner violence were more likely to not have a high school diploma, to have abused alcohol or drugs, to be described as having fair or poor mental health, and to have abused or threatened to abuse pets (Walton-Moss, Manganello, Frye, & Campbell, 2005).

Women who have experienced domestic violence also report that their children were affected. In one study, 62 percent of women interviewed in a domestic violence shelter reported that their children had witnessed the abuse of the pet (Ascione et al., 2007), and in another, 19 percent of women who experienced domestic violence reported that their children had abused an animal. Currie (2006) also found that children who had been exposed to domestic violence were nearly three times more likely to engage in animal abuse than children in a matched comparison group who had not been exposed to domestic violence.

There is growing awareness of animal abuse as a marker for children's maladaptive behavior. In 1987, animal cruelty was added to the criteria for conduct disorder in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*. Diagnosis of conduct disorder requires consideration of four categories of behavior: 1) aggression toward people or animals; 2) destruction of property without aggression toward people or animals; 3) deceitfulness, lying, and theft; and 4) serious violations of rules. Animal abuse is a symptom that appears early in the development of conduct disorder (Miller, 2001) – even earlier than symptoms such as bullying and fire setting (Frick et al., 1993). A meta-analysis of 60 studies found that animal abuse could be used to discriminate between children with severe and mild conduct problems (Frick et al., 1993). Studies of delinquent youths suggest high rates of animal cruelty in the year prior to arrest (Ascione, 1993; Wochner & Klosinski, 1988). Given the prevalence of conduct disorder among adjudicated adolescents (Teplin, Abram, McClelland, Dulcan, & Mericle, 2002) and the link between

childhood animal cruelty and aggressive and violent interpersonal behavior in adulthood (Ascione, 2001), early identification and intervention with young animal abusers may be critical in preventing future violence.

2. Policy Implications: United States

In response to these empirical findings, numerous policies have been implemented or are in development in the United States. Many of them are modeled after those developed in response to the recognition of the problem of spousal and child abuse. Recent policy innovations and those presently under consideration include registration of convicted animal abusers, the establishment of animal welfare courts, the admissibility of animal abuse in domestic violence cases, the inclusion of emotional damages in civil cases involving injury to animals, limited liability for professionals who report animal abuse (such as veterinarians and therapists) and inclusion of the category of animal abuse in national crime incidents databases.

Recognition of the co-occurrence of domestic violence and animal abuse has led 25 American states and the District of Columbia to enact legislation that includes provisions for pets in domestic violence protection orders. Domestic violence shelters are also increasingly recognizing that concern for pets may be a barrier to leaving an abusive home. As a result, some shelters are offering safe haven programs that provide shelter for companion animals either onsite or in collaboration with local animal welfare organizations.

Finally, the majority of American states now recommends or mandates that judges require counseling for persons convicted of animal cruelty. The majority of states also either require judges in such cases to impose mandatory bans on future possession of animals or explicitly allow judges voluntarily to impose such bans. From a broad perspective, all of these developments contribute to and mark a shift in public attitudes toward animals wherein the quality of their lives is taken more seriously.

3. Identification and Intervention

Given the co-occurrence of animal abuse and violence toward humans, it is important to develop interventions for individuals who abuse animals – for the sake of both animals and humans. To do that, we must identify juveniles and adults who are prone to this behavior and then provide them with an appropriate intervention. Depending on the severity of the problem, this might involve education, parent guidance, a diversion program, individual or group counseling, or residential treatment.

A prerequisite to identifying these individuals is that the relevant stakeholders take animal abuse seriously. In some instances, this means pushing against

views prevalent in many subcultures: as “boys will be boys,” the occasional abuse of animals is a regrettable but understandable rite of passage. Rather, parents, teachers, and other social agents need to take notice of all incidents involving animal abuse and take appropriate action. Another way to identify animal abusers is to ask. Increasingly, counselors and teachers include questions about companion animals when they talk to clients and students who are having problems. They ask if they have or ever had companion animals, if they ever lost one, and if they ever harmed or saw someone else harm one.

Once identified, it is important to assess the child or adult as a first step in developing an effective treatment plan. Numerous factors should be considered in the assessment: severity, recurrence of, and motivations for the abuse, comorbid problems and conditions, subcultural and familial contexts, psychological-mindedness, acceptance of responsibility and willingness to change (Boat, Loar, & Phillips, 2008; Lewchanin & Zimmerman, 2000; Shapiro, Randour, Krinsk, & Wolf, 2014).

As persons displaying a problem with animal abuse vary considerably in degree of psychopathology, no one treatment is appropriate for all. Forms of animal abuse also vary from neglect to motivated abuse, to sadistic and ritualized torture. The degree of suffering of the victims does not necessarily correlate with the severity of the behavior from a psychological perspective. For example, neglect can produce prolonged suffering and death, but can be perpetrated by an individual whose action is a combination of adoption of attitudes and behaviors of a particular subculture, subcultural influences, personal irresponsibility, and/or limited financial resources.

Depending on the assessment, a child considered “at risk” for beginning or continuing to abuse animals might participate in a diversion program, where he or she can learn more prosocial ways of interacting with animals and humans.

At the other extreme degree of disordered behavior, individuals with major mental illnesses (e.g., major affective disorders, psychosis, and organic brain damage) may require psychopharmaceutical and/or residential treatment. Those with substance abuse disorders generally require treatment for that problem first. Although currently there is no residential treatment center for children whose primary problem is animal abuse, Green Chimneys is an example of a residential treatment center for children with severe problems that may include animal abuse (Shapiro et al., 2014, pp. 44-47). Children reside in the working farm for an extended period, during which they receive individual and group-based treatment, as well as animal-assisted therapy and activities.

4. The AniCare Approach

In theories to deal with accountability for this often resistant population, and to teach empathy and other interpersonal an intermediate range, the AniCare

approach is the only published intervention for people who display the behavior of animal abuse (Jory & Randour, 1999; Shapiro et al., 2014). The AniCare approach uses cognitive behavioral, psychodynamic, and attachment and problem-solving skills. In addition, AniCare emphasizes sensitivity to the varying views of animals in different cultures.

AniCare Child includes training in empathy (taking an animal's point of view) and self-management techniques (better problem-solving skills). Many children who abuse animals have attachment problems: They may have failed to develop a secure bond with a parent and may be over-reliant on a relationship with a companion animal; or they may be taking out the frustration of their own unmet needs on a companion animal. Developed by Risley-Curtiss and adapted from the AniCare approach, *Children and Animals Together* is a diversion program for children who have abused animals, which uses a 14-session family intervention model (Assessment and Diversion Program, 2014).

The adult version of AniCare (Jory & Randour, 1999) emphasizes helping an individual be accountable for his or her behavior. Often animal abusers do not admit to themselves or others that what they did is wrong. They are not willing to accept that their behavior is a problem. They develop "stories" that deny the presence or importance of the abuse, or that distort their role in the abuse, or that somehow justify it. The counselor must work to help the client see that there is a problem and that he or she must accept responsibility for it.

For both children and adults, their justificatory story often is heavily influenced by the subculture in which they are being or were socialized – "they are just animals." Part of the work of the therapist is to help the client come to terms with this cultural layer, reframing it in ways that do not involve abuse.

Both residential and outpatient treatment approaches have not yet received rigorous evaluation. Beyond anecdotal and provider reports, we await evidence that the therapies work and how they work.

The development of valid assessment and effective treatments is one step in the effort to reduce violence in our society. A second necessary step is educating criminal justice and other relevant agencies about the co-occurrence of human violence and animal abuse and about the range of available interventions.

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